

Will China Test Trump? Lessons from Past Campaigns and Elections

China was in the crosshairs of both U.S. presidential candidates this election season. Republican candidate Donald J. Trump pledged to put an end to Chinese trade policies that “rape” the U.S. economy, while Democratic candidate Hillary R. Clinton criticized China’s record on human rights and island-building activities in the South China Sea.¹ Trump and Clinton both pledged to label China a currency manipulator, file more trade cases against China, and impose tariffs on Chinese imports.² As Chinese state media lamented, “China-bashing” is an “easy political card for U.S. political candidates to play.”³

Although promises to adopt tougher positions on China are a recurring feature of U.S. presidential campaigns, Donald J. Trump’s unconventional candidacy and ascent to the White House have introduced enormous uncertainty in the trajectory of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Both American and Chinese analysts have wondered what Trump’s election will entail for U.S. democratic norms and institutions. An open letter by hundreds of political scientists stated that Trump’s “unprecedented” remarks during the campaign had “questioned and attacked the core institutions and norms that make democracy work,” including freedom of the press, the validity of the election process, and the loyalty of citizens based on their religion and ethnicity.⁴ Chinese state media seized the opportunity to discredit Western-style democracy as a “sham.”⁵ Setting aside Chinese expressions of “delight” and *schadenfreude* in America’s “fading political and social institutions,”⁶ how will the election affect Chinese policy toward the new administration?

Kacie Miura is a PhD candidate in political science at MIT. Find her on Twitter @kaciemiura. Jessica Chen Weiss is Associate Professor of Government at Cornell. Find her on Twitter @jessicaweiss.

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The Washington Quarterly • 39:4 pp. 7–25
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2016.1263921>

China's treatment of newly elected leaders depends primarily on two factors.

In our research, we find that China's treatment of newly elected leaders depends primarily on two factors: whether a candidate's campaign rhetoric was *consistent* with other indicators of the candidate's intentions toward China, and whether the candidate promised to *change* the China policy of his or her predecessor.⁷

As the economic and security relations of the United States and China are tightly intertwined, Chinese observers pay close attention to what U.S. presidential candidates say, despite the conventional wisdom that elected leaders abandon their campaign promises on China in favor of more pragmatic policies after taking office.⁸ As Chinese Ambassador to the United Kingdom Liu Xiaoming told reporters, "I think I understand the American election politics. We listen to what they are saying today, but we must pay more attention to what they are going to do after the election."⁹ Although Chinese leaders rarely comment directly on U.S. presidential candidates, Chinese state-run media,¹⁰ official think tanks, and academics at top institutions publish opinions that fall within the bounds of what China's top leaders deem acceptable. Given China's tight leash on party-controlled and state-affiliated publications, these materials can give us insight into Chinese thinking.

Drawing on China's recent behavior toward newly elected leaders in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan, we expect China to adopt a wait-and-see stance toward the incoming Trump administration. During the campaign, Trump harshly criticized the current terms of U.S. trade and security commitments. However, his rhetoric was often inconsistent with that of his advisors and out of step with the views of much of the Republican establishment. Given this inconsistency, we expect Beijing to take a cautious approach toward the new administration, just as it has toward other national leaders whose campaign rhetoric conflicted with other indicators of likely policy. Although the past is hardly an infallible guide to the future, we do not expect China to probe the new administration, as there is little evidence that China has sought to test or take advantage of newly elected leaders in the recent past.

Chinese Perceptions of Campaign Rhetoric: Consistency and Change

When evaluating the likelihood that a leader will follow through on campaign promises, we find that China sees a candidate's campaign rhetoric as more credible when it is *consistent* with his or her past foreign policy statements and the reputation of his or her party and policy advisors. Candidates whose campaign

remarks contradict their past record, the reputation of their party, and the views of their advisors are more often expected to renege on campaign pledges when confronted with the complex realities of governing.¹¹ When a candidate's campaign rhetoric is *inconsistent* with other indicators, China typically takes a "wait-and-see" approach, delaying judgment until after the candidate takes office and reveals intentions through subsequent actions. China adopted such an approach toward Taiwan's Chen Shui-bian (2000–2008) and Japan's Junichiro Koizumi (2001–2006), leaders whose campaign rhetoric on China appeared opportunistic and contrasted sharply with their past behavior and actions. Observers in Beijing expressed deep skepticism toward Chen, whose moderate campaign stance contradicted his staunch, pro-independence reputation.¹² Conversely, Koizumi, who had a record of moderate statements toward China, adopted a tougher position on the campaign trail, which Chinese observers characterized as an attempt to cater to his party's conservative right wing.¹³

