

Has the inauguration of the second Trump administration accelerated the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific region?

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Abstract

This essay argues the second Trump administration's foreign policy undermines Washington's claim to normative legitimacy and reduces material benefits of a U.S. alliance. U.S. retrenchment creates hegemonic opportunities for China in the Asia-Pacific. However, Beijing's authoritarian structure and coercive foreign policy limit its ability to consolidate regional power, especially among democracies. The essay concludes, the Trump 2.0 has accelerated U.S. retrenchment, creating a hegemonic vacuum and opportunity for China, however this is not a straightforward power transfer but a fragmentation, with states pursuing increasingly multipolar strategies. Including deeper cooperation with middle powers such as Japan, Australia and western European countries.

This analysis challenges realist assumptions that hegemony is solely about material power. Demonstrating that normative legitimacy, governance through consent, is essential for stable international order, underscoring how a decline in perceived legitimacy can fragment alliances, reshaping international order.

Introduction

The United States (U.S.), under the second Trump administration, has retreated from its role as Global Hegemon, protecting a liberal world order. This essay begins by asserting that Trump's second term administration has decreased the provision of public goods to dependent countries, and enacted foreign policy that undermines the normative legitimacy of U.S. hegemony, both contributing to U.S. retrenchment. Subsequently demonstrating how Beijing has seized this hegemonic slack, desiring a restoration of its historical great-power status. Beijing expanded its political influence by increasing countries' asymmetric economic dependence, and conducted a 'Diplomatic charm offensive', seeking to increase its perceived legitimacy by the West. However, Beijing's authoritarian governance and coercive foreign policy constrains its appeal to democratic states, meaning U.S. retrenchment simultaneously increases multipolar strategies and strengthens mid-power cooperation, such as Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The essay concludes the second Trump administration accelerated China's rise in the Asia-Pacific by undermining U.S. hegemonic legitimacy, however, Beijing's authoritarian political structure and coercive foreign policy limit its ability to consolidate regional leadership particularly among democratic countries.

U.S Retrenchment and the Erosion of Hegemonic Legitimacy

Structural realists, notably Waltz, conceptualise global order as inherently anarchic (Waltz, 1979, p. 89). U.S. hegemony has contributed to creating international stability through undermining credible security guarantees reducing uncertainty and conflict. The declining trust in U.S. guarantees, due to the unpredictability of the second Trump administration foreign policy, promotes uncertainty within the international order.

Equally, Lake (2009, p. 332) describes an analytical framework for hegemony based on social contract theory, stating that hegemony provides benefits in return for smaller countries' compliance with its hegemonic rule. This builds on the realist perception of anarchic international order. The application of social contract theory to international order establishes that smaller states give up certain freedoms in exchange for public goods provisions, predominantly being security guarantees. When public goods provisions decrease, and security guarantees become unreliable, the advantages of U.S. hegemony

decrease.

Trump has previously called for “dramatically higher rents... sometimes in the form of direct monetary payments” (Brands, 2021) from U.S. allies, such as NATO members, South Korea, Japan and the Ukraine. Japan, due to their “defence-oriented” security policy (Government of Japan, 2022, Chp. 2), has heavily relied on U.S. security guarantees for protection, but Japanese leadership has become increasingly sceptical, forcing an increase in defence spending to 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2027 (Kosuke, 2025), an unprecedented level in post-war history. This illustrates how the U.S. is “Abdicat[ing] economic leadership in the region for the first time since the second world war” (The Economist, 2021). This erosion of duty fulfilment contributes to an increasingly “multipolar world”, in which states are more inclined to “adopt, reject, or redefine outside initiatives based on their own interests and values” (Lust, 2024, p. 138), reducing allied states willingness to defer decisions to U.S. leadership. The increased unreliability of U.S. guarantees and decrease in material benefit provided by U.S. hegemony leads to an erosion of consent and loss of legitimacy. It illustrates how a normative decline in public goods provision undermines the foundations of U.S. hegemony, leading dependent states to seek alternative alliances and hegemony.

