

Why China might need the rest of the west more as Trump arrives in the White House

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« Beijing has tried preparing for a tougher US climate, which may explain why it has increased trade with south-east Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East in recent years. Therefore, China may be looking to engage the west, at least the non-US part of it, for a range of economic, political and security reasons. »

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Donald Trump has a knack of antagonising and confusing China. During his first presidential campaign, he accused China of [“raping”](#) the US through unfair trade practices. But later in his first term as US president, Trump also called Chinese president Xi Jinping a [“good friend”](#).

Throughout the 2024 presidential campaign Trump suggested he would be tough on China in a second term, and days away from becoming president nothing looks likely to change.

Trump has suggested he could [raise tariffs on all Chinese goods](#) up to 60%, and is likely to appoint [Marco Rubio](#) as secretary of state and [Mark Waltz](#) as national security adviser. Both are “China hawks” who believe that Washington should toughen [its stance against Beijing](#), and view China as a national security threat to the US.

Beijing has tried [preparing](#) for a tougher US climate, which may explain why it has increased trade with [south-east Asia](#), [Latin America](#), and the [Middle East](#) in recent years. Therefore, China may be looking to engage the west, at least the non-US part of it, for a range of economic, political and security reasons.

The Chinese government could see Ottawa as a solution to help meet China's energy needs, as Canada is rich in [oil](#), [coal](#) and [iron](#). It could even warm up to Canberra, as Australia has abundant [lithium](#), which is crucial for making electric vehicles.

Ultimately though, China might need to maintain ties and improve its relationship with the EU. The EU holds the distinction of being China's [second largest trading partner](#), and exports to the EU have [soared](#) in the past few years. This occurred as Beijing [pivoted away](#) from manufacturing the [“old three”](#) exports -- household appliances, furniture and clothing - to the tech-intensive [“new three”](#), in electric vehicles, lithium-ion batteries and solar cells.

China's new products

Since the “new three” represent an important component in China’s economic growth, the EU, as a [significant consumer](#) of such products, represents a crucial market for China. Nonetheless, the EU is not an easy win for China.

Video : US likely to appoint a China ‘hawk’ as secretary of state.

Brussels has [accused Beijing](#) of unfairly subsidising Chinese electric vehicle firms and has imposed tariffs of up to [45.3%](#) on these goods since late October 2024. But China may have substantial room to smooth relations with the European bloc, and there are [signs](#) that this is happening. However, the recent row over China’s [potential involvement](#) with anchor dragging in the Baltic Sea to damage communication cables will not have helped matters.

Fortunately for China, the EU is not a united front. [Voting patterns](#) on tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles in 2024 reveal an interesting fact : ten nations supported them, five were against and 12 abstained.

Potentially, Beijing could sway detractors and fence-sitters in Brussels by [lowering barriers to entry](#) for EU firms coming into the Chinese market, and reduce [subsidies for Chinese firms](#) competing in Europe.

China has a [partnership of “no limits”](#) with Russia, and this has proven to be a [concern](#) for the west, and particularly Europe. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Nato [declared](#) that : “The People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values.”

[Growing concerns](#) over China’s activities in Europe and Asia may have prompted Nato to invite Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea (known as the Asia Pacific 4 or AP4), to Nato’s June 2022 summit. While European officials have [dismissed](#) a formal alliance between Nato and Asian states, there are increasingly frequent discussions and meetings between [both sides](#).

Beijing could help alleviate western fears that China is a security threat by resolving one of Europe’s thorniest geopolitical issues : the [Ukraine-Russia war](#), although that is [looking unlikely](#). However, an attempt to help create a peace deal could lessen western perception of the “Chinese threat”.

Engaging with the US

China will continue to engage with the US. Aside from being the [third largest trading partner](#) with China after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and the EU, the western superpower remains a technological, economic and military powerhouse.

Former US president John F. Kennedy once [wrote](#) : “When written in Chinese, the word “crisis” is composed of two characters - one represents danger and one represents opportunity.” If China plays its cards right, the danger that Trump appears to represent to its economy might not be as significant as first thought. Trump, after all, is not always predictable.

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Chee Meng Tan, an Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. He is known for his expertise in Chinese foreign policy and soft power, particularly in the strategic use of panda diplomacy, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Confucius Institutes.

With a Ph.D. in Business Administration and a doctorate in economics, his research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, deeply influenced by Chinese history and culture. Tan's work, which includes significant publications and a comprehensive dataset on panda diplomacy, has positioned him as a global authority on the subject, earning recognition from major international media outlets and being featured in documentaries, TV and radio shows.

His insights into panda diplomacy and Chinese soft power have been disseminated worldwide, reaching audiences in various languages and countries. Beyond panda diplomacy, Tan's research spans political economics, sociology, social psychology, and organizational studies, contributing to esteemed academic journals. Currently, he is focusing on a project exploring Chinese-style management, examining the impact of China's historical, cultural, and philosophical backgrounds on the management practices of Chinese corporations. This work is particularly relevant given China's rising influence in the global economic and geopolitical landscape, offering valuable perspectives for engaging with Chinese businesses.

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