Beijing used specific issues as litmus tests to assess whether these new leaders acknowledged cherished principles—such as the existence of "One China" with Taiwan—and avoided taking symbolically provocative actions, such as visits to Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japanese war criminals along with ordinary war dead. In both cases, Beijing's wait-and-see stance lasted for more than a year. Ultimately dissatisfied with the results of its efforts to influence these new leaders' statements and actions on key issues, Beijing's ensuing treatment was quite harsh.

Conversely, when there is consistency between a candidate's campaign rhetoric and their past statements, actions, and the reputation of the party and policy advisors, a second important factor that appears to influence Beijing's treatment of a new leader is whether he or she promised to change the China policy of the preceding administration. U.S. presidential candidates often seek to distinguish themselves from the incumbent, finding it difficult to "resist the siren song of tough promises to reverse their predecessors' soft approach" toward China, as noted by former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Kurt Campbell and former Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg.¹⁴

When a leader's campaign rhetoric is consistent with toughening policy toward China, Beijing has proactively attempted to head off anticipated tensions. For example, following the election of George W. Bush, whose campaign rhetoric was consistent with indicators of a hawkish shift in policy toward China, Beijing agreed to investigate Chinese companies accused by the new administration of providing air defense assistance to Iraq.¹⁵ China also sent Vice Premier Qian Qichen to Washington, an early attempt to build cooperation and rapport with the new administration.¹⁶ China similarly adopted a proactive policy of engagement toward Bill Clinton, who like Bush had pledged on the campaign trail to be tough on China, particularly on human rights. To forestall

tensions with the new administration, Beijing made “carefully guarded efforts to reach out to Clinton,” offering minor concessions such as the release of several prominent Tiananmen activists and political prisoners.¹⁷

Toward leaders whose campaign rhetoric is consistent with indicators of a moderate turn in China policy, Beijing has been proactive in initiating and advancing engagement. China’s treatment of Taiwan’s Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016) reflected Beijing’s willingness to take bold moves to improve relations when confident that its efforts would be reciprocated. After the 2008 election of Ma, whose campaign promises aligned with indicators of a dovish turn in Taiwan’s Mainland policy,

Historically, Beijing has sought to maintain or improve relations with a newly elected hawk or dove.

Beijing hosted the first meeting in nine years of the agencies responsible for overseeing cross-strait commercial and technical matters.¹⁸ Beijing also agreed to a “diplomatic truce” with Taiwan in the contest for diplomatic recognition from third-party countries.¹⁹ It is important to note that Beijing has sought to maintain or improve relations when convinced that it is dealing with either a newly elected hawk or dove, rather than probing the new leader’s resolve.

Finally, China has adopted a *status quo* orientation toward leaders whose campaign rhetoric is consistent with continuity in China policy. Although candidates often try to outdo each other to appear tough on China, other candidates have largely affirmed, or at least refrained from criticizing, the outgoing administration’s China policy, as Barack Obama chose to do during his 2008 campaign. When a candidate’s campaign statements indicate a desire to maintain the existing tenor and policies of the outgoing administration, China tends to respond in kind. Status quo behavior includes preserving existing modes of diplomatic engagement, welcoming new initiatives that advance Chinese interests, and continuing policies and activities that advance or defend Beijing’s strategic interests.

