



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Was Donald Trump on the money about China?

Description: As US president, Donald Trump rewrote the rule book for dealing with China, breaking norms enshrined in bilateral relations since the days of Richard Nixon. Yet even Trump's harshest critics have since warmed to his assertive, unconventional approach to Beijing, and there's now recognition that there is no return to the China policy of old. But was this radical reshaping really down to Trump, or was it somehow inevitable given China's inexorable rise as an economic and military power? Professor of American Politics Timothy Lynch examines Trump's China legacy with presenter Ali Moore. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Ali Moore:

Hello, I'm Ali Moore. This is Ear to Asia.

Tim Lynch:

Trump, through his very crude approach actually caused Beijing to rethink some of its approaches. I think Trump, and we need time to see how this works out, has revealed a certain vulnerability, a certain paranoia on behalf of the Chinese communists that American presidents prior to didn't exploit, and Trump came along and was prepared to exploit that.

Ali Moore:

In this episode, was Donald Trump on the money about China? Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

As president, Donald Trump will be remembered for many things, impeachments, riots on Capitol Hill, false claims about electoral fraud, and perhaps above all, the breaking of norms, and not least in the area of foreign relations where Trump publicly praised dictators while treating longstanding American allies with scorn. Such behaviour earned Trump condemnation from the Washington establishment and in other liberal democratic capitals of the West. At the same time, his approach to China was no less unconventional. Trump set the tone in his 2016 election campaign, claiming the United States was getting ripped off and his predecessors had "allowed China to rape our country."

And yet Trump's approach is now seen by even some of his harshest critics as well, maybe, on the right track. So was a radical reshaping of Washington's approach to its vital relations with China really down to Trump? Or was it somehow inevitable, a rectification of failed Obama policy? Did the Trump administration its China policy with good execution? And is the Trump approach to Beijing here to stay? Joining me to gauge how Trump has changed the conversation on China is Timothy Lynch, Professor of American Politics at the University of Melbourne School of Social and Political Sciences. Welcome to Ear to Asia, Tim.

Tim Lynch:

Thank you very much, Ali. It's great to be here.

Ali Moore:

Before we look at whether Trump got it right on China, can you draw us a picture of what the Trump approach to China was? How would you characterise it, and especially in relation to what came before under Obama?

Tim Lynch:

I think with Trump, it's very difficult not to begin with his instinctive approach to issues, and China for lots of reasons captures that instinctive approach, which has stood him in good stead across his business career and into politics. And that instinct is very crude, but not necessarily ineffective for being so, tends to privilege strength over weakness. He sees in China a strong power that the United States has recurrently bent in the face of and he determined to change that dynamic. There's something I think of a grudging respect Donald Trump held the Chinese government in. I mean, this could be mapped across his rhetoric for the last several decades. But he saw China as a power that was able to realise its interests through strength rather than through compromise. And particularly, again playing to his instincts, that strength came from being economically very wily for looking out for its own economic interests in a way that American leaders had forgotten to.

And it was that, I suppose, instinctive understanding of the power dynamics across both these states which gave Trump his purchase. And also, I think to address your second part of your question, he comes to prominence politically because he's prepared to challenge a kind of softly, softly approach to Beijing, which characterises many of his predecessors. I wouldn't characterise it as the appeasement of communist China, but every president, really from Nixon through to Obama, are all wedded to this notion that China is on the verge of a political liberalisation, just trade with it in a way where it recognises global norms. It will start to moderate its behaviour. And Trump says he could care less really about its moral conduct. What he wanted was a deal which would start to restore the imbalance that he says the United States had suffered in its trade relations with China. In that sense, I think Trump comes along and changes the tenor and tone of the relationship with China.

Ali Moore:

So was it purely transactional for Trump?

Tim Lynch:

Well, I think, Ali, it's very difficult to get away from the transactional when assessing the Trump presidency, indeed the whole Trump career. He's not a guy that spends much time worrying about questions in international relations. It really is a struggle between competing economic interests, how he sees his relationships as a businessman as a political leader. And I think he had a notion and again, it's crude and it's based on a stereotype, but like all stereotypes, it carries a certain truth. He saw China and possibly also Asia, more generally, as a transactional arena, where if you cut the right kind of deals, you could realise advantage, whereas moral posturing and globalism and cosmopolitanism, all the isms that any number of his predecessors brought to the challenge were all faulty.

