

Red State China? Why China (Sort of) Likes Trump

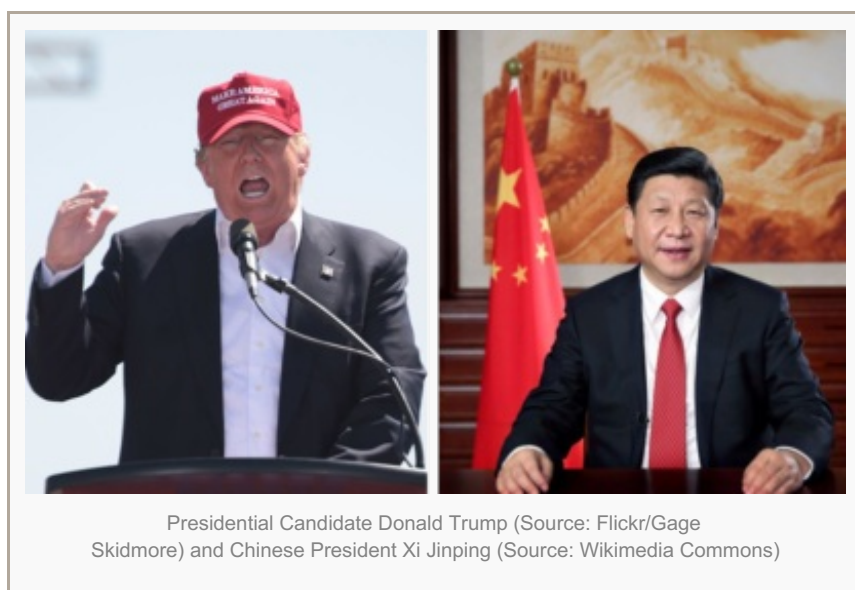
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E-Notes

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If China had a vote in the US presidential election, would it cast its ballot for Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump? The question is both provocative and not reliably answerable, and it has become more resonant amid reports that Russian government hackers, possibly seeking to help Trump's candidacy, were behind the Wikileaks of Democratic National Committee emails that brought down Democratic National Committee Chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz and rattled fragile Democratic Party unity on the eve of the convention. Ordinarily, China's preference is unquestionably for continuity in power of the incumbent party (and, where possible, the incumbent president) in the United States. But, in China as in the United States, 2016 may be no ordinary year. Does China share the alleged proclivities of the leader of its fellow authoritarian neighbor to the north and incipient partner in some aspects of global affairs? Very likely not. Are we seeing with Trump in authoritarian China in 2016 a strange echo of what we saw with Obama in liberal Europe in 2008—a US presidential candidate locked in a seemingly close race at home who enjoys strikingly stronger support in a foreign region that is vital to US interests? Almost certainly not.

But, in this election, China does seem less unambivalently or uniformly opposed than usual to the possibility of a win by the out-of-power party's candidate. Why would the notion of a victory by the non-incumbent party's candidate be less clearly unwelcome to China—and, particularly, to relevant Chinese elites—than in other election cycles? Why would this be so when the possibility of a Trump presidency is unusually and profoundly alarming to many Americans, including, especially, many of those Chinese elites' US counterparts? Why would this be the case when the candidate in question has been, at times, highly critical of China, subjecting Beijing—particularly on trade issues that long have been a major focus of China's US policy—to a dose of the invective he frequently directs toward perceived enemies and rivals?

Chinese sources offer several explanations for what appears to be a more-than-ordinary openness to a change of party in the White House, ranging from possible to highly plausible, from frequently cited to relatively rarely noted in policy-relevant circles in China. Many—perhaps all—of them account for the unusual pattern of Chinese views about the US’s extraordinary 2016 presidential election.

Some Caveats: What are “China’s” Views, and What do We Know?

Before taking a tour through the possible wellsprings of “China’s” attitudes about a potential Trump win, some caveats and qualifications are in order. First, there is no one “Chinese” view of Donald Trump, or of Hillary Clinton. “China” and “Chinese” are in quotation marks for a reason. Unsurprisingly, views vary within and across groups in China, from upper-tier political elites, to foreign policy intellectuals, to well-educated and relatively worldly elites, to ordinary citizens. And Chinese who hold similar views on bottom-line questions of the relative acceptability of the two major party candidates may—and do—hold those views for different reasons.

