

# **Did the Red Dragon slay the Land of Opportunity?**

## **Analysing the Trump Administration's impact on Sino-Asian relations.**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the Trump Administration's unsuccessful attempts to undermine China's position in Asia, focusing on the trade war and Huawei ban as key examples of Trump's political and economic crusades. To demonstrate this, the impact of the trade war and Huawei ban on both America and China will first be explored. Second, considering the participation of Japan, Vietnam, and China in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Trump's negligible impact on Sino-Japanese and Sino-Vietnamese relations will next be discussed. Finally, China's dominance in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will be evaluated, highlighting Trump's inability to undermine China's position. The results of this study suggest three key factors contributed to America's declining influence in Asia and therefore Trump's failure: US protectionism, Asia's economic priorities, China's shared Asian values and America's Western understanding of hierarchy conflicting with ASEAN perspectives. This paper concludes that whilst some Asian nations align with the US on security issues, Trump's narrative has been too binary. Trump's extreme protectionism, coupled with American conceptualisation of the trade war as a zero-sum game between China and the rest of the world has resulted in the Administration's inability to undermine China in the Asian region to a significant extent.

### **Trump's battles: The trade war and Huawei**

Trump targeted China with the trade war and Huawei ban, which backfired on the US, causing painful consequences. China's economic growth and development has soared since joining the World Trade Organisation in 2000, resulting in a shift from being a primarily exports-driven to domestic-demand-driven economy, and a huge trade surplus with the US (Lau, 2020). Although many American 'trade' concerns are home grown or driven by other external factors, such as technological advances, price fluctuation and relative decline in productivity, Trump's unilateral tariffs were intended to shrink the trade deficit and return many manufacturing jobs to America (Beeson, 2020: 17). By August 2019, the US had planned to announce tariffs on over \$500 billion of Chinese goods and China retaliated, imposing tariffs on \$185 billion of US

goods. A Moody Analytics study suggests that this contributed to the trade war overall, costing the US nearly 300,000 jobs in a clear failure of Trump's policy (Hass and Denmark, 2020).

China inevitably also suffered, with exports to the US falling by \$53 billion in the first nine months of 2019 (Eves, 2020). Trump's aim to divert global supply chains away from China succeeded to a degree. Many American and international firms accelerated shifts in production out of China and into other Asian countries due to the tariffs. US firm, Steven Madden Ltd, moved production to Cambodia, for example (Chong and Li, 2019; Pangestu, 2019). Such instances have contributed to the slowing down of China's economy. As a 2019 report highlighted, 63% of Chinese export losses were diverted to other countries (UNCTAD, 2019). Given China's growing middle class and rising labour costs, global supply chains were already shifting, however (Ho et al., 2018; Boylan et al., 2020). Indeed Lau argues that the Chinese economy is transitioning from being 'the world's factory to also the world's market' (2020: 8). This indicates that whilst, to an extent, Trump's trade war succeeded in impacting China's economy, its export losses were not exclusive to the trade war.

Furthermore, the Trump Administration banned US companies from working with Huawei due to its links with the Chinese state, arguing that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were using Huawei to spy on Washington and many of the company's other users (Boylan et al, 2020). Trump tried to rally allies against Huawei, reprimanding any nation purchasing their 5G (Beitelman, 2020). Concerns regarding the security of the company's equipment quickly snowballed, with US allies such as New Zealand, Australia, Japan and Taiwan all rejecting Huawei's products and mobile network (Zhang et al., 2020).

## **Sino-Japanese Relations**

The Trump Administration's antagonistic policies meant that China turned to Japan, amongst other Asian nations, to fulfil its US market losses. This resulted in improved Sino-Japanese engagement, with bilateral trade increasing by 7.8% and China rising to the position of Japan's second largest trading partner (Eves, 2020). Whilst Japan depends on the US as its ally for military security, in 2019 Trump threatened to withdraw US troops from East Asia if Japan did not expand its own military (Klinger et al., 2019; He and Li, 2020). The prospect of US withdrawal thus encouraged Japan to increase cooperation with China to mitigate any future threat (Eves, 2020). Additionally, the increased cooperation represented a resumption of Sino-Japanese economic dialogue, after eight years of suspension due to disputes over the Senkaku Islands (Eves, 2020). As Katagiri asserts (2019), if the US did indeed withdraw from active engagement in East Asia, China would succeed the role of dominant regional player,

particularly in the military sphere. Resurgence of Sino-Japanese economic engagement thwarts the original aim of the Trump Administration to divert supply chains away from China (Ajami, 2020).