His attempt was to remove from the relationship with China, all sentimentality and instead pursue the best deals. And I think we course can and will in our discussions, judge him on whether those deals realise the interests that he claimed they would. But I think the important thing to note about Trump and Asia and China particularly is this new attempt, this way of conceiving of the relationship is something other than moral or political. And to pursue naked self-interest, naked economic self-interest, that's what I think he changes.

Ali Moore:

Was it though part of a calculated plan that was driven by what he saw as the failure of his predecessors as you talked about there over many presidents, the belief that the more you embrace China, the more you

get political liberalism? Was it a calculated response to that? Or was it more the gut reaction of how Trump did things?

Tim Lynch:

Well, I think it's both. I don't think they're mutually exclusive explanations. His great popularity, which gets him over the line in 2016 and nearly does so again four years later, is that he's willing to articulate a political position that neither of the two parties were able to. This was particularly problematic for the Democrats who are meant to represent working middle class interests. The Democrats over the proceeding two decades had been complicit, had been champions of all the trade deals that had advantaged Beijing over the American worker. He comes along and is prepared to actually call the Democrats and as an implication, the establishment Republicans on the disaster this represents for the American worker.

Does it work perfectly? No, of course it doesn't. But what's important in Trump is what he represents and the forces and powers he represents. And he's able to give voice to in a way that the other Republicans before him and the Democrats certainly were unwilling or unable to. And that's what he changes domestically. So his foreign policies, his trade policy with China has a profoundly domestic genesis. And that I think is the foundation, which allows him to be an important president when it comes to Asia, not uniquely successful, but important in a way that his predecessors weren't.

Ali Moore:

At the same time, it's curious, isn't it? Because Trump started talking so tough. I mean, those quotes from during the election campaign, and yet when he became president, he very quickly labelled Xi Jinping his good friend. There was the state visit, the dinner in The Forbidden City. And at the same time, he then started to impose tariffs. How did the sort of "Xi Jinping, my good friend" fit with the confrontational approach?

Tim Lynch:

He may have wanted a foreign policy, which was devoid of sentimentality, but Trump himself is profoundly sentimental. And I think he put great store in the capacity of his own charisma to unlock ancient enmities. I think this was true of North Korea and his buddying up to Kim Jong-un. I think it was also true in part with Xi Jinping that all the bluff and bluster, the rhetoric he brought into those negotiations was a way of actually then pivoting where the power of his personality would become crucial. I also think this is not artifice and I don't think it's tactical in a narrow sense. I also just think it's a portrayal of what he is as a human being.

He does have this notion that his own personal chemistry, his capacity as a deal maker is going to be decisive. So he naturally, I think, moved to positions, which were much more warm towards opponents that he demonised, but that demonization gave him the ability to make that switch. His predecessors always had the problem of playing nice with China and nice with its leaders. It didn't give them the capacity then to change tack, they were sort of locked into this diplomatic dialogue. Trump could within himself play a version of good cop, bad cop. I don't think it always worked. I think we are dealing fundamentally with the legacy of failure measured in trade terms, perhaps. But I still think that underestimates some of the instinctive skills that he brought to this relationship and they were grounded in something quite peculiar to Trump, the man.

Ali Moore:

Let's have a look at that legacy of failure as you put it, what the dynamic created by Trump actually meant in practise when it came to policy execution. If we go to trade, Trump imposed tariffs, China responded, many of those tit-for-tat tariffs that they're still in place today, have they accomplished anything for the US economy?