Second, we do not know, in any aggregate sense, what “China,” or “Chinese,” or any significant, identifiable group of Chinese, think about the two US major party candidates, much less why they find one or the other comparatively appealing or unappealing. Our evidence is anecdotal, selective, or second-hand. China, of course, has no equivalent of the US’s hypertrophic public opinion polling industry. And, even if it did, it would not likely offer much on the Chinese public’s views of the US presidential election (although a handful of unscientific online polls by Chinese media showed much higher favorability ratings for Trump than for Clinton). We also face a dearth of more-than-impressionistic or methodologically rigorous assessments of the views of informed or influential Chinese elites. China’s top leadership has not expressed official positions—or publicly revealed its inner thoughts—on whom it would like to see prevail in the US presidential context or why.

Third, there is the question of salience. Which Chinese views about US presidential politics should we care about? Top leaders and the organs within the Chinese party-state that handle foreign policy or that have portfolios that significantly affect, or are greatly affected by, US-China relations are the most salient. But, conclusions about their views must be somewhat limited because they are based largely on inference, indirect evidence, or difficult assessments of the extent to which what they say reflects what they think. And, even in China’s authoritarian system, they are not the only group that matters for China’s US policy or foreign policy.

China’s foreign policy thinkers and experts on the United States—in think tanks, at universities, inside the party-state, and elsewhere—are another highly significant group. They reflect, and influence, the regime’s perspectives. Especially in not-for-attribution conversations, they also provide insight into officials’ and leaders’ views. This group and a wider community of China’s educated elite—a cohort that encompasses journalists and commentators in China’s old and new media—include astute observers of the views of more “ordinary” Chinese citizens.

The views of those “ordinary” citizens warrant more attention than in the past. Of course, China is not an electoral democracy, with the mechanisms for citizens’ preferences to affect policy that liberal-democratic institutions and processes provide. And even in robust democracies, ordinary citizens’ views on other countries’ domestic politics and foreign policies often have only limited or indirect impact on their own state’s foreign policy. But informed observers of China increasingly accept—and Chinese authorities themselves assert—that public opinion is a factor in Chinese foreign policymaking. And policy toward the US appears to be a relatively high salience issue for the Chinese public—that is, ordinary Chinese (especially relatively affluent and educated Chinese) seem to have opinions about the United States and its politics and policy. In the absence of more democratic channels for public input, the most strongly held—and stridently expressed—opinions among the public are more likely to have an impact. Through China’s engaged—and, at times, enraged—netizens, these views receive widespread exposure in China’s social media and become more visible to elites and wider publics in China and abroad. Whether as a matter of genuine belief or disingenuous and self-serving invocation, Chinese officials and commentators cite popular views as constraining factors in Beijing’s policy choices.

A (Limited) Departure from Baselines: China’s Usual Preference for Continuity

In addition to these caveats concerning methodology and interpretation, a more substantive limitation must be attached to the claim “China” is relatively favorable to the challenging party in the US 2016 election: this reflects only a judgment that Chinese views are *relatively* open to the idea of a victory by the out-of-power party, compared to past Chinese norms. That is, they are less unabashedly “pro-continuity” than they usually are. The baseline from which views in 2016 appear to depart notably—but not radically—is one of a marked preference for the party that holds the presidency in the US continuing in office.

The prevailing view among US China watchers, and consistent with my experiences in China in the run-up to the past several US presidential elections, has been that “China”—at least, the regime and mainstream, policy-relevant intellectuals—has strongly favored continuity in the Oval Office, with the exception of 2008, when positive views toward the prospect of an Obama presidency were notable, particularly among prominent Chinese international relations experts and “America hands.”

