



Decoding the Trade War

A Comprehensive Look at US-China Relations

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Introduction

Both the United States and have been engaged in a protracted trade war that has had significant economic and political ramifications for both nations. Under the Trump administration, the relationship between the US and China was characterized by hostility and skepticism. In contrast, the Biden administration has taken a more diplomatic approach, but tensions continue to simmer over issues such as intellectual property theft, human rights abuses, and territorial disputes. Obama's administration was marked by a mixed approach, with early attempts at engagement giving way to increased pressure on China towards the end of his presidency.

This white paper aims to provide a comprehensive look at the key factors driving US-China relations, the dynamics of the trade war, and their implications for the global economy.

Importance of the topic

The topic of US-China relations has become increasingly important in recent years due to the deteriorating state of their relationship. The US-China trade war that began in 2018 has been exacerbated by the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war, as the US and China took opposing sides in the conflict. Since then, tensions have only escalated, with both countries accusing each other of unfair trade practices, human rights violations, and cyber espionage.

The differences between how the Trump, Biden, and Obama administrations handled relations with China are also significant. While the Trump administration took a confrontational approach, the Biden administration has emphasized working with allies to collectively address common challenges. Regardless of the approach, it is clear that the outcome of US-China relations will have a significant impact on the global economy and international security.

The current trade war has been one of the most significant points of contention between the two nations. Both countries have implemented tariffs on each other's goods, hurting businesses on both sides. In addition to economic tensions, there have been disagreements regarding national security, military activities, and human rights.

Relations During the 2022 Ukraine-Russia War

Since the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war, global geopolitical tensions have significantly escalated, with various world powers taking sides in the conflict. The United States and its allies have backed the Ukrainian government against Russian aggression, while China and Russia have formed a strategic partnership in opposition to Western efforts. These developments have worsened the already strained relations between the United States and China, with the two countries clashing over trade, intellectual property rights, and human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

The diplomatic approaches of President Trump and President Biden have differed significantly, with Trump's fierce rhetoric and tariff wars having further exacerbated tensions, while Biden's focus on multilateralism and cooperation may offer a path towards a more constructive relationship. President Obama's strategy was more focused on engagement, but his administration also took steps to address concerns about China's economic practices.

US stance towards China during the conflict

Until mid-2022, the United States, which had previously pursued a policy of engagement with China, became increasingly wary and critical of its actions in the ensuing years. The Trump administration, in particular, took a confrontational approach towards China, viewing it as a strategic competitor and accusing it of unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft. Under Biden, the US-China relationship remains tense, with a focus on balancing competition and cooperation. However, the current administration has also emphasized the importance of multilateralism and working with allies to push back against China's assertiveness. In contrast, the Obama administration prioritized cooperation with China on issues such as climate change, but also expressed concerns about human rights abuses and cyber espionage.

China's response to the crisis

China's response to the crisis has been multifold. Firstly, the Communist Party of China has pursued policies that generate an inward-looking approach. In this context, over the years, Beijing has increased its domestic consumption, working towards reducing its reliance on Western economies. This shift in focus has come from a recognition that China cannot solely depend on its export-led growth model.

The deteriorating relations between the US and China continued under the Trump administration, where anti-China rhetoric became the norm and trade restrictions were imposed. However, with the arrival of the Biden administration, there has been a shift towards a more strategic and pragmatic approach in dealing with China, which was missing under Trump. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether this shift will improve the US-China relations significantly. The Obama administration's handling of relations with China differed from Trump and Biden in many aspects. However, the main focus of Obama's China policy was to develop a strategic partnership with China while encouraging it to be a responsible global stakeholder.

Impact on US-China relations

The Trump administration's approach was particularly combative and confrontational, with the former president imposing tariffs on Chinese goods and restricting access to US technology. However, President Biden has taken a different approach, seeking to de-escalate tensions and engage China where possible while also asserting US interests and values. This has included efforts to coordinate with traditional US allies and partners in Asia, such as Japan and South Korea, and to address China's human rights record. Overall, US-China relations are likely to be a key foreign policy issue for the Biden administration, with substantial implications for global stability and prosperity.

