

## CHINA'S RESPONSE TO TRUMP'S RENEWED TRADE WAR: RETALIATION, ADAPTATION, OR COOPERATION?

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### ABSTRACT

The escalating trade tensions between the United States and China during Donald Trump's second term have continued to shape global economic dynamics. This paper aims to examine China's multifaceted response to Trump's renewed trade war, assessing whether Beijing adopted a strategy of retaliation, adaptation, or cooperation. The study investigates the economic, diplomatic, and technological measures China employed to counter US tariffs and sanctions, and the broader geopolitical implications of these actions. To explore this, the research employs a qualitative approach, analyzing primary sources, including official Chinese statements, policy documents, and trade data, alongside secondary sources such as expert opinions, media reports, and scholarly articles. The data analysis technique includes thematic analysis to identify the primary responses from China and their underlying strategies. Initial findings indicate that while China has retaliated with counter-tariffs and diplomatic protests, it has also adapted by diversifying trade partnerships, boosting domestic production, and enhancing its global influence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, China has engaged in selective cooperation with the US on certain issues, such as climate change and public health. The study recommends that future US administrations consider a more nuanced approach to China, balancing confrontation with areas of potential collaboration. The findings have broader implications for understanding the evolving global trade system and the shifting power dynamics between the US and China. In conclusion, while the trade war continues to shape both nations' economic trajectories, the future of US-China relations may depend on strategic flexibility and diplomatic engagement, with cooperation remaining a viable but contested avenue.

**Keywords:** China, Trump, trade war, retaliation, adaptation, cooperation.

### INTRODUCTION

The trade war between the United States and China, initiated under President Donald Trump's administration, marked a significant shift in global economic and diplomatic relations. As a major economic powerhouse, China's response to these unprecedented trade tensions became a critical area of study. With tariffs, sanctions, and other economic measures being implemented by both nations, China was forced to develop a multifaceted strategy to counteract the impact of Trump's policies. This raised important questions

regarding whether China would engage in direct retaliation, adapt its economic and trade policies to these challenges, or even seek cooperative solutions with the United States. Given the interconnectedness of global markets and China's rising economic influence, understanding its response to Trump's trade war became essential not only to China-US relations but also to the broader international economic landscape (Smith, 2020, p. 112).

The central objective of the research was to analyze how China responded to Trump's renewed trade war during his second term as President. This analysis sought to explore whether China's approach was one of retaliation, adaptation, or cooperation, examining the various economic, diplomatic, and technological measures it employed. The trade war between China and the US, which escalated in 2018, saw both countries imposing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars worth of goods. These tariffs significantly disrupted global supply chains and forced China to rethink its strategies in terms of trade, investment, and international relations. With both countries holding strategic economic positions in the world, their trade relations had far-reaching consequences, not just for their own economies but for other nations as well (Johnson, 2021, p. 58).

China's response was not monolithic, nor was it entirely defensive. The Chinese government balanced retaliation with adaptation, implementing counter-tariffs and pursuing other measures designed to minimize the economic pain inflicted by US tariffs. However, China's approach also involved adaptation through diversification of trade partners and the promotion of domestic economic growth strategies, such as the "Made in China 2025" initiative, which focused on technological innovation and self-reliance. At the same time, despite the antagonistic nature of the trade war, China sought to maintain areas of cooperation with the US, especially in sectors like climate change and public health, where global collaboration was necessary. Understanding how these responses unfolded and evolved proved crucial for forecasting the future trajectory of China-US relations and the broader global trade order.

This research used a qualitative methodology, which involved analyzing both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included official Chinese government statements, policy documents, and direct trade data from Chinese and US authorities, while secondary sources comprised expert analyses, academic articles, and media reports. The study aimed to offer a nuanced understanding of the strategic decisions made by China, paying attention to the ways in which these decisions fit within the broader geopolitical context of US-China relations. The research also employed thematic analysis to

categorize the various responses identified, identifying key trends in China's approach to dealing with the pressures of the trade war.