To be sure, many electoral cycles have offered idiosyncratic reasons for China to prefer continuity. In 1980, the incumbent Jimmy Carter had reestablished diplomatic ties with China and faced an avowedly tough-on-communism (and pro-Taiwan) challenger in Ronald Reagan. By 1984 and 1988, China generally saw US-China relations as having gone reasonably well during Reagan’s presidency, and seemed to have little to gain from a switch in parties, particularly when the 1988 election pitted former US representative to China George H.W. Bush against an opponent, Michael Dukakis, with little foreign policy record or experience. For China, the 1992 election broadly reprised the 1988 contest, with candidate Bill Clinton’s criticism of the Bush administration for being too soft in responding to the bloodshed at Tiananmen in 1989 giving China’s rulers (if not many other groups of Chinese) reasons to favor a Bush victory. By 2000, the Clinton administration had won favor in China for accommodating China’s entry into the World Trade Organization—a factor that promoted positive views of Al Gore, particularly among China’s policy-relevant elites.

In 1996, 2004, and 2012, China issues were of relatively low salience in the US presidential election, and, at least among Chinese rulers and policy elites, initial concerns about the then-incumbent president’s “anti-China” policies had faded amid the experience of good (or, in 2012, tolerable) US-China relations during the years immediately preceding the election. Clinton’s formal linkage of China’s trading privileges to improvement in China’s human rights record had proved evanescent, and had given way to lower-temperature negotiations over China’s WTO entry. George W. Bush’s early promise to be a staunch defender of Taiwan’s interests was eclipsed by his administration’s demonstrated willingness to slap down of Taiwanese president Chen Shui-bian’s Beijing-provoking gambits. More ambiguously, Chinese concerns about Barack Obama’s perceived “oversteer” in response to criticism in the US that he was too accommodating in his 2009 visit to China and his administration’s “anti-China” (as China saw it) “pivot” to Asia had faded somewhat by 2012, with the pivot or rebalance bringing only modest change in US deployments and commitments, and the bilateral relationship rebounding somewhat from the initial 2010-11 spike in tensions over disputes in the East and South China Seas. In these three elections, opposition candidates Bob Dole, John Kerry, and Mitt Romney offered little to turn Chinese preferences against acceptable or relatively congenial incumbents.

Such context-specific factors provide a partial explanation. But they do not seem adequate to account fully for China’s consistently pro-continuity leanings. Their limitations appear more significant now that Chinese observers of American politics have learned to discount the rhetoric of presidential campaigns, especially the tendency of candidates from the out-of-power party to criticize the incumbent administration for being too soft on China. Knowledgeable Chinese and foreign observers have a strongly held—if admittedly subjective—sense that China (or, at least, the foreign policy-relevant or policy-relevant cluster in China) has a deeper and broader preference for continuity in the Oval Office that underlies and extends beyond individual election-related reasons to prefer the party in power. Whether this reflects a preference for predictability in dealings with the sole superpower, or the high priority attached to a stable (if not always favorable) international environment for China to pursue its policy goals, or relative comfort with the “devil you know,” or other items on a long list of overlapping possible motivations, the conventional—and seemingly valid—wisdom is that China favors continuity in US presidential election politics.

The outlier case has been 2008, when the possibility of an Obama victory and a transfer of the presidency from the Republicans to the Democrats was viewed with relative equanimity in China. John McCain faced a relatively

chilly reception because of what Chinese observers saw as troublingly hawkish views. To them, McCain showed an excessive eagerness to use force abroad that chafed against Chinese foreign policy nostrums emphasizing respect for sovereignty and opposing ostensibly benign interventions, and the Chinese foreign policy goals and interests with which those principles coincided. McCain's perceived approach contrasted sharply with candidate Obama's criticism of Bush-era military ventures that had brought US forces troublingly close to China's periphery. Among relatively liberal-minded Chinese intellectuals, Obama's candidacy held an additional, special appeal. That a member of a racial minority could reach his nation's highest office was a compelling idea—all the more so given the implausibility of such a development in China. Among a broader group of Chinese policy intellectuals, Obama's stated preference for a more rule-governed international order was attractive, both normatively and as a position that—compared to McCain's perceived agenda and the George W. Bush legacy—could better accord with China's national interests.

Unusually potent policy-based preferences conducive to China's finding an out-of-power party victory less disagreeable have been present in the 2016 electoral cycle. But so have several other, more striking considerations.