For example, China accepted the Obama administration’s proposal to add a strategic track to the existing high-level economic dialogue, but continued to oppose U.S. maritime surveillance activities near its coast, including confronting the USNS *Impeccable* three months after Obama took office. However, Beijing also made sure that its actions did not affect the overall tenor of bilateral relations or diplomatic visits and exchanges in the aftermath of the *Impeccable* incident. It was only toward the end of Obama’s first year in office that Beijing was said to have shifted toward a “more assertive” foreign policy, beginning with its efforts in December 2009 to block a comprehensive climate change deal in Copenhagen.²⁰

Although the variables of consistency and change appear to be the most salient dimensions guiding Chinese beliefs and reactions, Chinese assessments of a newly elected leader's ability and willingness to follow through on campaign pledges also appear to be influenced by other factors. For example, if candidates from different parties are united in favor of improving relations with China, a candidate's pledge to adopt a more conciliatory policy tends to be taken more seriously. Convergence among candidates may help allay residual concerns about a candidate's sincerity. For example, Chinese observers were cautiously optimistic about the election of Shinzo Abe in his first term (2006–07). A known hawk and nationalist, Abe refrained during the campaign from saying whether he would visit Yasukuni while in office, marking a change with the outgoing Koizumi administration. Given his tacit acknowledgement of Chinese concerns over Yasukuni, combined with a convergence across candidates on the importance of repairing ties with China and a willingness to avoid the shrine, China's wait-and-see approach quickly gave way to a pragmatic embrace of the new Abe administration. On the other hand, if candidates unite around a tougher stance on China, a leader who then engages Beijing is more likely to face staunch criticism, raising questions about the longevity of new diplomatic initiatives. As such, a candidate's campaign rhetoric is likely to be taken especially seriously when there is agreement among candidates, either for continuity or change.

Chinese Perceptions of the 2016 U.S. Election

How will China treat the new Trump administration? On the campaign trail, Trump's strident criticism of U.S. alliances and free trade agreements were generally consistent with his long-held, "America First" worldview. However, compared to most new U.S. presidents, Trump has an unusually sparse foreign policy record, contributing to the view in Beijing that Clinton would have been a far more predictable leader.²¹ Ambassador Liu Xiaoming noted, "We don't know Donald Trump that well."²² Furthermore, much of Trump's campaign rhetoric lacked specific policy details and was frequently contradicted by the efforts of his campaign advisers and Republican Party elites to reassure domestic and foreign audiences. Toward the incoming President Trump, China is therefore likely to adopt a wait-and-see approach, a cautious foreign policy stance that it reserves for leaders about whom it is most uncertain.

China holds a cautious stance toward leaders about whom it is most uncertain.

Trade and Economics

Although both candidates promised to stand up to China on trade and economic issues, trade was a focal point of Trump's campaign and was at the center of his

rhetoric on China. In addition to chastising China for “ripping us off” and waging “economic war against us,”²³ Trump promised to impose a 45 percent tariff on Chinese imports, to label China a currency manipulator, and to confront Beijing’s “unfair subsidy behavior” by bringing more cases against China to the World Trade Organization (WTO).²⁴ Trump’s tough rhetoric on China was consistent with his protectionist views on trade, reflected in his promises to scrap the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and renegotiate the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).²⁵ Peter Navarro, one of Trump’s main economic advisors during the campaign, blamed the U.S. trade deficit with China on unfair trade practices and other such “weapons of job destruction.”²⁶

Despite Trump’s unyielding contempt for the current state of economic relations with China, it remains unclear whether he will follow through on his promises. On the campaign trail, Trump himself promised to be unpredictable, stating: “We have trade power over China. I don’t think we are going to start World War III over what they did ... But—and honestly, you know part of—I always say we have to be unpredictable. We’re totally predictable. And predictable is bad.”²⁷ Moreover, Trump’s fierce opposition to the current terms of trade with China and his skepticism of international free trade agreements are at odds with Vice President-elect Mike Pence’s support for free trade agreements while he was in Congress from 2001–2012, as well as the views of much of the Republican Party establishment, which retains control of Congress.²⁸ As the Clinton campaign pointed out, Trump’s own businesses benefited from outsourcing textile production to China and Bangladesh.²⁹

Furthermore, in the days following Trump’s election, his policy advisers sought to downplay some of his more hardline economic pledges. Senior advisor and mooted candidate for Treasury Secretary Wilbur Ross told *The Washington Post* that “Everybody says, oh he’s going to slap 45 percent tariff on everything out of China. That’s not what he said, and it’s not what he intends.” Rather, as Ross noted, “What he actually said was if—if it turns out that the Chinese *yuan* is 45 percent overvalued, or as much as 45, and if they won’t negotiate with us, then it may become necessary as a negotiating measure to threaten them with as much as a 45 percent tariff.”³⁰ However, it remains unclear whether Ross is concerned about an overvalued or undervalued Chinese exchange rate, as he and Peter Navarro co-authored an op-ed before the election criticizing undervalued foreign currencies for having “pulled” offshore U.S. factories.³¹ Until 2015, when the IMF declared the RMB “no longer undervalued,” it was the artificially low Chinese currency that sparked congressional efforts to impose tariffs or countervailing duties on Chinese goods. The overvaluation of the Chinese *yuan* has been a more recent development, with Beijing intervening to prevent it from depreciating.³²

