

Trump's win provokes nervousness and bravado in Beijing

By Mike Head
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China's ruling elite has initially responded to Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election with a combination of appeals for dialogue, warnings of global instability and nationalist rhetoric.

On the one hand, the Beijing regime is clearly anxious to reach an accommodation with Trump and his aggressive "America First" agenda, arguing there could be a mutual "win, win" outcome for both ruling elites. At the same time, it is preparing for an historic collision.

Trump's campaign threats to name China a "currency manipulator" from day one of his presidency and to impose punitive 45 percent tariffs on Chinese imports, and his plans to boost US military spending, especially on the navy, have generated calls in state-run media outlets for China to be ready for all-out trade war and military confrontation.

Publicly, Chinese President Xi Jinping congratulated Trump and told him the world's two largest economies shared responsibility for promoting global development and prosperity. "I place great importance on the China-US relationship, and look forward to working with you to uphold the principles of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation," Xi told Trump by phone.

But the *People's Daily*, the main official mouthpiece of the Beijing regime, ran editorials that sent different messages, depicting the United States as dysfunctional and crippled. A November 8 editorial described the election as "the most dark, chaotic and negative one in the past two centuries," with the candidates smearing each other "in the most despicable and uncivilised ways." It concluded: "Such chaos and disorder tells the world that the US is 'sick' when it comes to the nation's own economy, society and politics."

A November 11 editorial said Trump's rise had

"plunged the world into a period of deep uncertainty," compounded by his "contradictory statements and lack of details." It held out hope that Trump would recognise the "critically important" need to "strengthen the relationship" because "America's strength depends on China's strength."

Yet the same editorial warned that Washington's "pivot" to Asia—a concerted drive to militarily and economically dominate over China—was unlikely to "fade under Trump." Instead, it would "have a harder edge." The newspaper noted that the Pentagon had been pushing for a stronger military presence in the region, and "could get its way" with Trump in office. "Trump has already stated his intention to increase defense spending, and his vision for national security includes adding 350 ships to the US Navy," it said.

Editorials and commentary in *Global Times*, a more openly nationalist state-controlled media outlet, were more belligerent. A November 11 article declared that "China should stand ready to fight back" if Trump rolled out protectionist measures.

"Trump regularly railed against China during the campaign, blaming the country for US job losses and proposing a 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports," the article commented. "Although campaign rhetoric is not necessarily consistent with policy after a candidate assumes office, China should be ready for any possible scenario when it comes to its bilateral ties with the US, including a trade war."

The article insisted China would "not hesitate" to retaliate. "China is now a vital overseas market for American firms like Apple Inc., and in 2015 China's imports of goods from the US reaching \$149 billion, based on Chinese customs data. There is no doubt that the American economy would suffer a severe blow if China were in turn to impose a 45 percent tariff on

US-made goods.”

A November 10 *Global Times* editorial asserted that, regardless of Trump’s “own tendencies,” the US was “not powerful enough to maintain its global hegemony.” However, “in the initial stage of Trump’s presidency, he might bash China to establish authority as a new commander-in-chief,” so “Beijing should be prepared for Trump’s blows” and “respond decisively and fearlessly.”

One feature of Trump’s victory has been hailed in Beijing—the killing off of the Trans-Pacific Partnership that the Obama administration had pursued as the economic spearhead of its anti-China “pivot.” The TPP, which excluded China, was designed to establish a US-led trade and investment bloc, battering down all national barriers to the domination of Asia-Pacific markets by American financial, technology, pharmaceutical and media corporations.

China will now step up its efforts to win support for a Beijing-led Asia-Pacific free trade area at this year’s Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, to be held in Peru on November 19-20. Briefing journalists ahead of President Xi’s departure for the summit and a Latin American visit, China’s Vice Foreign Minister Li Baodong warned that “trade and investment protectionism is rearing its head.” He said a trade pact was therefore essential “at an early date.”

For more than six years, China has proposed a Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP) and a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), but the Obama administration repeatedly pushed these plans aside in favour of the TPP. Li said Xi’s attendance at the summit showed China’s “confidence in promoting” its alternatives.

The FTAAP would cover all 21 members of APEC, while the RCEP would group the 10 members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand, but not the United States.

A November 11 *Global Times* article further drummed up Chinese nationalism, provocatively predicting the triumph of a “China-led Asia.” It proclaimed that China’s economic clout had “geographically fractured” the US pivot.

The commentary asserted that Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte’s recent declaration that he was “separating” from Washington, followed by Malaysian

Prime Minister Najib Razak’s purchase of navy vessels from China, had “put holes in Washington’s net around the Middle Kingdom.”

“It’s simple: US allies are being overwhelmed by China’s sheer industrial production, and infrastructure investment is more attractive than US foreign military base construction... Japan and South Korea may become isolated if the ASEAN countries continue to turn towards Beijing, and will have to decide what is more beneficial: US-led containment or collaborating with a China-led Asia.”

This bravado is designed to whip up nationalist sentiment, pitting Chinese workers against their fellow workers in America, throughout the region and internationally. While the Beijing bureaucrats and oligarchs will no doubt still seek to cut deals with Washington, Trump’s victory has spurred the rise of bellicose nationalist elements on both sides of the Pacific, intensifying the dangers of war between nuclear powers.

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