Trump Through a Chinese Looking Glass

Why might policy-relevant actors in China be less averse to Trump than they typically have been to US presidential candidates from the non-incumbent party? Why do members of China's political establishment and foreign policy intellectuals seemingly view the prospect of President Trump with less trepidation than do their American counterparts? Recent conversations with academics, think-tank researchers, officials, journalists, and other Chinese, discussions with fellow US observers of Chinese politics and policy, inferences from Chinese officials' statements and media reports, and other sources—the regrettably fragmentary and impressionistic information that is the basis for the analysis offered here—point to multiple, diverse and not-always consistent factors. They reflect the many faces of Donald Trump, as perceived by relevant Chinese audiences.

Trump the Businessman. For those in China who are especially concerned about China's international economic interests or who continue a long Reform-Era tradition of assigning a high priority to economic issues in China's foreign relations, "Trump the businessman" holds some appeal. From this frequently proffered perspective, the hope is that Trump will emphasize the economic aspects of the bilateral relationship, which have remained relatively positive in recent years despite a growing list of complaints from the US side, including intractable issues of intellectual property protection, mounting concerns about tilted playing fields that benefit domestic Chinese firms and disadvantage US and other foreign competitors in China, recurrent charges of currency manipulation, WTO-violating trade practices, and so on. Trump's apparently pervasively economic perspective on foreign policy—seemingly viewing even venerable US security alliances in cash-flow terms—suggests to Chinese observers that the potentially positive-sum business side of US-China relations would predominate in Trump's China policy and China-affecting foreign policy.

To be sure, Trump's periodic threats to impose duties of up to 45% on Chinese imports have hardly been well-received in China. But there is considerable skepticism about whether Trump would be able or inclined to follow through, not least because Chinese—and other—assessments conclude that such measures might do more harm to the US, whether through relatively direct impact on US consumers, or through more indirect effects on US businesses that would suffer reduced opportunities or retaliation, or via a WTO dispute process in which China would have a strong case.

At least if concerns about sanctions are discounted, Trump policies might seem preferable for China to the alternative. For Chinese policymakers and Chinese policy analysts, Hillary Clinton's relatively new-found skepticism toward the Trans-Pacific Partnership and trade liberalization agreements more generally has narrowed the gap between the candidates on economic issues that matter to China. More fundamentally, the focus on the economic aspects of bilateral ties that China expects would characterize businessman Trump's foreign policy generally would be preferable (in the view of many in Chinese policy circles) to the emphasis on the more fraught issues of international security that have dominated recent US-China relations and that observers in China and elsewhere assume would be a more central focus for a US administration headed by

former Secretary of State Clinton.

Trump the Deal Artist. A second, somewhat related reason—often cited by Chinese observers and experts—for relatively positive views of Trump in Chinese policy circles is the belief that Trump will be a pragmatist, willing to make deals. From this perspective, the prospect of a US president who is relatively uninterested in lecturing or hectoring China on human rights, democracy, and so on, or reassuring US allies of Washington’s commitment to support them in the face of increasingly China-driven dangers, would be a refreshing change. So, too, a US leader who shares what some Chinese and foreign observers see as the non-ideological (despite superficial rhetorical posturing), and narrowly interest-based bargaining mentality of Chinese leaders would be a potentially appealing interlocutor.

For some stridently nationalist and America-skeptic elements in China, the notion of Trump as the self-impressed but inept and attention-span-challenged hero of *The Art of the Deal*—the sort of character recently depicted by the book’s ghostwriter and other critics of Trump’s business career—is potentially enticing. In this darker vision—one only rarely articulated by Chinese sources, a Trump who has been an un-self-aware failure in many of his business ventures, and who is naïve and inexperienced but supremely self-confident—or deeply uninterested—in foreign policy, is potentially an easy mark. He offers China, and its skilled and knowledgeable negotiators, an extraordinary opportunity to make highly favorable deals, particularly in areas where US and Chinese interests conflict.

Trump the Constrainable. Relative openness to the idea of a change in the party of the presidency in the United States in 2016 has not meant a thoroughgoing abandonment of the venerable Chinese preference of a relatively high degree of stability in US-China relations. For the many in Chinese policymaking and policy-intellectual circles who—despite concerns about the recent state of US-China relations—view radical discontinuity as troublingly risky, there is solace in the idea that President Trump will be less of a bull in the China shop than his statements during the campaign superficially suggest.

