

Reverse Kissinger and Trump's foreign policy: Why would it not work?



The recent chain of diplomatic actions taken by Washington created many surprises: From their policy towards Gaza to the frequent policy changes towards Ukraine. We realised it was a watershed moment in Geopolitical history. Some argue that the current US policy is to move closer to Russia to isolate China ('PRC'). Proponents say this will be part of the grand diplomacy plan and bring a reshuffle in 21st-century geopolitics favourably for the United States' exceptionalism.

Bearing in mind that de-risking from China has cross-party support in the US, UK and EU parliaments. Yet, few had proposed the grand strategy to revive Kissinger's methodology. The question is: Would it work?

I seriously do not think it would.

What is Reverse Kissinger?

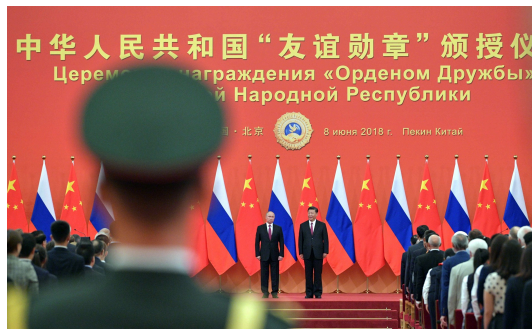
Before going further to explain the shortfall of Trump's foreign policy, it is better to explain the whole ideology behind it. The day before Nixon went to Beijing, there was a conversation between Nixon and Kissinger on the Sino-US relationship. During the conversation, Kissinger warned Nixon that a future president would not agree with Nixon getting cosy with China. The dialogue goes:

"Kissinger: Now, their present philosophy is different from Confucianism, but the basic principles, that if you have the correct principles, you can dominate the world. It's still inbred in their civilisation.

Nixon: I realise that. I think—

*Kissinger: No, as far as he's concerned, that's correct, but I just, I'm just taking the liberty of saying this for the action when you deal with them. I think, in a historical period, they are more formidable than the Russians. And I think in 20 years your successor, if he's as wise as you, will wind up leaning towards the Russians against the Chinese. For the next 15 years we have to lean towards the Chinese against the Russians. We have to play this balance of power game totally unemotionally. Right now, we need the Chinese to correct the Russians and to discipline the Russians."*¹

Indeed Kissinger reportedly suggested the idea to Trump in 2017 and warned it is a bad idea to let Russia get too close with China.²



President Xi of China awarding the Order of Friendship to President Putin of Russia.

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¹ National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Tapes, Oval Office, Conversation No. 671-1. Can be obtained in the Office of the Historian website under 'Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972'. Source: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d192>

² Asawin Suebsaeng, Andrew Desiderio, Sam Stein, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, 'Henry Kissinger Pushed Trump to Work with Russia to Box in China', Research Institute for European and American Studies, 5th August 2018.



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At CUHK, Larry research areas are The Hong Kong Identity and the Structures & Mind of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). All these are very relevant today in a dangerous world as the CCP's goal is to expand its inguence to replace our way of life - the liberal democracies based on a rules-based international order.

How does the CCP politburo function? What are their narratives in distorting cultural identities and history? Ask Larry, who is also an elected representative at Lib Dem's Foreign International Relationship Committee.

According to the archive, the ideology behind Trump's Reversing Kissinger had several shortcomings. Firstly, this strategy was created at the peak of the Cold War, **and Kissinger still carried forward the mentality of the past into the current multi-pole geopolitical world:** In his mind, it was only NATO versus the Warsaw Pact, China is the key player in the Third International but it was never as dominant as the other two. Secondly, **the economy and national interests of Russia and China changed dramatically** and the Cold War mentality is no longer relevant. Last but not least, **the dynamics of US foreign policies and its allies had changed dramatically**, in particular during Trump's second term.