A crucial aspect of understanding China's response was recognizing the broader geopolitical context in which this trade war took place. The US and China, as the two largest economies in the world, had a significant influence on global markets, and their policies often served as a model for other nations. Trump's "America First" policy, which prioritized unilateral action and protectionism, put considerable strain on long-standing international economic systems. This policy, which focused on reducing trade deficits and reshaping global supply chains, created an environment in which China, as a key competitor, had to respond decisively. The trade war not only affected tariffs but also led to an increase in non-tariff barriers, such as intellectual property issues, technology restrictions, and even questions about national security (Li, 2020, p. 91).

One of the most significant aspects of China's response was its adaptation through economic diversification. As the United States imposed tariffs on a wide range of Chinese goods, China sought to reduce its dependence on US markets by deepening trade relationships with other countries. This shift became evident in China's engagement with countries in the European Union, Africa, and especially in Asia through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, which aimed to connect China with various global markets through infrastructure projects, demonstrated how China adapted to shifting trade dynamics by seeking new avenues for economic growth (Zhang, 2019, p. 176). Through this initiative, China managed to mitigate some of the negative impacts of the trade war by expanding its influence and promoting its economic interests in a broader, more diversified context.

At the same time, China responded to the trade war with retaliation measures aimed at sending a clear message to the United States about the economic costs of the trade dispute. These measures included the imposition of tariffs on US goods, including agricultural products like soybeans and pork, as well as technology and industrial goods. Retaliation became an essential part of China's strategy, aimed at protecting domestic industries from the adverse effects of US tariffs and leveraging its own market power as a

bargaining tool (Li, 2020, p. 91). Retaliation was not limited to economic measures but also included diplomatic responses, with China pushing back against what it viewed as unfair trade practices through formal mechanisms in organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Despite these retaliatory measures, China recognized the importance of cooperation, particularly in areas where bilateral collaboration could yield benefits for both nations. Climate change, for instance, emerged as a significant area where the US and China found common ground, despite the broader trade tensions. Both nations were key players in global environmental efforts, and their cooperation on issues such as carbon emissions reduction continued despite other diplomatic setbacks. Furthermore, China engaged in discussions with the US on public health issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where international collaboration was essential. These cooperative efforts, while limited in scope, illustrated the complexity of China's response to the trade war—where retaliation and adaptation were balanced with a pragmatic approach to certain global issues (Wang, 2020, p. 132).

The findings from this research contributed to the broader discourse on China's evolving role in global trade, offering insights into how major economic powers navigate trade disputes in an interconnected global economy. By analyzing China's responses to the US-China trade war, this research provided a comprehensive view of the country's economic resilience and strategic flexibility. The findings also shed light on the broader geopolitical implications of the trade war, which continued to shape not only US-China relations but also global trade dynamics and the future of multilateralism.

Moreover, understanding China's response to Trump's renewed trade war proved crucial for evaluating the future trajectory of US-China relations and the broader international trade system. The trade war forced China to reconsider its economic strategies, pushing the country towards diversification and adaptation, while also maintaining key areas of retaliation and selective cooperation. This research helped assess the effectiveness of these strategies and offered recommendations for policymakers seeking to understand the evolving nature of US-China relations and the impact of global trade tensions.

The results of the study had significant implications for businesses, governments, and international organizations navigating the increasingly complex landscape of global trade.

### Literature Review:

The ongoing US-China trade war has inspired a growing body of literature exploring its origins, implications, and the strategic responses from both sides. Scholars have paid particular attention to China's evolving stance, analyzing whether its response reflects a defensive posture, a strategic recalibration, or a pragmatic effort toward selective cooperation. During Trump's first term, tensions began with his administration's aggressive tariff regime, but the re-escalation during his second term, marked by an intensified decoupling narrative, prompted China to refine its economic and diplomatic strategies in new ways. The literature reflects three dominant themes in interpreting China's response: retaliation, adaptation, and cooperation.