Experienced Chinese observers have seen strident criticisms of China from presidential contenders—especially from the out-of-power party’s candidate—quickly evolve into more moderate, status quo-preserving policy positions from presidents. A good many of them view Trump’s threats of trade sanctions and other perceived “anti-China” statements as more of the same. And Trump’s rhetoric has hardly been consistently critical of China. The three-minute video of Trump saying “China” that went viral during the primary campaign reveals Trumpese to be a tonal language—with the audiovisual collage of angry and admiring utterances skewed only modestly toward the former (and with the latter sometimes framed by additional words, as in, “I love China”).

Some of China’s America hands and foreign policy analysts join members of the US Republican Party leadership in believing that robust institutions of American democracy, including the constitutional separation of powers, will constrain any attempted Trumpian excesses. This assessment may be unduly optimistic and an instance of whistling past the graveyard, but it has a good number of adherents in policy-relevant circles in both China and in the GOP.

Some Chinese observers who closely watch US foreign policy expect, or at least hope, that a President Trump—recognizing his lack of expertise, or reflecting his lack of interest, in the field—ultimately would turn to familiar faces from past Republican administrations to shape his China policy and his China-relevant foreign policy. On this view (shared by some US analysts), Trump’s purported reliance on his own formidable brain and Trump’s reported reliance on the obscure (in China policy circles) and strongly China-criticizing Peter Navarro as his key sources of advice on China policy is a passing phase. In this analysis, while some members of the Republican foreign policy establishment may have permanently estranged themselves from a Trump administration by signing an open letter of opposition or taking other hard-to-reverse steps, some of their peers still have an opportunity to secure China-related policymaking posts in a Trump administration and will seek them, whether out of party loyalty, patriotism, or a desire for power and influence.

Trump and the American Comeuppance. Two factors that have not loomed very large in Chinese explanations of why Trump holds some appeal in China are worth noting because they seem—and in the views of some Chinese observers clearly do—resonate broadly (if perhaps shallowly) in China, with audiences ranging from top political

elites to ordinary citizens. One of these is the idea that the surprising—indeed, stunning—success of Trump in sweeping through the Republican primaries and emerging with a solid chance to win the presidency shows that the supposed virtues and strengths of the US democratic system that American presidents and foreign policy officials have so often touted to China and lauded as superior to China’s system are not all that they have claimed to be.

In this Chinese narrative (parts of which have appeared in state-linked Chinese media), Trump’s progress has revealed several profound failings in the US system (with the significance of each shortcoming varying among different Chinese audiences): Trump has succeeded with an agenda that includes elements of racism, misogyny, Islamophobia, and apparent contempt for many of the political values that US official and unofficial sources have long criticized China for not implementing, thereby undercutting the US’s ability to wield those values as a soft-power club against the Chinese regime; Trump’s support among the US electorate reflects the deep dissatisfaction of many Americans with a political system that has failed to meet their needs and desires for economic opportunity, physical security, and so on; and Trump’s potent outsider campaign, and the political chaos, intraparty rancor, and tincture of violence that has accompanied it, show the weakness and dysfunction of US political institutions and, by contrast, the strengths and virtues of China’s political institutions.

Trump has reinforced such views in China with his offering of what in Mao’s time would have been called a “self-criticism” of the United States. Most prominently expressed in his July 2016 interview with the *New York Times*, Trump’s stated view is that the United States has no business criticizing other countries’ records on civil liberties because the US has “a lot of problems,” and is so “bad” on those issues, that it is not “a very good messenger.” He therein echoes an argument long made by official Chinese statements on human rights conditions in the US and in China, and validates with broader Chinese resentment—and rejection—of perceived US claims of moral superiority and US efforts to meddle in China’s internal affairs.

Trump the Populist Strongman. The other image of Trump that has not been central to Chinese views about him or the US election, but that is widely (if unevenly) resonant and makes Trump somewhat appealing in China, is his persona as a populist strongman. For China’s current rulers, Trump’s expressed admiration for their predecessors’ handling of Tiananmen may not offer the bromance that he appears to feel toward Vladimir Putin, but any authoritarian tendencies or ambitions in Trump are hardly the cause for concern among China’s top leaders that the idea of a Trump presidency gives heads of government in liberal democracies allied or aligned with the United States. And Trump’s populist critique of the contemporary United States, and the out-of-touch and inept elites who rule it, dovetail nicely with the Xi Jinping leadership’s mounting rejection of Western values and institutions, and its touting of a China Dream as a preferable, and more suitable for China, alternative to the American Dream.