Trump senior advisor James Woolsey, Jr., also struck a conciliatory tone by suggesting that the Trump administration would welcome a larger Chinese role in international institutions. He wrote just after the election that “the Obama administration’s opposition to the formation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was a strategic mistake and I hope that the next administration’s response to the Belt and Road initiative will be much warmer.”³³ However, such reassurances conflicted with the long-standing views of former steel magnate Dan DiMicco, Trump’s trade representative on the transition team, who called the notion of taking a softer line after the election “false rumors.”³⁴

Whereas Chinese officials usually refrain from expressing opinions about candidates during foreign elections, the severity of candidate Trump’s promises to revise trade relations garnered much attention in Beijing, prompting some Chinese officials to express their views in uncharacteristically candid terms. Such comments reflect what was widely believed to be the Chinese leadership’s begrudging preference for a Clinton presidency. Finance Minister Lou Jiwei, for example, reacted to Trump’s trade proposals by describing him as an “irrational type” whose proposed trade policies would cost the United States its global leadership position.³⁵ Ma Zhengang, a former Chinese ambassador to the UK and political attaché in Washington, divulged that “[w]e don’t really buy all that he said during the campaign,” and described Trump’s rhetoric as lots of “lip service and air.” Ma also said, “Who knows what he believes? Perhaps he himself doesn’t know either.”³⁶

Chinese state media devoted extensive coverage to Trump’s campaign and subsequent victory, with news reports and commentary expressing skepticism about the likelihood that he will follow through on his campaign promises. A commentary by “Zhong Sheng” (a homonym for “Voice of the Center” used by *People’s Daily*) attributed both candidates’ stance to the heated election climate and pointed to the recurring pattern in which “aggressive arguments about China are generally toned down once one nominee wins the election and takes office.”³⁷ Some experts who doubt that Trump will carry out his trade threats base their assessment on his lack of experience and knowledge. Yu Yongding, an economist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), likened Trump’s rhetoric to the “talk of an amateur,” and noted that after “he becomes president, there’ll be advisers at his side to explain to him what the exchange rate is, what capital flows are, what macroeconomic policy is.”³⁸

Others base their skepticism on domestic institutional constraints and the negative consequences of Trump’s trade promises for U.S. businesses. A *China Daily* editor, for example, expressed confidence that the “U.S. business community and Congress are unlikely to permit such mutually destructive behavior.”³⁹ As Jia Qingguo, Dean of the School of International Relations at Peking University, noted: “after Trump takes office, he will discover that putting tariffs on Chinese goods is highly unrealistic. Not only will China protest, but the United States

itself will protest.”⁴⁰ The *Global Times*, a tabloid published by *People’s Daily*, also cautioned, “If Trump follows his campaign stance and imposes pressure on China over a host of economic issues, U.S. firms doing business in China may get caught in the fallout.”⁴¹ The tabloid also warned that, should Trump impose tariffs on Chinese imports, Beijing would respond with a “tit-for-tat approach,” in which a “batch of Boeing orders will be replaced by Airbus. U.S. auto and iPhone sales in China would suffer a setback, and U.S. soybean and maize imports will be halted.”⁴²

Other Chinese observers, however, have been more reluctant to dismiss Trump’s campaign threats as mere cheap talk. Shi Yinhong, a leading international relations expert at Renmin University, expressed his belief that Trump would follow through on his campaign promises, especially in regard to foreign policy. According to Shi, Trump’s “China policy will surely have negative effects on Sino–U.S. economic cooperation.”⁴³ Yuan Zheng, a researcher at CASS, noted that although campaign rhetoric “of course can’t be taken 100 percent seriously,” “trade protectionism is rising in the [United States] ... so the new president may take a more stiff attitude in some areas of trade, demanding that China respect international rules and bringing more suits to the WTO.”⁴⁴

Observers in Beijing are likely to be particularly uncertain about economic issues.