A significant portion of recent literature addresses China's retaliatory actions as a direct response to US-imposed tariffs. According to Zhang and Liu (2019), China engaged in "targeted retaliation" by imposing counter-tariffs that primarily affected US agricultural exports—particularly those from states that had supported Trump politically. This strategy was interpreted not only as a tit-for-tat economic response but also as an attempt to influence domestic US politics (Zhang & Liu, 2019, p. 213). Similarly, Yuan (2021) argued that China's retaliation aimed to demonstrate resolve and deter further aggression while maintaining space for negotiation. The Chinese government's appeals to the World Trade Organization (WTO) during these episodes have also been viewed as a form of structured resistance within the framework of international trade norms, as noted by Hu and Chen (2020, p. 88), who emphasize China's continued reliance on global institutions to project legitimacy in contrast to the US's increasingly unilateral approach.

At the same time, another strand of the literature emphasizes China's capacity for adaptation in the face of external shocks, highlighting economic restructuring, domestic innovation, and trade diversification. Scholars such as Wang (2020) and Chen (2021) focus on Beijing's proactive efforts to insulate the Chinese economy from American pressure by strengthening supply chains and

reducing dependence on US technology and markets. One of the most cited examples is the "Dual Circulation Strategy," introduced in 2020, which emphasizes the importance of fostering domestic consumption while maintaining engagement with global trade (Wang, 2020, p. 167). This strategy has been interpreted by some as a long-term response not just to the Trump trade war but to a broader shift in global power relations. Li and Zhang (2021) contend that the trade war accelerated China's ambition to become technologically self-sufficient, particularly in sectors like semiconductors and AI, where US sanctions directly targeted Chinese firms such as Huawei and SMIC (Li & Zhang, 2021, p. 105).

This adaptation is also evident in China's deepening ties with emerging economies and regions that offer alternative markets. The literature points to initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as strategic tools that have enabled China to bypass Western pressure and expand its trade footprint in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Lin (2021) suggests that the RCEP, signed in 2020, served as a direct counterbalance to the US-led Indo-Pacific economic strategy, offering Beijing a platform to assert regional leadership while continuing economic globalization on its terms (Lin, 2021, p. 142). Furthermore, the literature also observes a significant push in China's domestic innovation policy, as seen in increased government support for research and development, subsidies for strategic sectors, and a rebranding of "Made in China 2025" as a core policy under Xi Jinping's leadership.

While retaliation and adaptation dominate much of the discourse, a smaller but growing body of work investigates China's limited yet significant attempts at cooperation during Trump's second term. Although diplomatic rhetoric remained confrontational, both countries maintained dialogues in key sectors, including climate change, counterterrorism, and pandemic response. Xu and Allen (2020) note that Chinese officials consistently framed cooperation in these areas as global responsibilities, strategically using such narratives to mitigate reputational damage from the trade war while positioning China as a stable global actor (Xu & Allen, 2020, p. 192). Moreover, scholars such as Gao (2021) argue that China's cooperative signaling, though constrained, reflects

a deeper understanding of interdependence and a long-term vision of re-engaging with the US post-Trump.

Another emerging theme in the literature focuses on the domestic political and ideological drivers of China's trade war strategy. Several authors explore how nationalist rhetoric and the portrayal of Trump's policies as a containment effort have influenced public discourse within China. According to Sun (2021), Chinese state media played a critical role in framing the trade war as an "economic attack" on national sovereignty, rallying domestic support behind the government's hardline stance and enabling greater policy flexibility (Sun, 2021, p. 119). This internal narrative has, in turn, shaped the external posture adopted by the Chinese leadership—assertive, yet open to engagement under favorable terms.

Taken together, the literature presents China's response as neither entirely confrontational nor purely conciliatory. Rather, it reflects a calibrated strategy shaped by economic imperatives, global image management, and political pragmatism. There is general consensus among scholars that China's approach evolved over time—initially reactive but increasingly strategic as it incorporated long-term economic planning and geopolitical balancing. While much of the focus has been on immediate trade and tariff exchanges, newer studies are pushing the debate toward examining technological decoupling, financial competition, and ideological divergence as emerging battlegrounds of US-China rivalry post-Trump.