As some elite Chinese observers see it and as man-in-the-street media interviews sometimes found, Trump’s populist critique also resonates with ordinary Chinese citizens—and does so in ways that the Chinese regime is not so likely to welcome. On this assessment, for the many millions of Chinese who have not fared especially well during China’s long boom, or who face new worries amid China’s flattening growth rates and other economic troubles, Trump’s grim portrait of the US’s economy and society speaks to their concerns about their own lives: the system is rigged in favor of the powerful, wealthy and well-connected; ordinary people do not have a fair chance at success; experienced conditions and hopes for the future are not what they once were; Trump’s reality TV show-like campaign was a rare opportunity for the disenfranchised to feel like they had a chance to participate politically; and so on. The possibility that Trump’s populism is bundled with an authoritarian bent need not be disqualifying for this audience. For many economically insecure and lower-status Chinese, liberal democracy is not a compelling near-term goal, and arguably populist—and undeniably popular—reformist leaders in China have hardly been anti-authoritarian (a point most poignantly illustrated by Zhao Ziyang’s association with “neo-authoritarianism” during Reform-Era China’s most hopeful period for reform in the latter half of the 1980s).

Trump the Isolationist. For those in China who envision and advocate a rising China exercising much greater influence in Asia, and who see long-entrenched US strategic doctrine—including a robust US security role in the Western Pacific—as an impediment to China’s ambitions or “rightful” role, much in the skeletal oeuvre of Trump foreign policy ideas offers a tantalizing prospect. Trump’s pledge to “put America first” is often read in China—as

in the United States—as a call for retrenchment of US commitments abroad, a significant rejection of postwar American internationalism, and a possible harbinger of a new era of (relative) isolationism. So, too, does Trump’s insistence on greater burden-sharing by the US’s security partners in East Asia (and elsewhere), his talk of making even treaty-based commitments to allies’ security contingent on their performance of somewhat uncertain obligations, his stated view that the US could perform its international security functions with forces based closer to home, and his apparent comfort with the possible consequences that Japan, South Korea and others might react to such US moves by engaging in potentially destabilizing measures of self-help (including acquiring nuclear weapons).

For Chinese who would welcome US retrenchment, and a reduction of US-underpinned constraints on Chinese power, as an opportunity for China’s expansion, Trump’s apparent positions look like a potentially game-changing opportunity—albeit one that comes with dangers for China in a region where China’s rising power and ambitions are already viewed with great suspicion.

The Donald the Destroyer. Among Chinese perceptions of Trump, there is a much darker variant on the “American comeuppance” and “Trump the isolationist” themes—one not often voiced by Chinese policy intellectuals or Chinese officials, but one that does make its way into their accounts of what others think and into media accounts of “China’s” views of the US 2016 election. This is the vision of “Donald the Destroyer”—a man whose reckless policies at home and abroad will hasten the otherwise long-term process of the US’s relative decline, or trigger the US’s absolute—and possibly rapid—decline as a global power. On this vision, radical policies or radically inconsistent policies from Trump could shatter the confidence of the US’s friends and allies in East Asia and elsewhere, diminish the US’s material capacity and normative stature, and undermine the domestic foundations of US international power—or at least go a considerable distance toward doing so. For some of China’s more hardcore offensive realists (in the international relations theory sense of the term) and most ardent nationalists, who chafe at the US’s strategic preeminence (and, for some, the US’s soft power advantages), the chance that a Trump presidency will have the dire effects that Trump’s most strident critics in US foreign policy circles predict is a prospect to be welcomed, albeit with some trepidation. It is a more thoroughgoing and extreme form of the Chinese views of Trump the America-firster isolationist.

Trump the Agent of Change. A final pair of “visions of Trump” have been especially prevalent and seemingly influential among Chinese foreign policy elites and relatively mainstream to liberal foreign policy intellectuals. The first of these sees Trump as an agent of change in US-China relations (as in other things), and sees this as a good thing or at least potentially a good thing. Like some of the US voters drawn to Trump’s message of disruption but not necessarily to his policy prescriptions, some relevant Chinese are sufficiently unhappy with the status quo that their motto could be “since it ain’t (gonna be) fixed, break it.”

