

A Chinese Leadership Role in the Age of Trump?

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Executive Summary

The rise of China as a disruptor of the post-Cold War US hegemony has been touted as a solution to President Donald Trump's protectionist isolationism. Since Trump's surprise election victory in November 2016, the coherence of Western-led economic, environment and security policies have been threatened by this isolationist shift. Fragmentation of the liberal world economies, with the US particularly significant, would open up a power vacuum in the East Asian region. Simultaneously, China seeks to expand its regional influence and pursue a greater role on the world stage. However, the experience of the Hamburg G20 Summit shows that China is neither willing nor able to replace US hegemony in all areas, preferring to focus on economic issues. In such a context, no obvious successor to the US currently exists, pointing to a period of uncertainty in which multilateral summity gives way to the kind of bilateral deal-making beloved [of both Trump](#) and [the Chinese leadership](#).

Trump's China missteps

Trump's confused approach toward engaging with China has weakened US leadership in East Asia and risks losing the confidence of long-time allies as well as motivating Beijing to act with fewer curbs on its conduct.

Since his election last November, the erratic front Trump has presented to China shows a distinct lack of a new and coherent East Asian strategy to replace Obama's "Pivot to Asia". This time last year, the Commander-in-Chief remained an unlikely leadership contender who was frequently satirized as "Big-Mouth Trump" [in the Chinese press](#). Since then, Chinese scepticism over Trump's logic has not abated. Both his [unprecedented phone call](#) with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen and [vacillation over](#) whether to accept the traditionally ambiguous American interpretation of the One-China policy demonstrate a worrying lack of familiarity with Chinese sensitivities and regional politics. With Xi's unwillingness, or even inability, to rein in North Korea, the US President is once again unhappy

with perceived Chinese intransigence despite a brief honeymoon period at Mar-a-Lago.

At the Hamburg Summit, Trump cut an isolated figure among the G20 leaders, as the US reconsiders past commitments to allies in Europe and Asia. The speed and frequency with which the US President seems willing to change his opinion of leaders, nations and issues creates many uncertainties, in particular around future US policy towards China. Arriving in Poland before the G20 Summit, [President Trump castigated](#) a recent (claimed and subsequently disputed) 40 per cent increase in trade between Beijing and Pyongyang and tweeted his frustrations with characteristic braggadocio. Whether this represents renewed hostility to the Chinese leadership remains to be seen but themes of China as an enemy date back to [Trump's 2016 manifesto](#). For a self-styled dealmaker, a slow-burning and complex problem such as denuclearising the Korean peninsula poses particular challenges and frustrations.

The Limits of Hangzhou and Hamburg

The fact that China has taken some advantage of the space created by Trump's missteps to influence global politics in its national interest

demonstrates a clear strategy on Beijing's part. It is unlikely that Xi would not have deduced that Trump's policies are frequently based on ignorance and whim. Thus, a putative Chinese challenge to US pre-eminence in the economic and environmental spheres has emerged, but in concert with other nations' concerns around these issues and without provoking any significant concern.

Where the US has been unsteady on the economic front, China has been remarkably consistent and vocal in its (albeit contested) endorsement of free trade. The 2016 G20 Hangzhou Summit [represented a watershed](#) in China's engagement with global summity of this kind, but the extent to which its leadership is willing to continue along these lines is questionable after the Hamburg Summit saw little progress on this front.

However, one of the key achievements of the Hangzhou Summit last year – the agreement between China and the US to ratify the Paris Climate Accords – has effectively been rendered moot by Trump's decision to [unilaterally withdraw](#) from the agreement. Unsurprisingly, G20 leaders were unable to persuade Trump to pay even diplomatic lip service to the Accords, and the US position was

acknowledged in the final [Leaders' Declaration](#). In isolation, such a development would be of little practical concern to the Chinese administration. It neither affects its token displays of environmental responsibility nor reflects negatively on its prestige. Trump's behaviour leaves China with ample opportunities to exploit declining US soft power and present itself as the responsible guarantor of free trade and the environment.