Tim Lynch:

To paraphrase Zhou Enlai, I mean, it's too soon to tell perhaps, Ali, and I think this clever response is tenable, but not for very much longer. Measured in very simple terms, the trade deficit with China actually

deepened under Trump. The United States and its manufacturing industries, its agricultural sector was mostly damaged by the positions Trump took. So it's going to be very hard, I think, to sustain Trump's record on Asia and China, particularly on the numbers, at least so far. And it may seem like too much of a stretch to say, well, it wasn't really the economic effects that we should be assessing. It's the change of tone, the style, how diplomacy between the two regimes was obliged to switch because of Trump's approach. But I think that also by the same token, can't be neglected. If the relationship between both these states is measured in only economic terms, I think that doesn't capture much of the nuance, much of the very complicated history between them. China is more than an economic power. Trump, I don't think appreciated this. He only saw them as that.

Ali Moore:

Do you think that's why or one of the reasons that Trump, while had plans for a grand trade deal with China, he couldn't get there? He had the phase one trade deal in early 2020, and I'll ask you about that in a minute, because of course Biden's sticking to that agreement so far, but do you think that that's one of the reasons that Trump was unsuccessful with his grand plan because he didn't understand the broader context that China works in?

Tim Lynch:

Yes. I think there's some wisdom in that analysis that part of his problem, as I suggested previously, was that he thought, and this is perpetuated I think by the reverence in which the office of the presidency is held. There is a belief that the president himself, eventually herself is decisive in how other countries think about their own national interests. And Trump thought he could shift Chinese national interests. He could make Beijing recognise that the way to greater prosperity was through cutting a deal with Trump and no president from the greatest down to the least, the most forgettable, no president has that capacity to actually shift the national interests in Beijing, in Pyongyang, in Paris, in London, in Canberra even. And yet his diplomacy was premised on that pre-supposition. I think it's a problem that all presidents face in their handling of broader foreign policy in particularly China. The idea that what they do individually and separate from their predecessors actually has a transformative effect on the political calculations in capitals like Beijing. I think that always has been an exaggeration.

Ali Moore:

So I'm guessing that your answer to the next question will be "no", but if you look at Trump and you look at his Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, there was some really aggressive rhetoric. In fact, Mike Pompeo accused the communist party of seeking international domination. Did that tough talk, did that tough diplomacy actually get anywhere? Did it influence China at all when it came to issues like the South China Sea or human rights abuses in Xinjiang or just following on for your previous comment, the answer would be no?

Tim Lynch:

There's a limit of course to how much any tough talk can be transformative. But I think the necessary corrective that this kind of rhetorical belligerence signifies is a shift away from the nicey nice approach, which wasn't exclusively nicey nice, of course. I mean, Obama could be rhetorically quite tough on the Chinese communist. It did, I think, give Trump a certain credibility domestically, if not diplomatically. I also think, Ali, that we underestimate, perhaps, although as I've argued China doesn't change its national interest on the basis of how it's treated by an American president. The willingness of an American president to quite crudely and to back it up with increased military spending and military partnerships with China's very wary regional neighbours, that was indicative, I think, of a significant shift and possibly testament to a more effectiveness in the approach than we're willing to concede.

If you think of both these states as led by trade unionists, it's a good working class metaphor, they speak very tough publicly and they demonise and they entrench their positions in order when they get around the negotiating table to be much more nuanced and to be able to cut deals. So that tough rhetoric is not indicative of a collapse of relationship, but a way of setting up a negotiation that then proceeds. And I think

that's what you see in Trump and Pompeo, the willingness, and I've seen American military people do this when I've spoken to them. It's quite jarring to hear them describe China, not as a strategic competitor, but the enemy, "the enemy." Now we might see this as a downgrading, a resort to conflict rather than the ways of peace, but it's also a way of getting both sides on notice that they're taking each other very seriously.

And it also makes negotiations much more vital in order to deescalate. I don't think the way in which Trump was prepared to talk about China necessarily was a failure. What his predecessors may have ducked, he was prepared to embrace, and that probably brought him more leverage at the negotiating table than he was actually able to capitalise on. But the leverage for sure, he created by recourse, I think, to this new way of talking to China as opponents, as enemies, rather than simply as in that rather condescending way that an Obama, for example, would have that the China just need to be shown some tough love in order to be enveloped in this warm bosom of global cosmopolitanism. That seemed to me to be a much greater failure than Trump's more belligerent approach.