On this view, US-China relations have deteriorated in recent years to a sorry state: security issues, verging on—or reaching—strategic rivalry have come to dominate the relationship, amid what Beijing regards as an “anti-China” pivot or rebalancing toward Asia, rising frictions over maritime disputes in the South China Sea and US Navy operations in the area, Chinese perceptions of heightened US backing for the Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan in their conflicts with China, and, most recently, US moves to deploy the THAAD missile defense system in South Korea; perennial discord over human rights and related issues, which have spiked anew amid an ongoing crackdown on China’s rights protection lawyers and civil society more broadly, new restrictions on the Internet, and an ominous new law targeting foreign NGOs in China; persisting concerns (despite progress and commitments made at an Obama-Xi summit) about cybersecurity and Chinese hacking of US commercial and government computer systems; and long-standing US complaints about unfair Chinese foreign trade and investment policies and practices that have recently evolved into broader and more politicized battles over new institutions, such as the Chinese-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which the Obama administration sought unsuccessfully to persuade US allies not to join, and the US-led TPP and its China-led rival Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which the Obama administration portrayed as a contest over whether the US or China would write the rules of the world economy for the twenty-first century.

In this environment, “change” can—and to some relevant Chinese does—seem more likely to be good than bad. On optimistic readings, Trump the businessman or Trump the dealmaker may live up to hopeful expectations about how new US leadership might shift the focus and improve relations. On more skeptical assessments, even

unhelpful disruption (perhaps only after a period of continuing or worsening problems) may get the troubled relationship out of the rut—or ditch—in which it is now stuck.

Trump the Not-Hillary. Finally, and relatedly, much of Trump's appeal in China's foreign policy circles (and, on Chinese expert and media accounts, in wider circles of Chinese society as well) is—in yet another peculiar parallel to views of Trump supporters in the US—that he is “not Hillary.” As in the US, high levels of anti-Hillary sentiment in relevant circles is an uneasy mix of substantive policy issues and years of accumulated demonization. Whatever its origin, an abiding distaste for Hillary is what has done much of the work of making Trump seem more appealing, or at least less comparatively appalling, in China.

The Chinese anti-Hillary indictment includes many counts, splayed across many years. In 1995, when then-first-lady Clinton declared at the United Nations Fourth World Congress on Women in Huairou (near Beijing) that “human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights,” she aligned herself—in the eyes of Chinese critics—indelibly with an irritating and overreaching US practice of lecturing China on human rights and, thus, with an “ideological” approach (as one Chinese foreign policy expert put it) to China policy. As Obama's Secretary of State, she was, in the common Chinese understanding, the principal architect of the US “pivot” to Asia—seen by many in China a quasi-containment policy that did not become more palatable when relabeled as a policy of “rebalancing.” Then-Secretary Clinton's speech at the ASEAN Forum in Hanoi in 2010 is the locus classicus of current US policy on the South China Sea, which includes commitment to the principles of freedom of navigation, open access to Asia's maritime commons, and respect for international law in the South China Sea, and which has underpinned, in a common Chinese assessment, a series of ongoing US actions detrimental to China's vital interests: US Navy freedom of navigation operations near landforms claimed by China; US condemnation of Chinese island-building activities on disputed landforms; and US support for the arbitration claim over disputed maritime rights that the Philippines brought against China, resulting in a stunning, and Chinese outrage-provoking, loss for China in July 2016. Although she later repudiated the agreement during her hard-fought primary contest with Bernie Sanders, Hillary faced blame for the TPP initiative which rankled in China, thanks in large part to the Obama administration's “anti-China” framing of the ambitious trade accord.

In the common Chinese account, President Hillary Clinton could be even worse than Secretary of State Clinton and the Obama administration in which she had served. In this view, Hillary was the hawk in Obama's cabinet, on China policy as well as on other foreign policy issues affecting China's interests. As president, she could be expected to be tougher on China than Obama had been, and to pursue a more muscular foreign policy agenda in general which would bring more frequent or more serious challenges to China's interests and aims. On the eve of her nomination as the Democratic Party's standard-bearer, even the possible bright spot of her rejection of TPP had been cast in renewed doubt, with long-time Clinton confidant and Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe suggesting that relatively limited amendments could prompt Clinton to revert to supporting the China-excluding mega trade pact.