However, there has been a longstanding domestic dissatisfaction at the perceived U.S. financial burden of international defense spending, making U.S. hegemonic retreat inevitable. The rise of ‘America First’ ideology predates the second Trump administration and reflects deeper structural pressures within U.S. politics. Growing public discontent with the financial burden of sustaining U.S. hegemony indicates that retrenchment was not an abrupt departure under Trump, but an increasingly probable outcome of long-term U.S. hegemonic fatigue. As domestic polarisation intensified, support for the U.S. role as the ‘global policeman’ weakened. This was predominantly caused by the disproportionate costs the U.S. undertook to maintain liberal international order (Son, 2025, p. 1901). This sentiment was evident before Trump’s premiership. In 2014, the Obama administration urged “every NATO member... to do its fair share,” acknowledging NATO’s overreliance on “U.S. capabilities” criticising the “steady [decline] in European defense spending” (Obama, 2014). This demonstrates pre-existing concerns over unequal burden-sharing within U.S. foreign policy discourse prior to Trump’s second term, this resentment has only intensified in recent years. In 2024, a survey revealed nearly half of Americans believe the U.S. has no responsibility to help Ukraine and 62% of Republicans consider current U.S. aid to be excessive (Nadeem, 2024). This illustrates the isolationist

ideology held by U.S. voters. Whilst the Trump administration acted upon this sentiment, domestic resentment proves a decline in U.S. hegemony was inevitable as U.S. politicians faced a growing discontentment with the post-war international order.

While the 'America First' ideology reflects a long-standing domestic pressure for U.S. retrenchment, the second Trump administration accelerated the decline of U.S. hegemony, and the rise of China through their method of retrenchment. Rather than managing hegemonic decline through gradual-burden sharing and decreased spending, Trump's foreign policy delegitimised the liberal foundations of post-war U.S. hegemony. Trump pursued an "illiberal hegemony" characterised by unilateral foreign policy, coercion and the pursuit of self-interest disregarding the strategic and normative value of alliances that has sustained U.S. leadership since WW2 (Posen, 2018). Consequently, dependent states, faced with diminishing U.S. legitimacy, are incentivised to explore hedging strategies, seeking alternative hegemonic patrons, most notably China.

Effective and enduring hegemony depends not only on material preponderance but legitimacy through consent, "a regional hegemony should gain and sustain its legitimacy, rather than resorting to the imposition of its will over other nations" (Cho, 2025, p. 5). This legitimacy contains a crucial "normative component", rooted in the perceived "desirability" and "rightness" of the hegemonic leadership (Cho, 2025, p.10). Trump's second administration eroded this normative legitimacy by abandoning its commitment to democracy, international law and multilateral restraint. It has resulted in U.S. leadership being increasingly contested because of illiberal actions, such as threats to seize the Panama Canal, Greenland and Gaza, paired with demands for material compensation from Ukraine as compensation for military aid (Son, 2025, p. 1907). This erodes the normative legitimacy of U.S. hegemony widening political and diplomatic rifts between Washington and its traditional liberal allies. This has seen U.S. hegemony shifting from consent-based leadership towards coercive enforcement. Compliance becomes enforced through tariffs, threats and transactional bargaining rather than shared norms. Reliance on coercive power generates significant diplomatic, reputational and material costs, especially when directed against allies (Hurrell, 2005, pp. 55-56). South Korean finance minister Kim Dong-yeon criticised Trump's threats to withdraw U.S. troops unless favourable trade terms were met, arguing it was inappropriate to conflate economic disputes with security protection (Stracqualursi, 2018). This reaction evidenced growing resistance by allies to transactional diplomacy. Such practices weaken alliance cohesion and reinforce the perception of U.S. unreliability,

undermining the normative legitimacy necessary for effective hegemonic leadership.