Contrary to this, the Japanese government was offering subsidies to Japanese firms operating in China, to encourage supply chain diversification, for fear of tariff or duty increases (Ryall, 2020). Toyota, however, claimed they had no intention of changing their strategy or shifting production out of China. Jun Okumura, an analyst for the Meiji Institute for Global Affairs, supported Toyota's stringency, noting that China accounts for a market of 1.3 billion people. Okumura proports that Japanese firms will be focused on upholding their standing in the Chinese market (Ryall, 2020), especially given its increasing growth as the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Trump's Huawei campaign had further negative implications, however. Unfortunately for China, the Japanese firm Panasonic announced that they would stop supplying components to Huawei due to the Trump Administration's aggressive cautions (Farrer, 2019). Japan has now banned any rollout of Huawei 5G, citing risks to national security (Zhang et al, 2020). Japan's rejection of Huawei demonstrates a degree of success in the Trump Administration's efforts to thwart the company's expansion. Conversely, some pundits have postulated that despite Japan's refusal, economic engagement will continue to prosper (Ajami, 2020). New avenues of collaboration, in the form of macroeconomic projects, support this perspective. Particularly significant has been the recent establishment of a Sino-Japanese committee promoting cooperation and preventing competition in projected Asian infrastructure projects, at a cost of \$26 trillion (Eves, 2020).

The presence of both nations in the RCEP highlights deeper cooperation between China and Japan, in addition to South Korea (Pearson, 2020). Moreover, RCEP provides rules for member states concerning the regulation of intellectual property rights, financial services and e-commerce (Cali, 2020). Provisions such as these suggest that anxieties over Huawei and China's technological sector will be less tense in the future (Eves, 2020). Therefore, Trump's protectionist threat regarding US troops in East Asia, coupled with intensified Sino-Japanese economic engagement in the form of new projects and now RCEP, affirms the Trump Administration's failure to undermine China's position in Japan.

### **Sino-Vietnamese relations**

Trump's behaviour also facilitated deepened Sino-Vietnamese relations. Like Japan, Vietnam is involved in RCEP, which aims to combat protectionism and allow freer movement of goods within the region. RCEP represents a mutual plea for future cooperative relations, thus demonstrating the negligible impact of Trump's efforts to sow division (Strangio, 2020). In fact, Chinese firms began using Vietnam as a platform for trans-shipment, rerouting exports by labelling Chinese goods as 'Made in Vietnam' to sidestep tariffs (Ha and Phuc, 2019). The repackaging of Chinese steel as Vietnamese steel for export drew attention to Vietnam's trade imbalance with the US (Ha and Phuc, 2019). Trump responded by imposing tariffs of over 400% on Vietnam's cold rolled and flat steel. Despite claims that Vietnam was the biggest beneficiary of the trade war, given its 36% surge in US exports, such developments also made it difficult for Vietnam to reduce its trade dependence on China (Fang, 2019; Abdullah and Daud, 2020).

The Trump Administration showed support for Vietnam in its battle with China over the South China Sea territorial disputes, with Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo confirming the US's hardened policy in 2020 (Saha, 2020). Despite these tensions, Sino-Vietnamese economic engagement has persisted (Po and Primiano, 2020). China is Vietnam's third largest investor, investing \$2.6 billion in the first 10 months of 2019, with capital investment increasing 169% compared with 2018 (Ha and Phuc, 2019; Abdullah and Daud, 2020). The proximity of the two countries allows manufacturers to sell and export equipment from China to Vietnam and then on to other ASEAN countries, exemplifying further the interconnectedness of the nations (Ha and Phuc, 2019). Joint ventures such as the proposal by Vietnam's Geleximco and China's Sunshine Kaidi New Energy Group to develop Long Thanh International Airport in Ho Chi Minh City, illustrate their deepened economic engagement regarding trade, investment and project contracting (Abdullah and Daud, 2020). It is evident that Vietnam and China are inextricably linked, and Trump's trade war ultimately failed to undermine China's position in Vietnam.

