

Analyzing the Impacts on East Asia of Trump's Potential Return

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Abstract: The 2024 election is a pivotal and highly contested event in the United States. Donald Trump is expected to compete against Joe Biden without any doubts. A potential return of Trump to the White House would likely cause significant reactions in East Asia, particularly among the three major countries in the region. This analysis will explore the detailed implications of Trump's return.

Keywords: Donald Trump; Return; East Asia; Veto; Conflict; Trade war

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1. Introduction

Most analysts and critics worldwide are focused on whether Trump will return to the Oval Office after the 2024 election. The outcome will bring mixed reactions, with some happy and others disappointed. Will this significantly impact East Asia? A potential Trump presidency could have far-reaching effects on the political, economic, and security landscape in the region. Governments in East Asia must closely monitor Trump's policies and actions and be prepared to respond accordingly. This article will elaborate on the possible impacts on relevant East Asian countries should Trump return ^[1].

2. Japan

Recently, Trump stated that if re-elected in 2024, he would immediately veto Nippon Steel's acquisition plan of US Steel. This statement highlights the stark differences between Trump's American right-wing populists and mainstream Washington politicians. While Washington politicians believe that the US economy is open, allowing market-driven acquisitions of American companies by friendly nations and allies, Trump believes that selling American companies would ultimately harm US interests. Whether it's Chinese, Japanese, or European companies, Trump prioritizes American domestic interests.

Reflecting on past experiences, it can be concluded that, in Trump's view, Japan may be merely a tool to serve American interests. His stance might include:

- (1) Rejecting Japanese companies from acquiring strategic US industry enterprises.
- (2) Requiring Japanese companies to invest in the US.
- (3) Transferring Japan's manufacturing capacity and jobs to the US.
- (4) Potentially launching a trade war against Japan.
- (5) Insisting that the US cannot unconditionally support Japan's military demands and will reduce military involvement and commitments to Japan.
- (6) No more NATO expansion in the East.

In recent years, due to efforts by Japanese pro-Western politicians and media, many local Japanese residents perceive Taiwan as similar to Crimea and Japan as similar to Ukraine. They have even been convinced that if mainland China attacks Taiwan, Japan could be the next target. Therefore, they believe that the US commitment is crucial but occasionally wavering: "If the US cannot protect Taiwan as promised, how can it protect Japan either?"^[2].

Currently, it is evident that Trump will not militarily involve the US in Taiwan, effectively abandoning the situation. This significantly undermines the strategic relationship between the US, Japan, and other East Asian allies, with far-reaching consequences. Additionally, Trump's potential interactions with Kim Jong-un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea further unsettle the Japanese, mainly due to Trump's ambiguous words on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Therefore, it seems that a possible Trump presidency would weaken US-Japan relations.

3. The Republic of Korea

Essentially, Trump treats The Republic of Korea similarly to Japan—as a pawn for American interests. If The Republic of Korea requests US involvement, it must pay an economic price. Unlike Japan, The Republic of Korea faces a more immediate issue: Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The situation on the Korean Peninsula has deteriorated in recent years. The Republic of Korea's President, Yoon Suk-yeol, takes an extremely hard-line stance, while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's relations with Russia have improved since the Russo-Ukrainian war^[5].

In this new geopolitical context, The Republic of Korea perceives a potential encirclement by China, Russia, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. At this critical juncture, US commitments, support, and protection are vital. However, Trump shows little interest in protecting The Republic of Korea and is more intrigued by engaging with Kim Jong-un. He believes that personal communication with Kim can prevent conflict on the Korean Peninsula (similar to his views on Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine), which many experienced diplomats consider naive.

Yoon Suk-yeol strongly opposes Trump's personalized approach to Kim Jong-un, fearing that it places the fate of the Korean Peninsula solely in the hands of Trump and Kim, leaving The Republic of Korea sidelined. For The Republic of Korea, Trump represents significant uncertainty and even catastrophe.

4. China

4.1. Mainland China regions

Trump's most globally recognized influence is the Trade War with China during his first presidency. This approach changed the entire globe overnight. Years of global cooperation and coordination were thoroughly replaced by unilateralism. If re-elected in 2024, Trump's anti-China policy approach may include^[3]:

- (1) Comprehensive targeting: His policies will target any Chinese industry, company, organization, entity,

or individual.