China's Exploitation of the Hegemonic Vacuum

This erosion of U.S. normative legitimacy simultaneously creates strategic space for China, weakening the liberal basis of Washington's criticism of Chinese coercion, Trump's illiberal conduct emboldens Beijing's assertive regional behaviour (Goh and Chen, 2026). China's territorial ambitions, particularly regarding Taiwan, are primarily shaped by domestic factors, however, Trump's actions strengthen narratives portraying U.S. leadership as hypocritical and self-serving, legitimising Chinese challenges to its regional leadership. It illustrates how the second Trump administration did not merely coincide with the rise of China in the Asia-Pacific, but accelerated it by undermining and de-legitimising the normative foundations of Asia-Pacific order.

The abdication of U.S. hegemonic responsibilities has produced uncertainty over security guarantees and power holding in the Asia-Pacific, generating a power vacuum China has increasingly sought to exploit. While China had already begun its gradual expansion of regional influence prior to Trump, the retrenchment of U.S. hegemonic commitments during his second term significantly accelerated this process, amplifying China's ascent across the Asia-Pacific. Beijing has expressed an explicit desire to increase regional influence to restore its historic great-power status. It's primarily sought to achieve this through expanding the region's asymmetrical economic dependence on China to leverage political influence.

Chinese leadership has demonstrated a desire to capitalise on U.S. hegemonic slack to increase its regional influence. "China's leadership assesses the current global landscape as defined by the concurrent US descent and Chinese ascendance" (Son, 2025, p. 1899). President Xi Jinping stated "The East is rising, and the West is subsiding" claiming "there is no eternally dominant power in the world" (Jinping, 2025, p. 10). This illustrates how Beijing views this interregnum in world leadership, caused by U.S. retrenchment, as a unique opportunity for Chinese rejuvenation and restoration. Beijing presents itself as a revisionist power, reclaiming their 'rightful' dominant position in the international order, associated with its imperial past. Beijing frames this rise as a national rejuvenation,

reversing the perceived historical humiliation inflicted upon it by the West through the “100 years of humiliation” (Son, 2025, p. 1899), overturning the ‘pax americana’ post-war world order. Washington’s hegemonic retrenchment, grounded in Trump’s ‘America First’ ideology, is seized upon as a strategic opportunity to reshape international order as Sinocentric.

Beijing has capitalised on its economic dominance to seize opportunities arising from U.S. retrenchment, strengthening economic ties with Asia-Pacific countries. Increasing asymmetrical economic dependence on China and expanding dependence on Chinese markets within the Asia-Pacific have provided Beijing with larger coercive power over countries. President Xi, during the Central Financial and Economic Affairs Commission, claimed China must “strengthen the international industrial chain’s dependent [on China] to form strong capabilities to deter and retrain external forces” (Jingping, 2020). Beijing’s economic prowess and promise of AID is extremely alluring to countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar who are dealing with political instability and in dire economic need. It leads them to turn heavily towards a China-Led Asian order. U.S. withdrawal from multilateral trade frameworks such as the Trans-Atlantic Trade

Partnership further facilitated Beijing’s economic expansion, allowing it to act as a hegemonic substitute. The growing economic dependence of regional states’ on China makes governments increasingly reluctant to challenge Beijing on security issues, such as the South China Sea or Taiwan, in fear of economic retaliation. Thus, economic integration becomes a tool for shaping the regional security environment without direct coercion. This is illustrated through Beijing’s continued economic support for the authoritarian Hun Sen government in Cambodia, amid sanctions from the U.S., leading to Cambodia’s vehement support for Beijing in ASEAN meetings. This resulted in Cambodia blocking multiple resolutions on the South China Sea disputes, with the Prime Minister Hun Manet endorsing “the ongoing strengthening and expansion of Cambodian-China military cooperation” (Sochua and Yang, 2023). Beijing’s economic strategy has been extremely successful, resulting in the Lowy Institute proclaiming Chinese outperformance of the U.S., “in its capacity to exercise influence through economic interdependencies, measured in terms of regional trade and investment relationships as well as economic diplomacy” (Luke, 2021, p. 1218).