The recent deterioration highlights the far-reaching consequences geopolitical events can have on global politics.

Deterioration of US-China Relations

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. presidential election, relations between the United States and China have continued to deteriorate. The biggest turning point, however, came in 2022, with the eruption of the Ukraine-Russia conflict. This event saw the U.S. and China standing on opposing sides, with China taking a neutral stance on the issue, which frustrated the US government. The Biden administration aggressively moved to curb China's technological edge and prevent it from dominating the global economy, thereby continuing the Trump administration's hardline policy against China. However, the Biden administration's approach to China differed from Trump's in terms of emphasizing the importance of alliances, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the EU, in confronting China's rise. In contrast, Obama prioritized engagement, reaching a bilateral agreement with China to reduce carbon emissions in 2015.

Trade War

While the Trump Administration is often associated with enacting harsh tariffs and other measures against China, tensions between the two countries began to escalate during the Obama presidency. President Biden has continued many of these policies, but has also added new elements such as an increased focus on human rights abuses in China and closer alliances with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. As the world's two largest economies, the impact of this trade war is felt worldwide, with businesses and consumers alike facing increased costs and disruptions to global supply chains.

Technology War

US-China relations, which were already strained due to economic issues, have further deteriorated as both powers race to gain a competitive edge in various technological domains. The rivalry between the United States and China has manifested itself in the realm of 5G, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and other areas of technology. The approach of the Trump administration was one of outright confrontation, with tariffs and sanctions being used as a blunt instrument to force China to capitulate. The Biden administration, on the other hand, has been more cautious but nonetheless committed to maintaining a strong stance on China. It remains to be seen how their

approach will compare with that of the Obama administration, but one thing is certain: this technological war will continue to shape US-China relations for the foreseeable future.

Military Tensions in the South China Sea

Military tensions in the South China Sea continue to escalate between the United States and China, with the two countries exchanging heated accusations and engaging in provocative actions. The conflicts in the South China Sea have been heightened since the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war, with the US-China relations rapidly deteriorating. With the current state of affairs, it remains to be seen whether the US and China will be able to navigate the current tensions and avoid a full-blown military conflict.

Human Rights Abuses

Human rights abuses have been a significant issue in US-China relations for many years. The Chinese government's treatment of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong has been particularly criticized. Furthermore, the suppression of dissident voices and the lack of judicial independence have undermined the rule of law in China. While President Trump approached the issue of human rights with less urgency, President Biden has taken a more vocal stance. During his first conversation with Xi Jinping, he confronted China on its coercive policies in Hong Kong and its treatment of Uighurs. President Obama also faced similar human rights issues with China during his administration, particularly during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Despite these differences in approach between different US presidents, human rights abuses remain a persistent problem in the US-China relationship.

The trade war between the United States and China, coupled with China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea and its human rights abuses in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, has led to a sharp decline in American attitudes towards China.

President Trump's Approach Towards China

President Trump's approach towards China has been marked by a confrontational and aggressive stance. This approach stems from Trump's campaign promises to renegotiate trade deals and address the perceived trade imbalances with China. His policies have included imposing tariffs on Chinese goods and calling for a crackdown on intellectual property theft.

Trump has blamed China for its perceived lack of support for US efforts in Ukraine, and has also criticized China's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. This stands in stark contrast to the approaches of his predecessors, Barack Obama, who pursued a more measured and cooperative approach towards China. Obama sought to strengthen economic ties with China and encouraged dialogue, while Biden has since emphasized the importance of working with allies to address human rights and security issues in China.

Tariffs and Trade War

US-China tensions were further exacerbated by the ongoing tech war between the two nations, with the US placing restrictions on Chinese tech companies, including Huawei and ZTE. Despite the change in leadership since the Trump administration, the underlying issues between the US and China remain, and it remains to be seen whether the two nations can find a way to resolve their differences and work towards mutual cooperation.

Engagement Policies

Engagement policies have consistently played a pivotal role in US-China relations. During President Trump's term, a significant recalibration of these policies occurred. The administration implemented a series of tariffs and adopted a more confrontational stance towards China, marking a major shift in the U.S.'s approach to the bilateral relationship.