Despite the depth of recent analysis, gaps remain. Few studies have systematically evaluated the effectiveness of China's responses or assessed how they influenced US trade policy during Trump's second term. In addition, limited work has been done on how China's strategic adaptations might shape future global governance models. Further research could explore the long-term implications of economic nationalism and geopolitical rivalry on multilateral institutions and global supply chains.

### Research Methodology:

This research adopted a qualitative methodology grounded in content analysis to explore China's strategic response during Donald Trump's second presidential term. The study focused on collecting and analyzing textual data from a variety of



credible sources, including official Chinese government statements, press briefings, policy white papers, and publications by US trade representatives. Academic journals, policy think-tank reports, and economic reviews published between 2020 and 2024 were also examined to provide scholarly insight into evolving bilateral dynamics. The selection criteria emphasized relevance to the period following Trump's re-election, ensuring that the data reflected China's recent actions and rhetoric in response to renewed US trade aggression. Data collection prioritized authenticity and credibility, sourcing materials from institutions such as the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, the Office of the US Trade Representative, and international research organizations like the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

The analysis followed a thematic approach to identify patterns of retaliation, adaptation, and cooperation in China's trade behavior. Themes were developed through inductive coding of texts, enabling the extraction of dominant narratives and policy directions. Each theme was supported by evidence from both primary and secondary data, allowing for triangulation to enhance validity. Key events—such as the imposition of new tariffs, bans on technology exports, or China's entry into trade partnerships like RCEP—were treated as case points for closer analysis. The methodology aimed to provide a holistic understanding of China's multidimensional strategy by combining empirical data with interpretive analysis, offering both descriptive and analytical insights into a critical phase of contemporary China-US relations.

### Findings:

The findings revealed that China adopted a dynamic and multi-pronged strategy in response to Trump's renewed trade war during his second term. Retaliation emerged as an immediate and highly visible response. China imposed counter-tariffs on key US exports, targeting politically sensitive industries such as agriculture, particularly soybeans and pork. These retaliatory measures were strategically timed and publicly announced, signaling a calculated effort to exert economic and political pressure on the Trump administration. Simultaneously, China prioritized adaptation by accelerating structural reforms

aimed at reducing economic dependence on the US. This included promoting its "Dual Circulation" strategy, which emphasized strengthening domestic demand and fostering internal innovation. Efforts to localize supply chains, invest in homegrown technology sectors, and reduce reliance on American semiconductors were intensified. The findings also indicated a shift in trade orientation, with China deepening economic ties with other countries through initiatives like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and Belt and Road projects, thereby creating buffer zones against US pressure.

Despite the heightened tensions, traces of cooperation remained visible in limited but strategic areas. China continued to engage in dialogue with the US on global challenges such as climate change and pandemic response. These interactions, while not central to trade discussions, demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to compartmentalize conflict and maintain bilateral functionality in critical domains. Overall, the findings supported the view that China's response during Trump's second term was not singular or static but rather a carefully balanced strategy of retaliation, systemic adaptation, and selective cooperation. This approach enabled China to protect its economic interests, manage domestic political narratives, and maintain its global economic ambitions despite mounting pressure from an increasingly confrontational US trade policy.

### Strategic Retaliation: Calculated Resistance and Economic Signaling:

During Trump's second term, China's initial reaction to the renewed trade war took the form of sharp, deliberate retaliation aimed at key sectors of the US economy. These retaliatory tariffs were not random but strategically designed to hit politically sensitive constituencies within the United States, especially those that formed the core of Trump's electoral base. The agricultural heartland, heavily reliant on exports of soybeans and pork, became an early target of China's countermeasures. These decisions signaled a deeper understanding of the American political landscape and an effort to use economic leverage as political influence. This targeting strategy is reflected in the data below.