Beijing has also undertaken a “Diplomatic charm offensive” (Reuters, 2025) attempting to legitimise

themselves in the eyes of the West, through alignment with western liberal values. Against the backdrop of U.S. tariffs and renegotiation of free trade agreements, China is provided with a unique opportunity to position itself as a champion of free trade, signalling its intention to reduce tariffs and offer investment incentives further opening itself to international markets. In 2024, Beijing lifted retaliatory tariffs on Australian wine, agreed to resume Japanese seafood imports, and announced visa-free policies for multiple EU countries, Japan and South Korea (Son, 2025, p. 1906). These signals of Chinese openness to international cooperation and trade have proven successful, with Japan resuming military exchanges with China in 2025, and trade ministers from China, Japan, and South Korea convening in March 2025 for the first time in 5 years, also heavily influenced by U.S. tariffs (Son, 2025, p. 1906).

If Washington continues to undermine the value of its alliance commitments in favour of pursuing unilateral transactional diplomacy, Beijing's overtures will carry increasing weight amongst U.S. allies. Increasing asymmetric economic dependence works to consolidate the Chinese position of dominance in the Asia-Pacific, facilitating its rising influence.

The Limits of Chinese Hegemony

Despite Beijing's "Diplomatic charm offensive" (Reuters, 2025) attempting to legitimise their government and align with western values, Beijing remains an authoritarian government. Beijing has continued to improve relationships with anti-west revisionist powers, such as continuing to provide Russia with oil, gas and other mineral resources which other countries have refused to sell since its invasion of Ukraine (Son, 2025, p. 1901). Beijing attempts to uphold a delicate equilibrium of aiding revisionist powers, to divert U.S. and E.U. attention, whilst not aligning itself too closely, to preserve relationships and influence over liberal U.S. allies.

Aggressive foreign policy action, such as territorial disputes over the South China Sea, Taiwan, and crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang causes countries to become cautious over fully interlinking economies with China (Son, 2025, 1905). Beijing's coercive foreign policy and failure to condemn revisionist powers leads China to lack credibility as a reliable political partner in the Asia-Pacific. This is exemplified through a 2024 survey of Southeast Asian business leaders, which found only 21% were

confident China could be trusted to “do the right thing’ to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity and governance” (Seah et al, 2024, p. 56) . This incentivises democratic countries in the Asia-Pacific to look beyond both the U.S. and China for hegemonic needs, and public goods provision. Japan and Australia have strengthened their alliance committing to joint military training and a reciprocal access agreement (Reuters, 2025) reflecting a desire for democratic states in the Asia-Pacific to strengthen regional security cooperation beyond bilateral reliance on either the U.S. or China, illustrating the shift towards multilateral mid level power hedging and diversification of security provisions, rather than sole dependence on a single dominant power.

Conclusion

The second Trump administration has accelerated China’s rise in the Asia-Pacific through undermining U.S. hegemonic normative legitimacy. However, Beijing’s authoritarian political structure and coercive foreign policy limit its ability to consolidate regional leadership. The second Trump administration accelerated U.S. retrenchment, eroding both the material provision of public goods and normative legitimacy which underpins U.S. hegemony. This encourages dependent states to diversify their strategic alignment in search of alternative economic and security sources. While U.S. hegemonic slack produces opportunity for China to expand its influence, particularly among non-democratic states such as Cambodia and Myanmar, Beijing’s authoritarian governance and coercive foreign policy limit its appeal to democratic partners. As a result, U.S. retrenchment has not created a straightforward hegemonic transfer to China, but developed a more fragmented regional order in which democratic Asia-Pacific states increasingly pursue multi-polar strategies, including deeper cooperation with middle powers such as Japan and Australia. There is a strengthening of regional institutions such as ASEAN, and engagement with broader European states to seek regulatory and economic governance rather than hegemonic leadership.

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