The range of views expressed by Chinese officials, experts, and state media suggest that economic issues are likely to represent an area of particular uncertainty for observers in Beijing. Despite the relative consistency of Trump’s rhetoric on trade, the perceived incredulity of some of his promises, as well as the contradictory positions of his advisors and

many in the Republican Party, will likely induce China to adopt a cautious, watchful approach until more is known about the Trump administration’s willingness and ability to carry out his campaign promises.

Security

Trump’s campaign rhetoric on China focused overwhelmingly on trade, revealing less about other aspects of his potential foreign policy toward China. On the campaign trail, Trump occasionally raised the specter of China’s military modernization, but when referring to China’s island-building activities in the South China Sea, his remarks seemed to reveal an equal measure of awe. At a rally in Iowa, Trump noted that China is “building a massive, massive airfield, military base” in the South China Sea, adding that “people are amazed at what’s going on, and they don’t get environmental impact studies when they build, they just

build.”⁴⁵ These comments echoed parts of his 2015 candidacy announcement, in which he referred to China’s “military island” in the South China Sea and said: “Now, our country could never do that because we’d have to get environmental clearance, and the environmentalists wouldn’t let our country—we would never build in an ocean. They built it in about one year, this massive military port. They’re building up their military to a point that is very scary.”⁴⁶

Trump himself has been a longtime proponent of a strong U.S. military. In 1990, Trump told *Playboy* magazine that a President Trump would “have a huge military arsenal, perfect it, understand it.”⁴⁷ His campaign website stated that Trump would “discourage Chinese adventurism that imperils American interests in Asia and shows our strength as we begin renegotiating our trading relationship with China. A strong military presence will be a clear signal to China and other nations in Asia and around the world that America is back in the global leadership business.”⁴⁸ During the campaign, two of Trump’s military advisors, Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) and Representative Randy Forbes (R-VA), also emphasized that Trump would increase the size and spending on the U.S. military, particularly the navy.⁴⁹

At the same time, Trump repeatedly criticized U.S. allies in Asia during the campaign, complaining that the United States pays too much to defend Japan and South Korea. Trump suggested the possibility of Japan acquiring nuclear weapons, stating that “It’s going to happen anyway. It’s only a question of time.”⁵⁰ Trump later walked back these remarks, saying that the Clinton campaign “said I want Japan to get nuclear weapons. Give me a break.”⁵¹ During the Republican primary debate, he declared, “We can no longer defend all of these countries, Japan, Germany, South Korea.”⁵² When asked if he would withdraw troops from Japan and South Korea, he told *The New York Times*: “Yes, I would. I would not do so happily, but I would be willing to.”⁵³

Such statements were at odds with commentary by Trump’s policy advisors. On the eve of the election, Peter Navarro and Alexander Gray called U.S. alliances in Asia “bedrocks of stability in the region” and wrote that “the Trump naval program will reassure our allies that the United States remains committed in the long term to its traditional role as guarantor of the liberal order in Asia.”⁵⁴ Under Trump, the United States would continue “to have huge strength in the Asia-Pacific Area,” Representative Forbes stated. Senator Sessions similarly admitted, “I think we are going to have a Pacific pivot. That may not be the best word anymore, but in general that concept of a strengthened position in the Pacific, I would support.”⁵⁵

In the aftermath of the election, senior advisors continued this line of assurance, seeking to alleviate “unfounded” concerns that Japan might have.⁵⁶ As senior defense advisor James Woolsey, Jr. wrote: “The [United States] sees itself as the holder of the balance of power in Asia and is likely to remain determined

to protect its allies against Chinese overreach ... We may, perhaps, be more scrupulous in our decision-making on where and how we get involved but we will not become isolationist.”⁵⁷ However, even these assurances acknowledged that the continued U.S. commitment was “likely” rather than certain, with the U.S. domestic economy receiving higher priority. As Michael Pillsbury, one of Trump’s transition team advisors and a former Reagan administration official, noted: “Trump is not a traditional Republican conservative in the sense of the military challenge from China ... He’s said very little about the [People’s Liberation Army], China’s plans in space, the South China Sea: he’s focused more on American jobs.”⁵⁸