Ali Moore:

So when you look at, I suppose, a broader picture of what happened under the Trump administration, couple of examples, the US Pacific Command, changing its name to Indo-Pacific Command, the China Initiative, which is ongoing, which is aimed at disrupting covert activities in the US. When you look at things like that, to what extent were they driven do you think by Trump and his administration versus federal agencies or departments?

Tim Lynch:

Yes. I think Trump can't get credit for transforming the landscape, but I think he catalysed trends which are already underway. It's not that Trump came along and insisted we all take China seriously. This has been on the map since China went communist in 1949, but he did speed up the pace I think of military strategic thinking around some of these questions. The obvious case in point here is the US relationship with India, and this got warmer under Donald Trump. If Australians and other Americans and Parisians were bemused by the Trump presidency, there's a case to be made I think that the Indians really understood where Trump was coming from.

Certainly in the approach with China, India has to survive with a very large land border, which separates them from the world's second largest economy with whom they have had various border wars and have been in a state of some conflict over decades. They kind of recognise that Trump was changing the way in which China was being assessed. So I think the Quad, the relationship between Australia, Japan, India, and the US got more attention and was treated with more seriousness in New Delhi because Trump had changed some of the rhetoric around this particular issue. But the Quad itself because is not the creation of Donald Trump but I think it's given a greater salience as a consequence of how he changes some of the rhetoric around the relationship.

Ali Moore:

And we should note, of course, his approach to China or his policy on China largely had bipartisan support, didn't it?

Tim Lynch:

Yes. I think that's a very good point and it makes lots of Democrats uncomfortable, but Trump didn't transform the US approach to China. In some ways, he found, as you've said, a bipartisan sweet spot. And we think of that nation, that polity, as riven between competing conceptions of what America is and America's role in the world. But Trump actually was able to articulate a pretty good degree of bipartisanship, which was always there on China. And it's also, I think, worth noting that both sides of American politics are internally divided on the question of China. So there are Democrats which are pro-China or pro-engagement and those that dwell on its human rights record and that's mirrored on the Republican side. Trump was able, I think, to realise from these competing conceptions of Chinese power, a good deal of consensus, and I don't think scholars yet have really got to grips with that.

We treat Trump so far as this great source of dissensus within the system, this great disruptor and possibly we've forgotten how far he was able to effect a consensus on China, which has largely been imbibed, inherited by, and moved along by the Biden administration. So had Trump got it so wrong on Asia and China, you'd have thought Biden would've stepped back and changed course. He hasn't, he's got a more Trumpian policy towards Asia than Trump himself was able to effect. In part because, and this is not a defence of the Biden administration because it's of course in relative terms to the chaos of the Trump administration, but he's doing it with the American diplomatic machine on his side. Something that Trump always struggled to do. There is a natural fit between the Biden administration's worldview and that of the state department. But what is the policy that he's effecting through this great glacial machine? It's the policy of Donald Trump.

Ali Moore:

You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its society's politics and cultures, it's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and its open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia of the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again, you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Ali Moore and I'm joined by University of Melbourne Professor of American Studies, Timothy Lynch. We're asking whether Donald Trump was on the mark about China all along. Tim, I want to look at what's happened to China policy under Joe Biden in a minute. But to what extent was Trump's get tough approach to China driven by the domestic agenda? You did talk out how important the domestic agenda was in the context of trade. But of course, what we haven't mentioned is the pandemic. And if you look at the pandemic related China bashing, the Chinese virus, was that a distraction to a certain extent from his own failures?

Tim Lynch:

I think it's a very good question. And we haven't dealt with COVID of course, I think it's in important ways is justification for Trump's view of China. I mean, it's accidental, not something he manufactured. But it filled out for Trump this notion that the Chinese cannot be trusted. They will take away your jobs, and the Democrats won't do anything about that and they will take away your lives and your freedoms because of their nefarious research on viruses. It's not to endorse both caricatures that Trump had of Chinese communist behaviour. It is to observe they played really well domestically. We're left ponder, I think, Ali, that without COVID and the effect, the actual physical psychological effects of COVID in the United States, without that, Donald Trump possibly, I mean, a very strong likelihood, he would've won again in 2020. I don't think the domestic effects of China should be underappreciated.