This shift represented a departure from past strategies and underscored the Trump administration's commitment to safeguarding U.S. economic and strategic interests. This approach led to an escalation of tensions, marked by a trade war and an overall increased competitiveness.

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Despite these developments, the pursuit of mutual interests continued in certain areas, and efforts to establish common ground were made, although they were overshadowed by larger strategic and ideological differences.

With the evolution of U.S.-China relations, there has been a marked change in the relationship's tone. As such, various issues, including human rights concerns and trade imbalances, have strained the bilateral ties. Nonetheless, the reality remains that both nations, driven by their national interests, will continue to navigate this complex relationship, even in the face of growing challenges.

President Biden's Approach Towards China

Under President Biden's administration, the tenor of U.S.-China relations has shifted further towards a confrontational approach. As opposed to a predominant emphasis on bilateral trade agreements and a focus on the trade deficit, the Biden administration has centered its strategy on addressing China's global aspirations and alleged human rights abuses. The administration has also placed restrictions on access to U.S. technology, bolstered and broadened alliances within the Indo-Pacific region to counterbalance China's ascendancy.

This tougher stance signals a departure from earlier, more optimistic attempts to engage China economically and diplomatically, indicating a skepticism about China's willingness or ability to modify its behavior. Consequently, as long as China is perceived as a strategic competitor rather than a partner, U.S.-China relations may remain strained.

As inherited from its predecessor, the Biden administration had to navigate continued tariffs and technological bans. However, rather than deploying broad-sweeping tariffs, the administration has chosen a more nuanced approach, concentrating on issues like the South China Sea conflict, alleged human rights violations, and intellectual property concerns.

Efforts have been launched to forge alliances against China, with President Biden's strategy focusing on collaboration with other nations to tackle issues such as trade practices and human rights. However, rallying allies has proven challenging, with some nations showing reluctance to jeopardize their economic ties with China.

The Biden administration has attempted diplomatic engagement with China, though escalating tensions have complicated this approach. Diplomatic endeavors have been hindered by mutual mistrust, with the U.S. and China accusing each other of interference and violation of agreed norms. This, coupled with disputes over the Taiwan Strait, has further strained the bilateral relations.

Despite the various strategies deployed by different administrations, managing relations with the world's second-largest economy remains a key challenge and priority for U.S. policymakers. Tensions may persist due to ongoing discord over trade, human rights, and security issues.

President Obama's Approach Towards China

President Obama's engagement with China was characterized by a nuanced balance of economic diplomacy and strategic competition, culminating in the "pivot to Asia" strategy. This approach aimed at maintaining equilibrium in the region, acknowledging China's growth while concurrently keeping it in check. Economic alliances were cultivated, and simultaneously, military coalitions in the region were strengthened to counterbalance China's ascendant influence. Despite criticisms of being excessively accommodating or optimistic about China's potential for a peaceful rise, Obama's strategy was rooted in active engagement rather than confrontation.

The centerpiece of Obama's policy, the "pivot to Asia," underscored the escalating significance of the Asian region on the global stage. This pivot resulted in a decisive shift in U.S. foreign policy, affecting trade, technology, geopolitics, and ideology across sectors. The Obama administration's objective was not merely to challenge China but to foster relationships that would facilitate a cooperative and stable Asia.

Under Obama, economic dialogues with China played a pivotal role in shaping bilateral relations. Recognizing the two nations as the world's largest economic powers, he emphasized collaboration and cooperation, understanding the global reverberations of their trade policies. This cooperative stance was built on a pragmatic realization of the intertwined nature of U.S.-China economic interests, and the need to manage these relations carefully in light of China's growing economic prominence.

Military cooperation also featured in Obama's engagement policy, albeit with some constraints. Before any major conflicts, the U.S. and China engaged in modest military cooperation, including joint exercises and dialogue across different levels. As China expanded its influence, Obama opted for a more collaborative engagement approach. He focused on areas of mutual interest such as climate change and trade, seeking to create a framework of cooperation that could mitigate the potential for conflict.