In relation to Trump's Huawei ban, Vietnam has followed similar policies to those of Japan. Vietnamese military tech giant, Viettel, refused to contract Huawei for both 4G and 5G equipment, despite purchasing 3G equipment from them in 2009 (Zhang et al, 2020). Viettel's CEO declared Huawei to be unsafe and that Vietnam required a more secure alternative (Boudreau and Uyen, 2019). To an extent, this rejection suggests that Trump's Huawei campaign was victorious, though scholars have suggested that Vietnam's decision was unrelated to Trump's warnings (Strangio, 2020: 280). This view undermines the idea that the Trump Administration was able to deter nations from collaborating with Huawei (Strangio, 2020). Vietnam's rejection of Huawei notwithstanding, economic ties with China were maintained and continue to deepen due to RCEP and upcoming projects (Po and Primiano,

2020). Trump's tariffs and technological indictments thus failed to significantly undermine China's position in Vietnam.

## **Huawei and ASEAN**

Despite Vietnam's hostility, the fact that Huawei remains well positioned in ASEAN demonstrates how the Trump Administration failed to undermine China's position in the region. Considering the limited 5G alternatives and Huawei's cheap price point, from the outset it was unlikely the Trump Administration would impact ASEAN's decision making (Strangio, 2020). Huawei has enjoyed considerable success, for example, as Malaysia's leading supplier of 5G. Myanmar, Thailand and Singapore all have procedures in place or are undergoing trials. Huawei has also collaborated with major telecommunications companies in the Philippines, PLDT and Globe, to launch the country's first 5G-enabled smartphone (Zhang et al, 2020). This further suggests that, despite Trump's anti-Huawei agenda, the company's success appears unhampered. Adding to Huawei's ascendance, Cambodia's leading telecom providers, Metfone, Smart Axiata and Cellcard also announced collaboration with China to launch the country's 5G network. The Trump Administration's warnings of Huawei's dangers had again gone unheeded in the region. Smart Axiata's CEO expressed the view that Huawei was a trustworthy and capable partner with whom to collaborate (Zhang et al., 2020: 218).

China's prominent role in initiating the RCEP agreement involving all 10 ASEAN countries is indicative of its key influence in the region (Cali, 2020). With RCEP now the largest trading bloc in the world – exceeding both the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union – the absence of trade barriers and tariffs on goods and services will stimulate further integration between China and the rest of the ASEAN cohort (Cali, 2020). This illuminates further the failure of the Trump Administration's political and economic attempts to undermine China's position in the region.

## **Declining US influence**

Expanding engagement across the region regarding Huawei, as well as ASEAN's reliance on Chinese tourism, trade and investment, was further highlighted following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Strangio, 2020). This contrasts significantly with America's presence in the region under the Trump Administration. The 'America First' rhetoric and zero-sum approach towards China displayed by the Administration made it complex for Asian nations to deal with from the outset (Beeson and Watson, 2019). Trump exhibited a neurotic focus on

China as America's dangerous rival and was absent from the 35<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit and East Asia Summit in 2019 – both of which showcase Southeast Asia – representing a blind spot on the Administration's radar (Valencia, 2019; Strangio, 2020). The absence of US ambassadors in both Thailand and Cambodia for nearly a year typifies this disengagement further (Strangio, 2020). ASEAN was not completely dismissed, however. Trump's officials frequently visited the region, guaranteed security to the Philippines regarding South China Sea disputes and allocated \$1.5 billion in annual expenditure for US programs in both East and Southeast Asia, via the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act (Strangio, 2020: 276). These projects did not bridge the Administration's fundamental disconnect with core values of both ASEAN and the rest of Asia, however.