A handful of Chinese observers have suggested—not implausibly—that sexism might be a modest factor in Chinese aversion to Clinton, and correlative tolerance for Trump. Women have made only relatively modest cracks in the glass ceiling of China's male-dominated elite politics. And a common Chinese political trope holds that women at the apex of power bring bad results. While the long history of Chinese politics contains male villains aplenty, seemingly outsized condemnation has targeted Empress Wu Zetian (for ruthlessness and usurpation of a role properly belonging to men), the Dowager Empress Ci Xi (for presiding fecklessly over the collapse of China's last dynasty, and opening the door to China's century and half of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers), and Mao's wife and Gang of Four leader Jiang Qing (for her central role in the Cultural Revolution that caused so much disruption and destruction within the memory of many Chinese).

...But Not Riding on the Trump Train...

None of this means that China—or foreign policy-relevant constituencies in China—are pro-Trump. China's foreign policy-relevant elites do seem less unmitigatedly pro-incumbent party than usual, and they, and other informed observers, believe that other Chinese (including those above and below them—national leaders and ordinary citizens—who matter in Chinese foreign policymaking) also are deviating from the usual pro-continuity

norm, but this does not tell us that the prospect of a Trump presidency is more appealing than the prospect of a Hillary Clinton presidency. Apparent pro-Trumpism is epiphenomenal to a remarkably sharp and, in the end, quite possibly overstated anti-Hillaryism. At least those Chinese foreign policy experts and officials who engage frequently with their US counterparts seem, in significant numbers, to understand the potential dangers of a Trump presidency for China's interests and how a Trump administration could be much worse for China than a Clinton administration (even assuming the accuracy of relatively bleak Chinese views of Clinton's likely policies). Many of them believe—and other glimpses of leadership preferences suggest—that China's leaders share some of their understanding of the potential perils of Trump in power.

The Chinese catalogue of acknowledged, serious risks of a Trump presidency includes: Japan and South Korea, unable to rely as before on the US security umbrella, will build up their own militaries or seek to acquire nuclear deterrents—developments that would be destabilizing for the region and problematic for China's security interests; a US administration headed by a president largely aloof from the details of US-China relations and much of foreign policy, but thin-skinned and prone to lash out in response to perceived slights or challenges abroad, could mean a volatile international environment for China and US-China relations—something that Reform-Era Chinese leaders have generally abhorred; the “anti-China” side of Trump might prevail, imposing trade sanctions or undertaking other acts of disruption that would harm both sides and put China to tough policy choices about how to respond; and, most broadly and fundamentally, a sharp decline in the US role in the Western Pacific and in the world more generally could lead to a loss of US-provided international public goods (specifically, promoting stability, order, and openness from which China has benefitted), to a void of power, leadership, and responsibility that China is not yet ready to fill, and to widespread uncertainty and instability as lesser powers scramble to find their footing in a changed security environment.

If Trump wins, an urgent and vital question will be whether Chinese foreign policy experts and intellectual elites, with their sober appreciation of the risks a Trump victory will bring, will have the ear of those who matter most politically in steering China's foreign policy through newly choppy waters. Surely one of the lessons of the unexpected rise of Trump to become a serious contender for the American presidency is that US policy intellectuals and the US political establishment were dangerously out of touch with some of those who matter for setting the course of US foreign policy—Republican primary voters and, later, the general electorate. An analogous disconnect may exist in China. Among US China experts, there is considerable worry that the Chinese with whom US experts in academia, think tanks, and government most densely and openly interact, and who do seem to appreciate the complex and difficult challenges a Trump presidency could bring, have seen their influence and opportunity for input wane under Xi Jinping—who has shifted authority from relatively expert and technocratic bodies in the state toward the party and leading “small groups” (often headed by Xi), and from the relatively liberal-minded and cosmopolitan cohort of thinkers and advisers who have been frequent and trusted interlocutors for American officials and experts toward less accessible holders of more conservative, US-confronting, and, in some key respects, likely less well-informed views of the United States and international affairs.