The Obama administration dealt with China through a policy that aimed at cooperation and dialogue, despite increasing tensions towards the end of his term due to various issues. This strategy reflected an understanding of the complexities of U.S.-China relations and a belief in the possibilities of a constructive and mutually beneficial relationship.

Possible Solutions to Improve US-China Relations

Given the current state of US-China relations, there are several potential solutions that could mitigate tensions and facilitate cooperation between the two countries. The first involves a renewed focus on dialogue and engagement, with both sides committing to open and honest communication. Another possible solution is to expand economic ties and increase collaboration in areas such as climate change and technology development. Additionally, both countries could work to establish more robust mechanisms for crisis management and conflict resolution to prevent or manage future crises. Finally, a shift in US policy towards greater multilateralism and engagement with global institutions could also help to improve relations. However, it remains to be seen whether these solutions will be embraced by leaders in both countries, particularly given the significant differences in approach between the Trump, Biden, and Obama administrations.

Diplomatic talks

Diplomatic talks between the US and China have been complicated in light of recent geopolitical tensions, including the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war. US-China relations have significantly deteriorated since then, with both countries engaging in a trade war, diplomatic impositions, and military tensions in the Indo-Pacific region. Under former President Trump's administration, the US pursued a more hawkish stance towards China characterized by tariffs and a tough approach. Conversely, President Biden appears to be adopting a more diplomatic strategy, calling for collaboration on issues such as climate change while remaining firm on human rights issues. During Obama's tenure, the US pursued a policy of strategic competition, where the US leaned towards a cooperative relationship with China, but at the same time, managed and countered the issues that posed a threat to US interests. Overall, the future of US-China diplomacy remains unsettled, and ongoing talks will continue to shape the relationship between these two superpowers.

Trade Agreements

The US-China economic relationship has experienced considerable fluctuations in the last decade, spurred largely by significant policy shifts under Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. Each administration approached trade relations with its distinct perspectives, resulting in varying degrees of tension and cooperation.

Under President Obama, the primary objective was the pursuit of engagement and dialogue with China. This strategy was rooted in the understanding that economic interdependence would encourage China's integration into the global economic order. A significant aspect of this approach was the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement which sought to deepen economic ties among Pacific Rim countries. While China was not a participant in the TPP, the partnership was seen as a method to set high-standard rules for trade in the region, potentially encouraging China to adhere to similar standards. However, criticisms of China's trade practices persisted, particularly regarding perceived unfair intellectual property practices and barriers to market access for US companies.

Donald Trump's administration marked a radical shift from the policies of his predecessor. Trump criticized the TPP and subsequently withdrew the US from the agreement, citing it as unfavorable to American interests. He launched an aggressive campaign of tariffs on Chinese goods, igniting the US-China trade war. His administration accused China of unfair trade practices, intellectual property theft, and a significant trade imbalance detrimental to the US. Trump's tariffs were met with retaliatory measures from China, leading to escalating tensions and negotiations that culminated in the Phase One trade agreement in 2020. Despite this agreement, many tariffs remained in place, and the economic relationship continued to be strained.

Entering office, President Biden inherited a challenging trade landscape. Unlike Trump, who preferred unilateral actions, Biden signaled his intent to work with allies to exert collective pressure on China. He maintained many of Trump's tariffs while promising a comprehensive review of US-China trade policies. However, he also signaled openness to negotiation and dialogue, emphasizing the need for competition without unnecessary confrontation. Nonetheless, Biden's administration has continued to express concerns over China's trade practices, particularly regarding technology and intellectual property.

The US-China trade war is rooted in numerous complex issues. At the heart of the conflict lies differing economic systems and ideologies. While the US economy is market-driven, China's

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economy is state-led, leading to clashes over issues such as state subsidies and state-owned enterprises. Additionally, there are concerns over intellectual property rights and forced technology transfers, with many US companies reporting unfair treatment in China. Furthermore, the significant trade imbalance, with China exporting more to the US than it imports, has been a continual point of contention.

The road to the US-China trade war is marked by changing policies, escalating tariffs, and complex negotiations. As administrations change, the approach to US-China trade continues to evolve. Despite the ongoing challenges, it's crucial to understand that a constructive US-China trade relationship is vital for the stability and prosperity of the global economy.