For many in China, Trump’s election signifies the dawn of a more isolationist turn in U.S. foreign policy that could entail reduced security commitments in the Asia–Pacific.⁵⁹ The prospect of a more inwardly focused United States has elicited optimism among some observers in Beijing. Following Trump’s election, Jin Canrong, associate dean of the School of International Studies at Renmin University, remarked that Trump’s lack of enthusiasm for the U.S. “rebalance” to the Asia–Pacific, as well as the possibility that he would abandon Taiwan, would take the strategic pressure off Beijing.⁶⁰ Jin noted: “There will be more trade pressure but less strategic pressure. But China can handle those trade disputes.”⁶¹ Xie Tao, a professor at Beijing Foreign Language University, similarly remarked: “If the [United States] is alienating Japan and South Korea and U.S. troops leave the region, it’s a huge chance for China.”⁶² Ruan Zongze, an expert at the Foreign Ministry-affiliated China Institute of International Studies and a former envoy to Washington, predicted that bilateral relations would “have a greater chance of thriving under the Trump presidency.” He also noted that Trump’s business background suggests that he will be “pragmatic and not ideologically bent.”⁶³

Trump’s campaign polemics and lack of political experience, however, led other observers to voice their apprehension. As Jia Qingguo remarked in the days following the election, “Trump’s presidency brings enormous uncertainty. No one knows what he will do in office. He has had no prior political experience, no systematic description of his policies, so there’s no way to speculate what his policies will be after taking office.”⁶⁴ Shen Dingli of Fudan University similarly cautioned that “[Trump’s] lack of experience and over-confidence bring uncertainties and could cause him frustration that might lead to impulsiveness.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, Trump’s perceived preference for a transactional approach to U.S. alliances has caused concerns that he may happily reward increased defense spending by Japan and South Korea by expanding the U.S. military presence in the region. According to Renmin University’s Shi Yinhong, “Japan perceives that it faces a China threat and South Korea faces the North Korean threat. They have no other way, they have to pay money ... After their payment, Trump will be very

pleased to further strengthen military alliances with South Korea and especially Japan.”⁶⁶

Trump’s security policy remains an unknown variable for Beijing, with efforts to “read the tea leaves” producing an assortment of predictions about the future of bilateral relations under Trump. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences expert Fan Jishe concluded that while “basic military relations” between the United States and China are unlikely to change under Trump, “[h]is military policy, however, remains uncertain because he did not talk much about it during the election campaign.”⁶⁷ In light of the deep uncertainty surrounding Trump’s China policy, Chinese observers are keeping a watchful eye on Trump’s cabinet appointments. Lian Degui, an expert affiliated with the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, noted, “[Trump] is a layman in diplomacy, but he will have his own advisers. But we still don’t know who they are, so it’s hard to judge.” Lian suggested that unless Trump proceeds to “neglect all advice,” the United States is unlikely to “stop countering China in world affairs.”⁶⁸ Indeed, even after Trump announces his foreign policy team, the extent to which he will adhere to their advice remains to be seen. Beijing is therefore likely to adopt a wait-and-see approach in both the security and economic realm until more is known about the extent to which Trump intends to revise U.S. policy toward China and the Asia–Pacific.

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Implications for the Trump Administration

Many factors set Trump apart from past leaders. Chief among these differences are Trump’s lack of prior political experience or detailed policy proposals, and the alienation of a large swath of his party’s foreign policy establishment. These unprecedented features of Trump’s candidacy exacerbate the difficulty of forecasting how the Chinese government will react to the transition and other changes that the Trump presidency may set in motion. Given China’s past behavior toward newly elected leaders, we think it likely that Beijing will bide its time and allow the Trump administration to play out a bit more before determining a specific response.⁶⁹ Jin Yanan, a professor at the PLA’s National Defense University explained, “As for what will actually happen once Trump takes office, we have to wait and see, but one thing is certain: he is without a doubt going to be different from Obama and Hillary.”⁷⁰ With so much uncertainty about whether Trump will try to implement his tough campaign rhetoric on trade and whether he will renegotiate U.S. alliance commitments in Asia, China is also likely to allow the new

China is likely to allow the new administration to settle in without probing or accommodating.

