



Survival

Global Politics and Strategy

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/tsur20

China and America: How Xi Jinping Has Changed the Game

Hilton L. Root

To cite this article: Hilton L. Root (2025) China and America: How Xi Jinping Has Changed the Game, *Survival*, 67:2, 107-114, DOI: [10.1080/00396338.2025.2481774](https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2481774)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2025.2481774>



Published online: 31 Mar 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Commentary

China and America: How Xi Jinping Has Changed the Game

Hilton L. Root

Even facing a weakened economy, China has signalled a willingness to wage a costly trade war with the United States as a means of ideological self-defence. It has responded to US President Donald Trump's initial tariff salvos with tariffs and investigations of its own. Being more trade dependent, China risks running out of targets and depleting its limited arsenal of economic weapons before the US does, incurring significant economic costs. But it views these sacrifices as necessary to uphold national dignity and project strength against an untrustworthy American aggressor. This strategic posture is transforming trade into a high-stakes ideological battleground, heralding a new era of 'economic statecraft' – a form of economic warfare poised to overshadow traditional geo-economics.

In this context, it is doubtful that Trump's long-standing tariff-centric approach remains a viable framework for facing down China, which has changed dramatically since his first term as president. On my recent visit there, I was struck by how, despite its economic struggles, Beijing seems to have fortified itself against Washington's traditional playbook with new defences that could blunt the impact of another wave of tariffs.

Hilton L. Root is a professor of public policy at George Mason University and author of 11 books on international political economy. He is also Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing and formerly a senior US Treasury Department official.

China: emboldened if weaker

During his first term, Trump did secure minor concessions in the Phase One trade deal and pressured allies to restrict Chinese tech giants. China has since adapted, positioning itself to counter future pressures more effectively.¹ Chinese President Xi Jinping's multipronged 'Made in China 2025' plan exemplifies this shift, pushing sectors like semiconductors, robotics and biotechnology toward global competitiveness.² In these industries – once dominated by Western firms – Chinese businesses have made notable headway. The advanced capabilities of China's DeepSeek illustrate how hard it will be to stop China's technological advances using tariffs or export

The CCP has framed external threats to its own advantage

bans. Meanwhile, warehouses and ports are already brimming with goods ready to export before new tariffs take effect, and Chinese companies have strategically diversified their global investments to avoid trade barriers and channel surplus capacity to emerging markets.

Also bolstering its resilience is Beijing's 'dual circulation' strategy, which seeks to foster domestic economic self-reliance even as China continues to expand its international footprint.

Trade is only one part of a much broader challenge. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long framed external threats to its own advantage, a tactic that can serve to reinforce Xi's message that the CCP is the nation's trusted guardian against Western coercion. Since Trump last occupied the White House, Xi has consolidated his power, and the CCP has hardened its ideological stance.³ These shifts have confirmed, among other things, that the era of trade deals premised on China drifting toward Western norms is definitively over. From the United States' standpoint, any meaningful agreement now hinges on understanding the deeper ideological forces driving Xi's regime and appreciating the limits of American leverage.

In the past, delivering rapid GDP growth has justified the CCP's authority, but Xi has now anchored its legitimacy to a state-centric ideological platform rooted in Marxism, nationalism and what is called 'Xi Jinping Thought'. Chinese officials currently regard compromise not so much as a

pragmatic adjustment as an acquiescence to forces that would undermine the regime's doctrinal framework and threaten its core identity. Even as China faces economic challenges, ideology has taken precedence, making Beijing less responsive to external pressure.

Accompanying this development, which has marked Xi's rise, has been a deepening effort to shape public opinion. Over the past decade, the CCP has intensified nationalist propaganda and campaigns to embed Marxist ideology into society. Through new institutions, curricula, media and digital platforms, the regime has promoted the idea that Western values – individualism, democracy and consumerism – threaten the Chinese 'civilisation state'.⁴ This messaging resonates domestically, fostering public perceptions that Western demands for reform are not constructive but rather an attempt to weaken China. This ideological premise also shapes Beijing's foreign policy, whereby sovereignty and long-term strategic goals often outweigh immediate economic considerations.

Confident in the West's decline, Xi has framed China's rise as inevitable, removing presidential-term limits to ensure consistent leadership and strategy in a shifting global order. By contrast, any US approach under Trump is subject to the impermanence of his presidency. In Xi's speeches and policies, he asserts that the global order is shifting, with China, Russia and other BRICS nations poised to lead a multipolar world. This belief reinforces the notion that China can pursue its long-term objectives as the balance of global power tilts in its favour. If Beijing perceives that time is on its side, the incentive to strike deals diminishes further.

Xi has also succeeded in 'externalising' China's economic difficulties, adding another layer of diplomatic complexity. His government has frequently attributed domestic economic weaknesses to Western tariffs, sanctions and technology restrictions. This narrative enables the CCP to avoid acknowledging internal structural flaws by casting China as a victim of foreign containment. It also reinforces Beijing's resolve to stress self-reliance and state-led economic models, further reducing the palatability of concessions that Trump might try to secure.

From its harsh policies in Hong Kong and Xinjiang to its assertiveness in the South China Sea, Beijing has demonstrated its readiness to

prioritise sovereignty and stability over external criticism and pressure. This uncompromising stance strongly indicates that Beijing would rather endure economic losses than concede ground through negotiation. Beijing has shown little hesitation, for example, in continuing energy and technological cooperation with Moscow, despite the risk of secondary sanctions and international condemnation over China's support for Russia in its war on Ukraine. Similarly, China's ongoing military exercises and heightened naval presence in the Taiwan Strait – which prompt caution among foreign investors – reflect an acceptance of reputational and financial costs in pursuit of the broader strategic goal of asserting sovereignty over the island. Moreover, China has imposed retaliatory tariffs and trade restrictions on countries like Australia, sometimes at the expense of its own industries and consumers. As in the Mao Zedong years, Chinese leaders have made economic pain acceptable collateral for advancing geopolitical and nationalistic objectives.