Human Rights Advocacy

The interplay of trade and human rights issues in US-China relations has been prominent across the administrations of Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden. Each president has taken a unique approach, which has invariably impacted the dynamic of this bilateral relationship.

During the Obama administration, there was a clear emphasis on engaging China economically and diplomatically. While human rights issues were a part of the dialogue, they often took a backseat to economic interests. The Obama administration prioritized establishing the rules of trade and promoting economic cooperation. This approach was exemplified in the negotiations around the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which was primarily an economic agreement but also touched upon labor and environmental standards. Despite maintaining dialogue on human rights, critics argue that the administration was not forceful enough in advocating for improvements in China's human rights situation.

The Trump administration took a distinctly confrontational approach in its trade relations with China, ushering in the US-China trade war. The administration placed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars of Chinese goods, leading to retaliation from China and subsequent negotiations. Under President Trump, the discourse around human rights took a slightly more pronounced role, particularly towards the end of his term. His administration imposed sanctions on Chinese officials and companies connected to alleged human rights abuses, especially in relation to the Uighur population in Xinjiang and pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong. However, human rights advocacy was often overshadowed by trade and economic issues, leading to criticisms that these issues were used more as strategic tools than out of genuine concern for human rights.

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Coming into office, President Biden inherited both a fraught trade relationship with China and a growing international focus on the country's human rights record. Biden's administration has attempted to strike a balance between holding China accountable for alleged human rights abuses and managing a necessary economic relationship. The Biden administration has maintained many of the Trump era tariffs while promising a comprehensive review of US-China trade policies. Simultaneously, it has continued to voice strong concerns about human rights issues, including Beijing's actions in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang, and has maintained sanctions on Chinese officials associated with these issues. This signals a more integrated approach where trade policy is more closely intertwined with human rights advocacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the US-China relations have experienced a significant deterioration following the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war. Both countries have engaged in a trade war that has tainted their once-cordial diplomatic relations. The Trump administration pursued a confrontational approach that involved imposing tariffs and restricting Chinese companies' access to the US market. Conversely, President Biden has adopted a more multilateral strategy that involves working with allies to pressure China. During his presidency, Obama embraced a policy of engagement with China, which aimed to promote economic interdependence between the two nations. However, in recent years, the US has shifted towards a more hawkish position due to rising concerns over China's geopolitical ambitions and human rights abuses.

The future of US-China relations remains uncertain, but it is clear that both countries must work to find common ground to avoid a full-blown confrontation.

Recap of US-China relations since the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war

Since the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war, US-China relations have deteriorated significantly, with tensions continuing to escalate under the Trump, Biden, and now the Biden-Harris administrations. While both sides have expressed a desire to maintain a stable and cooperative relationship, disagreements over a range of issues – from trade and human rights to territorial disputes in the South China Sea and Taiwan – have fueled the rivalry between the world's two largest economies. Unlike his predecessors, President Trump pursued a more confrontational approach towards China, characterizing it as a "strategic competitor" and imposing a series of tariffs and trade restrictions. President Biden has also taken a tough stance, albeit with a more multilateral approach, while Obama favored a more cooperative strategy that emphasized diplomacy and engagement. Despite differing approaches, US-China relations remain a critical issue for both countries and the world at large.

Future of US-China Relations

Since the onset of the 2022 Ukraine-Russia war, US-China relations have been strained due to the two countries' differing approaches to the conflict. China, a major importer of Russian oil and gas, has been more hesitant to impose harsh sanctions against Russia, while the US has been vocal in

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its condemnation of Russia's actions. This has caused tensions to rise between the US and China, with the two countries engaging in tit-for-tat trade tariffs and adopting a more confrontational approach towards one another. The Trump administration took a more aggressive stance towards China, imposing tariffs on Chinese goods and labeling the country a strategic competitor. The Biden administration has continued to be tough on China, albeit with a more multilateral approach, while the Obama administration had a more collaborative approach and emphasized the importance of engagement with China. The future of US-China relations will likely depend on the two countries' ability to find areas of cooperation amid their many differences.

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