administration to settle in without probing or accommodating the new leadership. As an anonymous senior analyst in Beijing noted before the election: “Regardless of who wins, we will try to engage and influence the new administration, show them that China is not so bad after all.”⁷¹

Although some might expect China to try to exploit the handoff to such an inexperienced president, our research suggests that the Chinese government is unlikely to gamble on such a risky strategy. Indeed, the optimistic remarks of Chinese leaders and senior officials in the days following Trump’s election suggest that China intends to extend a “grace period” toward the new president. As Chinese president Xi Jinping told Trump in a congratulatory phone call, “I attach great importance to

China–U.S. relations and am ready to work with the U.S. side to carry forward bilateral ties and to better benefit the two peoples and the rest of the world.”⁷² Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi similarly said that Beijing “stands ready to communicate with Trump’s team, so as to cement mutual understanding and expand consensus on bilateral cooperation.”⁷³

With inconsistency between Trump’s campaign stance on trade and the reassurances of his advisers as well as the preferences of the Republican Party establishment, China is likely to pursue a cautious approach toward the new administration’s trade and economic policies. China likely expects to be the target of continued action and rhetoric on unfair competition and trading practices, as China has grown accustomed to dealing with industry- and product-specific disputes through institutional mechanisms. Trump could declare China a currency manipulator but then choose to pursue bilateral negotiations rather than imposing retaliatory tariffs and duties.⁷⁴ But if Trump follows through on his promise to impose tariffs on Chinese imports, Beijing may well retaliate in kind. Although Chinese observers may hope that Trump’s policies in office will bear little resemblance to his tough campaign rhetoric, his promises to “beat China” may not be so easily recanted. As a *Global Times* editorial lamented, “now that presidential candidates keep making extreme attacks on China, they won’t be so easily forgotten.”⁷⁵

Far more likely to destabilize U.S.–China relations are the regional repercussions of uncertainty in U.S. alliance commitments—and self-help efforts by Japan to strengthen its military and potentially acquire nuclear weapons. China is likely to react with outrage to increased Japanese military spending and potential nuclear acquisition. In 2012, just the purchase by Japan of three uninhabited islands in the East China Sea triggered a massive wave of nationalist street protests

in China and unprecedented Chinese countermeasures.⁷⁶ China may also choose to watch carefully whether the Trump administration continues to support an active U.S. military presence in Asia, and make the most of any opportunities created by an abrupt U.S. departure. In the absence of an exogenous shock that provides an overriding rationale for strategic cooperation, as the attacks of September 11 provided for U.S.–China relations in 2001 under the George W. Bush administration, a major improvement in bilateral relations is unlikely.

Senior Trump advisor James Woolsey suggested “a grand bargain in which the [United States] accepts China’s political and social structure and commits not to disrupt it in any way in exchange for China’s commitment not to challenge the status quo in Asia,” but we think it unlikely that China would accept such a deal. During the campaign, Trump’s remarks about the crackdown at Tiananmen Square conveyed his satisfaction with how those protests were handled. Trump referred to the 1989 democracy protests in Tiananmen Square as a “riot” and praised China’s bloody crackdown as a demonstration of strength.⁷⁷ Given these remarks, it is unlikely that the Chinese government would choose to offer geostrategic concessions or reassurances in exchange for a U.S. commitment not to pressure Beijing on human rights. As it is, many Chinese observers are already predicting that “Trump is not going to be as harsh on human rights as Hillary Clinton would have been,” said Renmin University’s Zhang Ming.⁷⁸

Although Beijing will likely continue to advance its strategic interests, past behavior suggests that China will avoid initiating new frontiers of conflict with the newly inaugurated U.S. president. A significant deterioration of U.S.–China relations in the early phase of the Trump presidency is therefore avoidable, although an incident could easily escalate to conflict if the new administration feels that its resolve is being tested. Given the perception among many Chinese observers that Trump is “volatile,”⁷⁹ Beijing may be especially cautious as the new administration takes shape. China is likely to respond mildly to early criticism, but the new administration should not take for granted China’s initial forbearance. Once the shadow of the leadership transition has passed, any actions that challenge China’s economic and strategic interests may elicit a strong reaction from Beijing. Washington should avoid mistaking such reactions by Beijing as efforts to probe or exploit Trump.

Notes

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