He was able to articulate on trade and then on COVID, a position which had been silenced through a kind of diplomatic version of political correctness, which says you only talk so tough on China in order to realise advantage. Trump blew that apart and actually called China on its behaviour in terms of trade, he did so very, very effectively with this crude, but very effectively narrative that for 20 years, successive American leaders had sold out the manufacturing class in the United States to Chinese factories.

Democrats and Republicans, complicit in this defenestration of the American working class, had no real response to that. And Trump has changed the way in which we understand the role of China in American politics and in American industrial policy in a way that none of his predecessors were able. And that carried over, I think, into COVID. I think he took it far when it came to COVID. Although I think it's worth saying that the strongly sceptical line he took towards the Chinese handling of the initial outbreak found resonance in any number of capitals, including that of Canberra. So I think that the domestic resonance of his positions on China, hugely advantaged him politically and almost got him over the line a second time in 2020.

Ali Moore:

So what did China make of Trump? I know you're not a sinologist, but the more aggressive, the transactional approach, to some extent it actually suited Beijing better, didn't it?

Tim Lynch:

Yes. I think there's a good case to be made that China actually got Trump, I mean, a difficult thing to a measure. And I spent a month in China during the first real trade war of the Trump administration in 2018. So my claim would be in my conversations with officials with academics, it was based at a university, there was a kind of grudging respect for Trump, that Trump had come along and actually done what number of Chinese leaders that expected presidents, American presidents to do and yet hadn't. He began calling them on their behaviour, on their devaluing of the yuan, on their ambitions in the South China Sea, in their unfair trade practises. And it just struck me that for most of the modern history of this relationship, American presidents had kind of ducked this. They'd pretended that China was on the verge of a transformation in the way it behaved. Something that China, the Chinese communist themselves, of course never believed and always expected an American president to come along and abandoned this kind of appeasement approach.

And when Trump came along, it wasn't a surprise to many in the Chinese communist party. We'd been expecting Trump all along. I think there may be some limits to that analysis, but I've still not seen a obvious evidence to suggest that any president, either side of Donald Trump was treated by Beijing with any greater deference. Trump through his very crude approach actually caused Beijing to rethink some of its approaches.

I think Trump, and we need time to see how this works out, has revealed a certain vulnerability, a certain paranoia on the behalf of the Chinese communist, that American presidents prior to didn't exploit and Trump came along and was prepared to exploit that. So I think some of the Chinese overreaction to places like Hong Kong to its increased repression in Xinjiang, these are responses not based on Chinese confidence and robustness, but to some of the fears that have been latent for a long time in the Chinese communist experiment. And that Trump was prepared to scratch. Again, ask me in 10 years, ask me in 50 years, I think that will be seen possibly as a net positive that some of the Chinese communist behaviour that we've seen was only really provokable via the approach of a Donald Trump.

Ali Moore:

Do you think though, that by the end of the Trump presidency, the Chinese felt differently? I mean, you had an increasingly strong Xi Jinping and you had a president who was widely seen to be trashing America's global standing, and you had an extraordinarily divided America.

Tim Lynch:

Yes. These are all problematic legacies of the Trump administration, which we need decades to unravel. I mean, I had maintained in this discussion the idea that any government's national interests are only really tweaked by the position of an American president. I don't want to suddenly contradict that position, but I think it's worth observing that Beijing, some of its latent instinctive behaviour, became much more apparent as a consequence of the way Trump conducted his diplomacy. That kind of edginess that unpredictability some have called it a reworking of Nixon's madman theory of putting your competitors in a state of almost perpetual dislocation and concern about what your next move would be. That I think elicited more Chinese insecurity, which given a better organised Trump administration, would've been able to exploit more fully than it was able.