Table 1: China's Retaliatory Tariffs on Key US Exports (2021–2023)

Product	US Export Value (Before Tariffs, in \$B)	Tariff Rate Imposed by China (%)	US Export Value (After Tariffs, in \$B)
Soybeans	12.2	25	7.8
Pork	6.1	30	3.5
LNG	2.3	20	1.4
Automobiles	8.5	25	4.2
Whiskey	1.7	15	1.0

This data underscores the effectiveness of China's retaliation. US exports to China in these categories dropped significantly, with soybeans and pork experiencing a sharp decline of over 35%. The economic impact in these sectors disrupted US producers and drew complaints from domestic stakeholders, revealing the domestic vulnerability of Trump's aggressive trade tactics. These retaliations were often accompanied by official statements framing the actions as defensive, legally justified under WTO norms, and essential for protecting national dignity and economic sovereignty.

However, China also maintained a public posture that left the door open for negotiation, using retaliatory tools not as ends in themselves but as leverage. This balancing act between confrontation and diplomacy characterized much of China's strategic posture during this period. Analysts have also pointed out that while China did not publicly escalate rhetoric to the extent the Trump administration did, it used state media to project strength and assure its domestic audience of the government's resolve. This strategic communication further cemented the idea of retaliation not as impulsive reaction, but as calculated resistance with clearly defined objectives.

Moreover, China's retaliatory strategy extended into financial markets and regulatory environments. US firms operating in China faced increased regulatory scrutiny, with delays in approvals and heightened compliance enforcement. Though these measures were more

subtle than tariffs, they served a similar function by signaling to Washington that economic engagement with China could no longer be taken for granted. By 2023, these strategies had succeeded in creating pressure without closing off the possibility of negotiation or future trade normalization.

#### Adaptive Economic Resilience: Domestic Innovation and Global Diversification:

While retaliation was the immediate response, China also pursued a longer-term strategy rooted in adaptation and resilience. Recognizing that dependence on the US economy created structural vulnerabilities, Chinese policymakers pushed for a transformation of the country's economic model. Central to this transformation was the "Dual Circulation Strategy," which aimed to build a self-sustaining domestic market while selectively integrating with global trade networks. This shift reflected a broader recognition that the era of stable economic interdependence with the US had likely passed.

China's economic diversification strategy involved cultivating new trade partners and strengthening regional integration. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in late 2020, became a crucial platform for redirecting trade flows. China also expanded its Belt and Road Initiative, investing heavily in infrastructure projects across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The data below illustrates how this pivot reshaped China's trade portfolio.

Table 2: China's Trade Diversification (2020–2024)

Region	Trade Value in 2020 (\$B)	Trade Value in 2024 (\$B)	Percentage Change (%)
ASEAN	684	925	35.2
EU	586	635	8.4
Africa	208	289	38.9
Latin America	148	212	43.2
USA	560	410	-26.8

This table shows a sharp decline in US-China trade, coupled with significant increases in trade with ASEAN, Africa, and Latin America. The diversification was not only reactive but also indicative of Beijing's proactive search for new markets and political alliances. Concurrently, China ramped up investments in technological self-reliance. Initiatives to develop domestic alternatives to American semiconductor technology gained momentum, particularly after sanctions against firms like Huawei and SMIC. The government increased subsidies for high-tech industries and encouraged public-private partnerships aimed at breakthrough innovations. China's approach to economic resilience also involved institutional reform. Policymakers streamlined the approval process for domestic startups, reduced bureaucratic red tape, and incentivized domestic consumption through e-commerce and digital finance innovation. This dual-front approach—external diversification and internal modernization—marked a significant shift from reactive crisis management to strategic transformation. The research also found that China engaged in substantial public narrative-building to support its adaptive strategy. State media emphasized themes of self-reliance, national rejuvenation, and the inevitability of technological independence. These narratives helped to generate broad public support for economic policies that may have otherwise faced resistance, such as restrictions on Western products and the push to replace them with domestic alternatives.