A brief review of geopolitics between USSR, PRC and US in the 1960s and 1970s

A quick review of what geopolitics was like in 1972, the year President Nixon made that watershed trip to the People's Republic of China. From the 1950s onward, Nikita Khrushchev, the former Soviet leader, adopted the de-Stalinization policy. It caused tension with Chairman Mao, the leader of the People's Republic of China, who accused Khrushchev of Revisionism. Mao was also annoyed with Khrushchev's rapprochement with more liberal (*relatively*) Eastern European states such as Yugoslavia, in addition to the disagreements on social and economic policies. The relations between the PRC and the USSR worsened significantly. The border conflict between these two nations near Damansky island in Manchuria in 1969 further deteriorated their relationships. The conflict ended with a Soviet victory and a ceasefire was ordered with a return to the status quo ante bellum. As a result, China sought relations with the United States to counterbalance the Soviet threat, which resulted in Kissinger's secret visit to China two years after the ceasefire.

We must remember, that when President Nixon had his handshake with Chairman Mao in Beijing, the PRC was largely an agricultural state, and the economy was largely dominated by state enterprises. Unlike the Soviet Union, which was already an industrialised nation.:

Structure of PRC GDP in different sectors³

Year	GDP Share on Agriculture	GDP Share on Industry	GDP Share on Services	Total GDP in Billions US\$
2024	6.78%	36.48%	56.75%	18,943.29
1972	32.36%	42.70%	24.94%	113.87

Around 1/3 of the PRC's GDP came from agricultural products. And even though the industrial sector may have had a significant share of its GDP, most of it was for internal consumption. Meanwhile, there were only a few options for its product to be exported. Since the PRC had severed its trading relations with the USSR. Export share with the Soviets dropped from 48% in 1959 to around 2% in the 1970s. Hong Kong and Japan became the leading export markets of PRC goods. There was a reason why Mao referred to Hong Kong as a window to the rest of the world at that time. The former British colony was one of the few places where the PRC could export their products to earn foreign currency.

In China's view, the PRC achieved energy independence at the Sino-Soviet split. That was the time when the Daqing Oil Field entered its 8th year of full production¹. With a relatively shallow industrial sector, the Daqing Oil Field would be able to fulfil the domestic demand of the PRC, and it would no longer need to import petroleum product from the Soviet Union. Therefore, it would be easier for PRC to decouple its economic link with USSR.

¹ Premier Zhou Enlai reported during the 2nd National People's Congress on 3rd December, 1963 that China became self-sufficient on oil production and supply and no longer required importing Petroleum from other countries. Source: National Museum for Modern Chinese Scientist website.

To sum up: First, the geopolitical tension with the USSR and, second, the economic factor which motivated China seeking rapprochement with the United States in 1972.

How about the relationship between Russia and China now? Unfortunately, both criteria which will motivate China to decouple from Russia no longer exist.

Current PRC and Russia geopolitical dynamics (National interest had changed dramatically)

Very importantly, the border dispute between Russia and China had been largely resolved under the border agreement in 2003. China was granted control over [Tarabarov Island](#) (Yinlong Island), Zhenbao Island, and around 50% of Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island (Heixiazi Island), near Khabarovsk.

China is no longer a third nation under two superpowers. In recent years, Vladivostok literally became an entrepôt for the China internal trade between Jilin province and the rest of China. According to a document published by the Chinese Customs Control in 2023,¹ all goods transported from or to Jilin via Vladivostok, are being treated as internal trade, and can be exempted from all export and import procedures. Some will say the city is functioning akin to a Northern Chinese city. The border tension became non-existent particularly after the inauguration of Blagoveshchensk-Heihe Bridge in 2019, not to mention Russia performed more than 100 joint military exercises with China since 2017 and a lot of them were related to the Golden Horn Bay.²

National Interests indeed become very special friendships. Even though there were moments when nationalists in China caused rows about the sovereignty of Vladivostok, neither the PRC nor Russian governments started any diplomatic initiatives to renegotiate the matter.

As importantly, we should also remember in the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship, Article 9 of the treaty has similarities to NATO's Article 5 in that it commits both parties when one is threatened, to "immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats".³

If Trump wanted to persuade Putin to abandon China, the diplomatic hurdle he faced would be much higher than Kissinger persuading Mao to abandon the USSR.