The United States: nuance required

Given that China's ideological commitment, nationalist sentiment and confidence in a changing global order have invalidated the pragmatic economic calculus that influenced Beijing's past dealings with the West, traditional US approaches to negotiating with China are unlikely to yield the desired outcomes. Addressing them will require a more nuanced approach that extends beyond economic incentivisation and considers the ideological and political forces now shaping China's decision-making.

There was some virtue in the Biden administration's efforts to keep Beijing off balance by confronting its leadership with a multifaceted strategy comprising strengthened alliances, the US Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) and Science Act of 2022, and heightened outward-investment surveillance. China couldn't easily counter this onslaught. For example, Washington collaborated with key allies such as Japan and the Netherlands to impose sweeping export controls on advanced semiconductors, blocking China's ability to replace critical technology imports. Additionally, the CHIPS Act incentivised major chip manufacturers to build new facilities in the United States rather than

expand in China, eroding Beijing's leverage over global technology supply chains. The idea was that only an array of varied measures that took on board the regime's political doctrine, aligned with allies' efforts and offered a competing vision of progress could begin to erode the foundations underpinning China's current posture.

Against that backdrop, it is unsurprising that Chinese leaders characterise tariff threats as blunt, transactional instruments driven by a crude and ineffective narrative. By depicting US policies as coercive and irresponsible, the CCP is able to rally domestic sentiment and portray the West as predatory. On that basis, Xi can make a forceful case to the Chinese people that the CCP remains their strongest bulwark against foreign domination and humiliation. This theme not only enables the CCP to deflect blame for economic mismanagement, but also reinforces its domestic standing by projecting the resilience of a leadership that has weathered far greater challenges.

Xi's revised policies reflect a fundamentally different civilisational vision than that championed by the United States. Beijing's prioritisation of state control, ideological conformity and CCP supremacy frontally challenges the American commitment to the rule of law, individual freedoms and the fulfilment of individual potential. US policymakers who cling to assumptions formed during more market-oriented phases of China's development risk fatally underestimating the depth of these ideological differences.

The US must ensure that its actions track both at home and abroad as principled responses to China's unfair trade behaviour, and not as broad-based attacks on the Chinese people. Doing so would help dilute Beijing's 'people's war' framing of the confrontation and avoid playing into Beijing's depiction of a racist or imperialist America.

In practice, the United States should clarify that its measures target specific harmful practices – such as intellectual-property theft and forced technology transfers by the Chinese government – while upholding global norms rather than pure protectionism. Although shifting Chinese public opinion may be unrealistic given extensive state censorship, such messaging would at least reassure American businesses, international investors and allied governments that US strategy was not courting unnecessary

economic self-harm or embarking on a futile crusade to align China with the West's ideological evolution.

Fully accounting for China's ideological resolve, however, requires the US to gird itself for a marathon rather than a sprint. US–China economic frictions are likely to persist, and therefore to call for active management rather than grand attempts at full resolution. This means the US will have to craft policies that at once recognise the ideological dimension of trade conflicts and can withstand Chinese counter-moves and domestic political headwinds. It also means avoiding wishful thinking, such as the blithe assumption that China will simply give up on its state-driven model if tariffs are applied a little longer and harder, or that strident rhetoric alone will inspire allies. The complexity of the challenge is enormous, and whether Washington's strategy will catch up to the new reality and forge the 'collective resilience' with partners needed to deter Chinese economic coercion remains uncertain.⁵

* * *

Xi's intensification of ideology has made China more resilient, though not invincible. Both Washington and Beijing are adapting. The outcome of the trade and tech showdown will hinge on which side has the more astute strategy and the more robust economic system under strain. If there is one takeaway for Washington, it is that these contests now transcend spreadsheets and supply chains; they are battles of will, narrative and national purpose. In such confrontations, understanding an opponent's mindset is half the fight. The United States must therefore act with both firmness and insight – or risk fighting yesterday's war against today's ideologically fortified China.

Notes

- ¹ See Ana Swanson, 'Trump Eyes a Bigger, Better Trade Deal with China', *New York Times*, 19 February 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/19/business/economy/trump-china-trade-deal.html>.
- ² See the Center for Security and Emerging Technology's translation

- of 'Made in China 2025', 8 March 2022, https://cset.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/to432_made_in_china_2025_EN.pdf.
- ³ See, for example, 'Xi's Domestic Consolidation of Power at the 20th Communist Party Congress', IISS *Strategic Comments*, vol. 28, no. 24, November 2022, [https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/xis-](https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/xis-domestic-consolidation-of-power-at-the-20th-communist-party-congress/)
- [domestic-consolidation-of-power-at-the-20th-communist-party-congress/](https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2022/xis-domestic-consolidation-of-power-at-the-20th-communist-party-congress/).
- ⁴ See Hilton L. Root, 'Civilisational Conflict', *Survival*, vol. 66, no. 3, June–July 2024, pp. 43–8.
- ⁵ See Victor D. Cha, 'Collective Resilience: Deterring China's Weaponization of Economic Interdependence', *International Security*, vol. 48, no. 1, Summer 2023, pp. 91–124.