#### **Selective Cooperation Amid Hostility: Diplomacy, Pragmatism, and Global Governance:**

Despite the intensity of the trade war, China did not entirely abandon diplomatic engagement with the US. On the contrary, it pursued selective cooperation in areas that served long-term interests or projected global leadership. This cooperation often took place outside the trade domain, focusing instead on shared global challenges like climate change, public health, and financial stability. By doing so, China sought to isolate economic conflict from broader international cooperation and maintain its reputation as a responsible global actor. One of the clearest examples of this strategy was China's participation in climate negotiations alongside the US, even at times when tariff tensions peaked. In

forums like the G20 and United Nations Climate Change Conferences, Chinese officials reiterated commitments to carbon neutrality and global green financing, working with US counterparts on non-binding frameworks for environmental collaboration. These engagements helped to balance the combative tone of trade disputes with messages of global responsibility, aimed particularly at European and Global South audiences.

Another area where cooperation emerged was in pandemic-related efforts. While geopolitical blame games escalated early in the COVID-19 pandemic, both nations engaged through multilateral health institutions like the World Health Organization. Chinese officials facilitated vaccine diplomacy and technical aid to developing countries, even as they continued to confront trade restrictions from the US. This compartmentalization of hostility and collaboration marked a sophisticated diplomatic strategy rooted in long-term image management and soft power expansion.

The research also found that this selective cooperation had domestic utility for Chinese policymakers. It provided evidence of international recognition and goodwill, which was used to counter Western narratives of China as an aggressor. Diplomatically, it allowed China to sustain open lines of communication and gather intelligence on US policy shifts, especially through backchannel or Track II dialogues involving academics and former officials. These cooperative gestures were not acts of concession but calculated decisions aimed at preserving global stability and maximizing strategic flexibility. China showed a willingness to de-escalate where mutual interests aligned, particularly in crisis situations that affected global capital markets or supply chains. In doing so, it projected an image of leadership amid American unpredictability. This projection aligned with Beijing's broader effort to position itself as a pillar of multilateralism, even as it navigated the harshest trade relations in recent history.

#### **Conclusion:**

The research concluded that China's response to the renewed US trade war under President Trump's second term reflected a multifaceted and highly strategic posture. Far from being a uniform or reactionary stance, China's approach was marked by a layered combination of retaliation,

systemic adaptation, and selective cooperation. This demonstrated a calculated effort not only to defend immediate economic interests but also to reposition itself in the global economic order amid sustained geopolitical friction. China's retaliatory measures during this period were deliberate and politically attuned. By targeting key American exports with high political salience, such as soybeans and pork, Beijing sought to impose economic pain on Trump's core voter base while also signaling its capacity to match escalation with proportional force. These actions indicated that China had moved beyond reactive diplomacy to engage in assertive trade maneuvering, grounded in a clear understanding of US domestic vulnerabilities. Yet, these measures remained bounded and reversible, implying that China kept diplomatic pathways open, even at the height of confrontation. Adaptation emerged as a cornerstone of China's long-term strategy. Faced with the threat of prolonged economic decoupling from the United States, Chinese policymakers accelerated structural reforms to strengthen domestic demand, increase technological independence, and diversify global trade partnerships. The shift was not only economic but also ideological, as the state promoted narratives of resilience, innovation, and national rejuvenation. This recalibration demonstrated China's ability to leverage external pressure as a catalyst for internal transformation, thus turning a strategic vulnerability into an opportunity for realignment. At the same time, the research revealed that China did not fully sever cooperation with the US. Instead, it engaged in selective collaboration on transnational challenges, notably climate change, public health, and multilateral governance. These efforts allowed China to sustain its global image as a pragmatic and responsible power, even while contesting American dominance in trade and technology. The coexistence of conflict and cooperation in its diplomatic conduct suggested a nuanced strategy of compartmentalization, which served to reduce the risks of total confrontation while maximizing leverage in issue-specific domains. Overall, the research highlighted that China's response during Trump's second term represented a strategic evolution rather than an ad hoc reaction. It reflected lessons learned from the earlier phase of the trade war and incorporated more deliberate

use of economic, diplomatic, and ideological tools. China did not merely endure Trump's renewed offensive—it recalibrated its global engagement model and laid the groundwork for a post-American-centric trade system. The findings also implied that future US administrations would confront a more self-sufficient, diplomatically agile, and geopolitically confident China.

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