Next, political ideologies have changed. One factor which caused tensions between the USSR and the PRC was the ideological difference. In the case of Putin and Xi, there are few differences between them. Both had an authoritarian tendency, both believed in repressive domestic policies, both were socially conservative towards LGBT rights, and both were very repressive in their policy towards ethnic minorities, in particular towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang and Tatars in Crimea. Both the PRC and Russia adopted strong state intervention towards their economy, and both had a strong one-party rule. To put it simply: The ideological difference between Mao and Khrushchev-Brezhnev had long been gone.

The only tension between Xi and Putin would be their attitude towards the Russo-Ukrainian War, and the strategy towards the economic sanctions. However, even though China tried to gain a foothold in Ukraine and the EU after Trump became the US President for the second time, there is no sign of how it could affect Sino-Russian relations, largely because of the current economic dynamics between today's China and Russia.

¹ Frédéric Lemaître and Benoît Vitkine, 'Beijing greenlit to use Russian port of Vladivostok for its domestic trade' Le Monde, 26th May, 2023

² Mark A. Green, 'China and Russia: Quietly Going Steady?', Wilson Centre, 29th October 2024.

³ "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation". www.fmprc.gov.cn. Archived from the original on 5 June 2011. Retrieved 19 April 2022.

China's Dominance in Sino-Russian Economic Dynamics (economic interests of Russia and China had changed dramatically)

Since Putin's Russia second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, he assumed his "*special military operation*" could end in weeks. He seemed unprepared for a prolonged conflict. However, when the war prolonged from weeks to years, and the unexpected economic sanctions from the West kicked in, Putin was trying to get China onto its side to soften the impact of economic sanctions. President Xi tries a balanced action with the intention to gain favourability for the PRC. On one hand, he allows assistance on military goods, but just short of direct ground troops intervention. On the other hand, he was following some economic sanctions, in particular, related to financial transactions, preventing secondary sanctions from the West on China.

If Trump was trying to persuade Putin to distance from China under the Reverse Kissinger ideology, this would not work because the economic dynamics between China and Russia changed dramatically since 1972. Let us review what happened in these years.

China became the global manufacturing powerhouse since Deng Xiaoping's economic reform in the 1980s, and its appetite for natural resources grew year by year. A former main exporter of raw materials, China became the largest importer of materials such as crude oil in 2023.

The following table shows the list of the top 5 oil importers in 2023, and how much crude oil they imported:

Country/Region	Crude oil imports (bbl/day est.)
China	11308860
United States	6480000
India	4674455
South Korea	2734694
Japan	2546159

Source: CEIC data 2023⁸/

As shown in the table above, China imported more crude oil than the United States and India combined. When we combined the data on the structure of Russian exports to China, we found out Russia is so heavily reliant on China to earn foreign currency: in 2023, 54% of Russian exports were to China, which amounted to USD129 billion. 60.7 billion came from crude petroleum, and 11.7 billion came from natural gas. It was more than half of the total value of Russian exports to China.²

If Trump assumed that Reversing Kissinger would hammer China's ability to maintain its industrial capacity, he would have had to ignore the fact that Russia heavily relied on China to earn its foreign currency. The **US does not have the appetite to consume that much petroleum imported from Russia. Europe will also lack the appetite to return to the days of dependency on Russian gas.**

⁸ CEIC data, 'Crude Oil: Imports'. <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/crude-oil-imports>

² Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), 'China/Russia'. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/rus>

The Russo-Ukrainian War further complicated the issue since Russia relied on Hong Kong as a free entrepôt to avoid military and economic sanctions. A report published by Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, with data largely based on the Centre for Advance Defence Studies (C4ADS), demonstrated that Hong Kong's exports of semiconductors to Russia almost doubled after the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Between August and December 2023, 40 per cent of the USD2 billion worth of shipments to Moscow contained goods on the US and EU lists of advanced components – including semiconductors, computer processors, digital storage units, and integrated circuits – many of them sought by Russia for its war effort. The report also identified numerous locally registered companies that are working with Russia, Iran and North Korea to facilitate their shipping needs, including the transport of sanctioned oil and gas.¹

A few other reports published by OE Data Integration Network – US Government, Centre for Defence Reform Ukraine, and Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Service (RUSI) further indicated that several Hong Kong-based companies are the primary suppliers for SMT-iLogic3, such as Asia Pacific Links, Xinghua Co Ltd and Sinno Electronic Co Ltd. The semiconductors were used to manufacture Orlan-10 drones. Not only did Russians import the semiconductors from these companies; companies such as Asia Pacific Links were controlled by Russians in Chinese territories.