The China Syndrome

China's positioning as a champion of global trade merits greater scrutiny. Xi's past statements, on trade in particular, [fail to mask](#) the protectionism and hostility to the free flow of capital that has characterized China's development model. At Merkel's closing press conference and other events around the G20 media centre, such as Japanese press briefings, German journalists mentioned China in conjunction with steel dumping. This issue had been raised in Hangzhou, but no substantive progress was made in Hamburg other than a vague commitment to discuss it in August.

Although human rights concerns should not characterize every interaction with China, its parlous record in this area

means that it remains an imperfect and uneasy partner for the EU, and Germany in particular. Regardless of her desire to present Germany as a liberal world leader, and Hamburg as a free city tolerant of democratic dissent, Merkel failed to prioritize issues of human rights above the Hamburg Summit's more immediate aims, not least of which involved shoring up flagging support for free trade. At the same time, the German public's focus on the illiberal leaders of Russia, Turkey and the US shifted the spotlight away from China, making inaction on human rights easier for the Chancellor. China's [recent abrogation](#) of the Sino-British Joint Declaration, [irredentist designs](#) on Taiwan and the [militarisation](#) of the South China Sea also call into question the country's willingness to respect international agreements. Good faith is indispensable when seeking to achieve the G20's objectives, and China cannot credibly lead if it fails to respect this principle.

The Hangzhou Summit also demonstrated China's selective engagement with the G20 on the economic front. Hamburg's [Leaders' Declaration](#) diplomatically mentioned "expanding on [Hangzhou's] results", but the stated Chinese summit priority of decreasing trade deficits and surpluses to balance global trade was not ultimately included. The *People's Daily* opened its G20 coverage on the day

before the Hamburg Summit began [with a call for](#) the consensus reached at the Hangzhou Summit to continue shaping the economic direction of global financial policy. The relative success of a home summit, albeit one without Trump, motivated the Chinese delegation to play it safe and direct its focus towards redoubling efforts to sell the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Interconnected but Divided

While the global economy continues to develop along ever more interconnected lines, the political will to defend free trade and globalisation exists in some nations, but not among all significant players.

At his press conference on the last day of the Hamburg Summit, French President [Emmanuel Macron commented](#) that the world has never been so divided. Divisions of this sort necessitate coalitions in unlikely places. China has [benefited hugely](#) from its position within a globalised, interconnected world economy, and has in the past been willing to amend aspects of its economic policy for material or strategic gain, such as on condition of World Trade Organisation (WTO) admission. After all, Xi's endorsement of globalisation is not mere

window dressing concealing a trade policy that flouts WTO rules in the way that making America great again would.

Gallic hyperbole aside, the shifting coalitions that formed around particular interests at the Hamburg Summit point to shared or contested global leadership. Korean denuclearisation was primarily tackled by a [US-Korea-Japan trilateral meeting](#), for example, and achieving a consensus on global warming mitigation proved a bridge too far. This suggests that diminishing US prominence will lead to groups of influential nations and their supporters moving to assume joint leadership on specific issues. China has shown a willingness to sign up for joint efforts in areas where its preferred outcome can be achieved through cooperation. However, even OBOR [has provoked controversy](#) for the preferential treatment given to the (usually small) countries that echo Beijing's line. Once again, China will only be motivated to cooperate when it is in its national interest to do so.

Summary

Ultimately, China remains ill-suited to taking on the kind of hegemonic role the US has comprehensively occupied in world affairs since the end of the Cold War, in



which a single country's stance on an issue determines its general success or failure. It remains to be seen whether US abdication of responsibility will be enough to sink the already divided G20. What is clear at this stage is that China, while having a strong position moving into the

G20's future, lacks the weight or will necessary to lead unambiguously.

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