Firstly, China is deeply culturally connected with the entire region. Demographic movements throughout Southeast Asia, have spread Chinese culture, forming a significant part of the socio-cultural and economic fabric. Milner et al. (2020) would maintain this notion, proposing that cultural and historical factors alone weakened the Trump Administration's zero-sum battle against China. Secondly, Asian nations view multilateral bodies as cornerstones for rules-based international order (Beeson and Watson, 2019; Chong, 2020). Hence, Trump's underfunding of the United Nations and his prompt withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership illustrated latent disregard for America's relationship with Asia and an intentional disruption of multilateralism (Chong, 2020). In the eyes of many ASEAN leaders, Trump's 'America First' rhetoric fuelled widespread distrust and a loss of confidence in the US (Valencia 2019).

Although it has been suggested that Southeast Asian countries are more likely to reject dominant Western political values such as democracy, equality, and freedom, preferring stricter social hierarchies (Bell, 2017), Chinese philosophy and political culture in fact value meritocracy, hierarchy and harmony, thus impacting how political power is organised and justified in China (Bell and Li, 2013). The tendency is not to rally against the dominant power but to engage with it and ensure maximum gain (Milner et al, 2020). Therefore, Trump and his Administration's portrayal of the conflict as a zero-sum struggle between the CCP, as 'the central threat of our times' (Mike Pompeo, cited in Strangio, 2020: 276), and the rest of the world represented too binary a perspective. Despite Western concerns regarding China's behaviour, Xi Jinping's strategy remained fairly consistent with that of past leaders, emphasising national sovereignty and self-determination throughout (Bader, 2016). Strangio (2020) notes that such traits deeply resonate with post-colonial Southeast Asia. The Trump Administration's miscalculation of cultural solidarity spanning across the region clearly hindered any chance of ASEAN disavowal towards China.

Trump's depiction of COVID-19 as the 'Chinese virus' resulted in a further blow to America's stance in Asia (Kurtzman, 2021). Whilst Asian countries demanded clarification of Beijing's pandemic mishandlings, Trump's aggressive and confrontational approach stoked racism towards many Asian-Americans (Aratani, 2020). In one tweet of July 2020, Trump stated that, 'China has caused great damage to the United States and the rest of the World!' (Trump, 2020). Such hostility towards China has been linked to a spike in the use of other anti-Asian hashtags (Websdale, 2020). Additionally, the tragic shooting of six Asian women in Atlanta days after the tweet was published further exemplifies the severe consequences of the President's 'finger pointing' twitter rhetoric (Salcedo, 2021). The Trump Administration's rigorous efforts to attack China with the trade war, Huawei, and COVID-19, contributed significantly to the further deterioration of US influence. Though Sino-US tensions are likely to remain high for some time, newly-elected President Biden will undoubtedly adopt a more measured approach, reinforcing liberal international order and rebuilding Asia's trust in America (Hass, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the trade war and attack on Huawei did not succeed to the degree the Trump Administration intended; jobs did not return to the US, China's regional trade relationships remained stable and Huawei's 5G rollout continues (Hass and Denmark, 2020). Various Asian countries continued to rely on the US for security, such as Japan, and support in diplomatic disputes, such as Vietnam. However, Trump's threatening rhetoric concerning withdrawal of East Asia-based troops and the imposition of tariffs on Vietnam, have fortified both Vietnam and Japan's economic cooperation with China, weakening the significance of both nations' rejection of Huawei's 5G (Milner et al, 2020). Additionally, Huawei's dominance in ASEAN, coupled with full ASEAN involvement in RCEP, offers further evidence of the Administration's failure to undermine China's position in Asia. The Trump Administration's zero-sum approach and clear disconnect with Asian values, demonstrated by skipping summits and a disdain for multilateralism, indicates a miscalculation of China's prominence economically, historically and culturally (Strangio, 2020). The result has been the continued decline of US influence. The Trump Administration's economic and political strategies were ultimately unsuccessful in weakening China's position in the Asian region, raising important considerations with Biden now in charge of rebuilding America's reputation in Asia and pacifying future US-China relations. Biden's emerging policy on China, for example towards tech companies such as TikTok and Huawei, suggests an intention to sustain Trump's tough stance with alterations in its execution, aiming to increase inclusivity as opposed to ostracization (Leary and Davis,

2021). The success of such endeavours remains to be seen as Biden approaches the sixth-month mark of his presidency and the US economy begins its recovery from the pandemic.

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