(2) Societal participation: In the US, from federal to state and local governments, public to private sectors, from the East Coast to the West, numerous measures could be anticipated against China under Trump's encouragement.

(3) Unscrupulous approaches: According to Trump's experience, the public understands that, for Trump, any means to achieve goals are acceptable, even selectively enforcing or reshaping laws. The forthcoming unscrupulous approaches targeting China are filled with surprises and doubts.

(4) Sides taking among allies: As in Trump's first presidency, demanding other nations participate in restrictions and sanctions against China will surely be a daily routine. Simultaneously, "taking sides" will be a tough option for allies.

(5) Long-lasting strategies: Trump aims to turn containment policies into long-term, irreversible strategies.

Some pessimists are worried that a situation similar to the 2018 trade war may return with Trump's re-election. They also suggest that additional specific measures by Trump may include but are not limited to:

(1) Further escalating China-US trade wars: Expanding tariff categories, raising duty levels, removing most-favored-nation treatment for China, etc.

(2) Restricting US capital investments in China.

(3) Strengthening restrictions and extending sanctions against Chinese companies: Huawei and TikTok have been long targeted. Specific companies like Shein, Tencent, Xiaomi, PDD, and key manufacturing chains in electric vehicles will be targeted without any doubts.

(4) Expanding restrictions on Chinese investments in the US.

(5) Limiting civilian exchanges, including business visits and education programs.

(6) Less focus on climate change and global governance: Trump's administration lacks interest in these global issues, and the US may withdraw from such agreements, mainly aiming to reduce cooperation with China.

As a result, China-US cooperation and negotiation will likely decrease, further weakening mutual trust.

4.2. Taiwan Strait: Opportunistic "playing with fire"

From all of Trump's dialogues and speeches, he believes that mainland China has overwhelming military superiority over Taiwan. If conflict erupts after the Taiwan region declares independence, the US would be militarily powerless to alter the outcome. Trump also recognizes that MAGA Republicans have no significant public support for military intervention in the Taiwan region. Consequently, Trump would not involve the US militarily in a Taiwan Strait conflict. This fundamental judgment leads Trump to view the Taiwan region as unreliable, including its semiconductor industry, which he deems "unsafe"—susceptible to being absorbed by mainland China^[4].

In Trump's view, the true US strategy should be to repatriate the Taiwan region's semiconductor industry, preferably to the US or its most reliable core allies, and reduce dependence on the Taiwan region. From this perspective, Trump seeks a moderate decoupling from the Taiwan region. Such a move would fundamentally alter the post-war geopolitical logic, but Trump, who advocates for NATO withdrawal, pays little heed to these implications.

Trump recognizes the Taiwan region's importance to China. In his logic, the Taiwan region serves as his pawn to constrain the Chinese government. By probing, provoking, and pressuring on the Taiwan Strait issue, Trump aims to gain initiative and dominance in US-China relations. However, the Trump administration's questionable loyalty to the Taiwan region is quite obvious to the public. He may escalate tensions while

simultaneously demanding more concessions from the Taiwan region, including further relocating semiconductor production to the US. Trump's approach is opportunistic: as some critics estimate, he almost has no fixed plan and only makes changes to adapt to actual situations, which is seen as too dangerous and flexible.

If Trump assumes office after the 2024 election, he will vigorously confront China and likely use game theory in the Taiwan region to oppose China. However, his actions could gradually erode the precious trust between the Taiwan region and the US. Taiwan region might realize that, like the Russia-Ukraine war, the US may ultimately abandon it. The island's ultimate benefit from this uncertainty might lie in maintaining a prudent distance from the US and continuing to adhere to the policy of maintaining the status quo.

5. Conclusion

There is an interesting comment from our interviews with various professional experts: Trump is not just a troublemaker but a trouble himself. This judgment may seem funny and simple but carries far-reaching implications. His return might be optimistic, futile, or even comical in the current deeply divided society.

A famous saying by the Chinese philosopher Laozi in his masterpiece "Daodejing" goes, "Responding to change with the unchanging." He teaches that remaining calm is the best way to confront change. In light of Trump's unpredictable actions, all the major East Asian countries and regions might take this as their first option to adapt to what the future Trump administration might do.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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