Ali Moore:

Was that, do you think, the one achievement of this new approach? When you look at this change in tenor and tone, as you put it having a relationship which is looked at from a perspective other than moral or political, it's largely seen, isn't it, as opportunity squandered? Because if you look at trade, if you look at other areas, really there was nothing of benefit to America in the end, but would you argue that the benefit was that you elicited something from China that previous presidents had not been able to do?

Tim Lynch:

Yes. I think it may not be much of an argument in defence of success, but I also think it needs to be built into our understanding of the failure that the change of tone that Trump perfected was an important part of where we currently are. I don't think America was its position was necessarily degraded because of some of the posturing of the Trump administration. The primary evidence for that is how far the Biden administration and the administration which trades on its diplomatic nuance and progressivism, how far that administration has actually adapted and adopted the Trump approach.

Ali Moore:

You said much earlier that in fact Biden has a more Trumpian approach than Trump himself. What exactly did you mean by that?

Tim Lynch:

Well, I think he's more vulnerable, Ali, because he's a blue collar Democrat representing industrial working class interests, and yet has been complicit himself over 50 years in Washington of selling out that constituency through things like the WTO and permanent normal trading relations with China. So he feels a degree of vulnerability, which Trump exposed, and he must adapt himself to maintain his political viability along those same lines. I mean, that is an effect I think Trump had, which is not widely recognised that he's forced the Democrats to actually confront their sinophilia by which I mean this investment in the hopes that China would play fair. If you lock it into a global system, suddenly it would observe rules and begin a political liberalisation. Trump exposed that, and he's forced the Democrats to actually start articulating the voice of the victims of China's economic behaviour.

That seems to me to be a considerable success, even if it's narrowly confined to American domestic politics. But in some ways, all foreign policy, all trade policies, refraction of what happens internally within a nation and that's especially true of the United States. So Trump came along and perhaps it's not peculiar to his approach to Asia and China, but he's come along and said, "Look, there is a new way of conceiving of American national interests, which both sides of the political spectrum have to recognise. We can't keep ignoring a forgotten middle class. We've got to make them central to our worldview." And it's hard to imagine another president. I mean, I can't think of a president over the course of my lifetime since the late '60s, early '70s through to today, that's had that kind of effect on American politics.

Tim Lynch:

Is he an idiot? Yes, of course, he faces this charge. He doesn't read books, he doesn't think deeply about the world. He's not an academic and yet he was capable, I think, and we'll see how this works out, in changing some of the basic dynamics of how domestic politics interact with and affect American foreign policy. And I think that's where his legacy, his most profound legacy resides.

Ali Moore:

But isn't the challenge with that legacy, the uniqueness of Trump, as you've just said, and his lack of interest in values or political liberalism, his sole focus on the deal. We have never seen that before in a president, whether we're ever going to see it again remains for the future, but they are unique characteristics to Trump and aren't other politicians like Joe Biden, eventually going to struggle with that and therefore find that if there is this new tenor and tone, they will struggle to maintain it.

Tim Lynch:

I compare him with Richard Nixon. And again, these are two presidents, Trump and Nixon, who's in some ways their foreign policy legacy is a refraction of their approach to China. And in both cases, as you observe, I think very well, neither was able to put in place a system, a structure, neither was able to transform the institutional approach consistent with their own idiosyncrasies, their own personal chemistry. So when you remove a Nixon and a Kissinger, what you remove is actually the basic dynamic of the diplomacy. And I think the same is true of Donald Trump, that Donald Trump saw himself as unique. He shares with Obama I think this self-conception or psychosis that his mere presence in the room was going

to be the decisive factor. And it turns out that's not enough, but what you actually have to do is marry charisma and individual leadership skills and pathologies with institutional transformation.

And that's the one thing he was singularly incapable of doing. He had no feel for bureaucracy. His whole political persona was built on being anti the bureaucracy, the deep state. And this of course, as with Nixon, has and will compromise his legacy, but you can't do through personal chemistry, what it takes institutional transformation to effect. And I think that's Trump's real failure, that too much of his foreign policy particularly rested on him. I mean, think of how he glad-handed Kim Jong-un and his diplomacy with Xi Jinping or his deepening of the India relationship, much of it was predicated on him rather than on institutional transformation. And I think that is a real problem with his legacy.