In 1972, China largely decoupled from the USSR in terms of their trading relations. That made US rapprochement with China much easier despite their ideological difference. When Trump attempted to use the same trick on Putin and persuaded him to abandon China by lifting economic sanctions and reactivating Nord Stream 2, the hurdle he would face would be significantly higher because the USA would not have the capacity to fulfil Russian needs.

Further Complications of Chaos Diplomacy towards *Reverse Kissinger*: EU, Russia, and the US

When Napoleon Bonaparte tried to impose a naval blockade and embargo on the United Kingdom during the Napoleonic War, it was Russia who violated the policy and caused the blockade to fail. The key word of any diplomatic policy is 'cooperation', otherwise it could easily end up in failure.

The same can be applied to any foreign policies towards Russia after the Russo-Ukrainian war. The economic sanctions were successful at the early stage of the war due to the cooperation among like-minded countries. This included kicking Russia out of SWIFT, the embargo of crude oil exports, and the secondary sanctions, which caused China to stop accepting payments from Russian banking institutes.

However, Trump and his Mandarins lived in the past They assumed the possibility of only having the US, Russia and China dominating the world in superpower exceptionalism. They ignored the fact that in the 21st century, the world is much more multi-polar. Both the European Union and the South America are much stronger in terms of their economic capacity and international status. It was no longer the 1970s when the geopolitics was dictated by two superpowers.

Complications also involve contradictions from within. Since Trump was elected, he adopted several policies which contradicted the goal of Reverse Kissinger to pull Russia on his side and isolate China.

¹ Selwyn Parker, 'Hong Kong keeps Russia's dark fleet afloat', the Interpreter, 3rd Sept 2024.

Back in February 2025, Trump was cutting Ukraine's military aid step by step, first on the ammunition, then on weapon delivery, and intelligence sharing, and now there are allegations of cutting Starlink communications. The purpose of these actions, according to Trump, was to end the war, and let Russia get what it wanted and the Russians would be kinder with the US. If it was the move to pull away both Russia from China, it had a few complications. The first one was that Ukraine had already approached China for diplomatic support, and China already stepped up its diplomatic action. The recent examples were 1. the open market agreement between Ukraine and China on Ukrainian peas and wild aquatic products¹; and 2. China announced its opposition to the US and Russia talks on ending the war without Ukraine and the EU.²

EU's re-approaching China out of anxiety. One other issue Trump overlooked was when the European Union imposed sanctions on China on several areas back in March 2021. They included blacklisting companies, arms embargo and cyber sanctions. They included blacklisting companies, arms embargo and cyber sanctions. They resulted from not only cooperation among EU member states but also with the United States. When Trump chose to distance himself from the EU over Ukraine, some European countries started softening their relationship with China. The recent examples are 1. EU parliament removed the restrictions on EU MPs meeting with China³; 2. EU Commissioner called for new efforts to improve relations between Brussels and Beijing⁴; and 3. The UK government's imminent approval of the planning permission for the new Chinese embassy complex in the centre of London⁵. In other words, Trump is trying to collaborate with someone from his enemy by betraying natural allies. The result is those allies isolating Trump collectively instead. Under these circumstances, it would be questionable whether the sanctions can still function well if the EU softened its stance towards China.

Intelligence and long-term national security. Intelligence and long-term national security. Trump's domestic policy also brought some confusion to the Reversing Kissinger policy. Intelligence sharing, for example, is crucial for national security in any confrontation against China. The Five Eyes Intelligence Alliance took an active role in maintaining national security against the threat from China since 2018, and together with France, Japan and Germany (The Five Eyes plus Three) against the threat from Russia. However, since the allegedly pro-Russia Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard took office in the Trump administration, the Trump administration became increasingly pro-Russia. There are already talks among members of the 'Five Eyes plus Three' on setting up their own Eyes to prevent confidential information from leaking to Russia via the United States, or the intelligence sharing was cut off completely. Germany, for example, proposed the idea of the 'Euro Eye' to counter the threat of the US's sudden cut-off of intelligence sharing.⁶

¹ 'The Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine signed an agreement to expand the list of Ukrainian agricultural exports to China', Odessa Journal, 6th March 2025.

² 'China opposes US-Russia talks on ending war without Ukraine and EU', Ukrainian World Congress, 7th March 2025.

³ Finbarr Bermingham, 'European Parliament removes curbs on lawmaker meetings with China', South China Morning Post, 7th March 2025.

⁴ Emanuele Bonini, 'Von der Leyen now looks east: India and China as alternatives to Trump's America', EUNews, 21st January 2025.

⁵ 'Chinese Embassy Plan in London Sets Off Opposition', New York Times, 20th February 2025.

⁶ Chris Lunday, 'German lawmakers float 'Euro Eyes' spy network amid uncertainty on US intel', Politico, 7th March 2025.

Countering Belt and Road. Another example was the cut of The United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It was supposed to implement programs in global health, disaster relief, socio-economic development, environmental protection, democratic governance, and education in developing countries, particularly Africa and South America. Since China adopted Belt Road Initiatives in the 2000s, USAID became the institution to counter this scheme by providing grants to developing countries. As Senator Roger Wicker (Republican) said, "I have felt for a long time that USAID is our way to combat the Belt and Road Initiative, which is China's effort to really gain influence around the world, including Africa and South America in the Western Hemisphere."¹

It was a consensus among Republicans and Democrats that cutting aid too aggressively may give a win to China on the world stage. As Michael Sobolik, a China analyst at the conservative Hudson Institute think tank and a former aide to Senator Ted Cruz once said, '(On cutting USAID) ... Do not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Beijing is hoping we do exactly that.'²

Conclusion

Kissinger's rapprochement with China in 1972 could only happen when the USSR and China were at odds, and the near total decoupling between China and Russia in terms of their trade relations. In contrast, the Sino-Russia relationship has been at its peak in recent years, and both China and Russia rely on each other in terms of their trade.

The Trump administration may try their best to decouple Russia from China, but the USA just does not have what China had to persuade Putin to do so. Even if Trump is willing to give up on Ukraine, Russia will hardly have incentives to give up on its neighbouring PRC.

Our Party's proposed policies at this conference which we gladly gave our input: Our party rightfully stands with Ukraine, wary of authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China and supports civil liberty movements overseas. We should endeavour to continue our initiatives. In this Spring Conference, our foreign affairs spokesperson Callum Miller will table motion 'F14 The UK's Response to Trump'. It included how to tackle the challenges of the Trump administration. This motion, highlighted our concern about cutting the USAID, and its complications towards Global South which is already under the influence of Belt Road Initiatives. The motion also proposed several policies which would allow the UK to prepare for the potential impact of the US Reverse Kissinger policy, such as:

- a) Protecting our democracy as a national security priority.
- b) Taking influence dominance out of politics by capping donations to UK political parties.
- c) Working closely with European and other democratic allies to coordinate our response to Russian interference and other authoritarian regimes.
- d) Enforcing existing laws to limit the abuse of power by US 'Big Tech' firms and the spread of disinformation on social media.
- e) Cooperating with Norway, Türkiye and other willing NATO allies.

¹ Sheidlower, Noah; Tan, Huileng, "The USAID shutdown could make China more powerful. Beijing is already pouring billions into countries around the world", Business Insider, 7th February 2025.

² Gramer, Robbie; Bazail-Eimil, Eric; Kine, Phelim, "As USAID retreats, China pounces". Politico, 10th February 2025; and Matza, Max, "Unions sue Trump administration over USAID agency cuts". BBC News, 7th February 2025.