Ali Moore:

And if we look at where Biden sits now while he's kept much of Trump's China approach, we have seen, I suppose, a return to more diplomatic communication. We have seen a winding back of the harsh rhetoric. Where do you think Biden will end up on China?

Tim Lynch:

I think he'll end up in a not dissimilar position to the one Trump found himself in that he will realise the limits of his own power to persuade that Beijing has a notion of its self-interests sustained over the last 70 years, which Biden and all his left leaning diplomats will struggle to shift and change, which is why I think, Ali, that attempt to do so is not how we think about Biden's approach to China at the moment. It represents much more continuity with Donald Trump. And what does that continuity mean? It means sticking up, rhetorically if not substantively, for the rights and interests of the American working class. It means calling Beijing on some of its behaviour. It means as we've seen in recent weeks, playing politics with sport by withdrawing diplomats from the Beijing Winter Olympics. These all strike me as quite Trumpian in their approach and motivation and suggests to me that Trump was able to affect a certain change that Biden and his successors would be very wise to adapt rather than try and repeal.

Ali Moore:

So is it, I guess if nothing else, providing a new dynamic provides space for a reset, which wouldn't be there if it was business as usual?

Tim Lynch:

Yes. I think there's a new realism that captures the nature of the relationship between both sides, and Australia, in lots of important ways, has found itself trapped in the middle of this. For a long time, Australia sought to... It's Hugh White, I think, that came up this formulation enjoy all the benefits of Chinese wealth whilst being protected from its power. And America, of course, was crucial in how Australia sought to navigate this. And that approach has been exposed I think. What we are now dealing with is a much more realistic assessment of Chinese power in Canberra and in Washington and elsewhere, which says that this nation is not on the cusp of some great liberalisation, but actually is here for the long haul. And we need to deal with it on terms which are effective rather than simply aspirational. And I think that again is part of Trump's contribution.

Let's deal with the Chinese for what they are, not for what we hope they might be. And if there has been a revolution in international relations in and after the Trump administration, it may be in those terms, a willingness to actually deal with the world as it is rather than in more Obamian notions of inevitable human progress and cosmopolitanism. Again, without being pro-Trump in my concluding thoughts, this, I think, represents a considerable success for the Trump administration to actually reintroduce realism into our assessment of international relations and into our appreciation of Chinese power.

Ali Moore:

So bottom line, Trump got it right on China?

Tim Lynch:

I think he got it more right than his critics are prepared to admit, and time and scholarship will be the test of that claim.

Ali Moore:

Tim, thank you so much for your analysis and it will be wonderful to talk to you again, as you say, ask me again in five years, 10 years, 15 years, as we can look back and have some perspective on those Trump years. Can I ask you before I let you go where can listeners hear more of your work, the sort of analysis that you do? Are you on social media? Is there somewhere you can point our listeners to?

Tim Lynch:

Ali, yes. I tweet at [tim_lynchphd](#). I point listeners to my new book, *In the Shadow of the Cold War: American Foreign Policy from George Bush Sr. to Donald Trump*, came out with Cambridge UP last year. I am also co-editing with Robert Ross of Boston College, an addition of *Melbourne Asia Review* in March 2022, which deals with many of the questions we've considered here, the rise of China, the emerging geopolitical order and the role good and bad that Donald Trump and Joe Biden have played in that.

Ali Moore:

Wonderful. Tim Lynch, thank you so much for talking to Ear to Asia.

Tim Lynch:

Thank you, Ali. It's been a great pleasure.

Ali Moore:

Our guest has been Timothy Lynch, Professor of American Politics from the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple Podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, or Google Podcasts. If you like the show, please rate and review it on Apple Podcasts. Every positive review helps new listeners find the show and please help us by spreading the word on social media. This episode was recorded on the 11th of December 2021. Producers were Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param of [profactual.com](#). Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons Copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne I'm Ali Moore, thanks for your company.