

# Trump's China Team: The Men and Women Who Will be Shaping the US-China Relationship

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*We are now less than a month away from **Donald Trump** being sworn in as the 47<sup>th</sup> President of the United States.*

*Trump's cabinet is starting to take shape, and while his picks still need to be confirmed in the Senate, **we can start to put together a picture of who will be making policy over the next four years.***

*So, let's take a look at the men and women who are most likely to have influence America's China policy in the new Trump administration.*

## [Secretary of State - Marco Rubio](#)



**Senator Marco Rubio** is set to replace Anthony Blinken as the United State's top diplomat. This is a worrying development for anyone who is a fan of peace since the Floridian Senator has been obsessed with regime change operations. In the Senate, his chief [foreign policy](#) obsession has been Latin America (so much so that during the first Trump presidency, he earned the moniker "Secretary of State for Latin America"). In particular, he has backed coups in [Venezuela](#) and championed tough (and [completely illegal](#)) sanctions on Cuba. However, over the years, he has also developed a side interest in China. He was the chief voice of support for the Hong Kong protests in the US Senate, even inviting key leaders of the protests to Capitol Hill. Of course, it goes without saying that Rubio's support for protests has not extended to the BLM or Palestine protests at home - but then he is hardly the first US Senator to only support protests when they further US geopolitical interests.

More recently, his interest has shifted to the Taiwan island. He is the author of the rather Orwellian named "[Taiwan Peace Through Strength Act](#)," which, if passed, would see the United States deepen its involvement with the separatist movement there - and directly contradict the official US government policy of respecting the One China Principle. The bill is very unlikely to pass, especially now that Rubio seems set to leave the Senate for the cabinet, but it does give us a window into his thinking. Rubio is willing to work with

whichever groups happen to be useful in increasing tensions with China. This [strategy of tension](#) is a well tested ploy used by the United States against its adversaries going all the way back to the Cold War and beyond. In the State Department, we should expect Rubio to use whatever levers he can find to further this aim.

## **US Trade Representative - Jamieson Greer**



After the Secretary of State, it will probably be the US Trade Representative who has the most impact in Washington on the shape of the China-US relationship. On the campaign trail and after, Donald Trump has made renegotiating America's trade relationship with other countries a key pillar of his agenda. As such, the US Trade Representative will be in an important position in the early days of the Trump presidency. For this role, Trump has tapped [Jamieson Greer](#), another China hawk.

Greer is almost certain to pass the nomination process - he has received the full support of Trump's first Trade Representative, Robert Lighthizer, and has experience in trade policy. During the first Trump presidency, he served as Lighthizer's chief of staff and was a key architect of the US-China trade war, which defined the relationship near the end of Trump's first term. Greer does not seem to have mellowed after four years in the private sector: he has recently praised Biden's new tariffs, for example.

Now, I don't think we should necessarily take Trump literally when he [proposes](#) 60% tariffs on Chinese goods (this is probably meant more as a starting position in negotiations.) However, we should take the intent (to renegotiate the China relationship) seriously. Greer is a man who knows his way around the US Trade brief, and who is fully on board with his boss' tough on China talk. However, Biden had already locked in Trump's trade war as US establishment policy when he refused to change tact at the start of his own presidency. Greer, in the role of Trade Representative, may tinker with individual policies, but his appointment really represents more of the same rather than a radical rupture in how the US approaches trade with China.

## **National Security Advisor - Mike Waltz**



On a list of China hawks, **Mike Waltz** is probably the most anti-China of the bunch: as a member of the House of Representatives back in 2022, he even called for a US boycott of the Winter Olympics in Beijing.

As National Security Advisor, he will have a key role inside the White House, advising Trump on defense and foreign policy issues.

He has strong links with the Neocon wing of the foreign policy establishment, having worked as a policy advisor to both Donald Rumsfeld and Robert Gates in the Defense Department and having served in Special Forces operations in Afghanistan and the Middle East. In other words, we can expect Waltz to be working with Rubio in trying to make US foreign policy as hawkish as possible.

### **US Ambassador to the United Nations - Elise Stefanik**



US **Congresswoman Elise Stefanik** is an odd choice for Ambassador to the UN since she appears to hate the institution. A staunch defender of Israel, she has repeatedly accused the UN of antisemitism and was a strong supporter of the Biden administration's decision to freeze funds to UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for Palestinian relief. At the UN, we should expect her to use her position to further fight Israel's corner.

She is also a fierce critic of China: in the House, she was a member of the House Republican China Taskforce from where she repeatedly denounced China and supported the Taskforce's anti-China legislation.

At the United Nations, she will, of course, have to work with China, one of the other five permanent Security Council members. If her career in the House is anything to go by, expect tension in the relationship.

### **US Ambassador to China - David Perdue**



The US Ambassador to China is unlikely to have a top role in the formulation of US policy to China, but, to be fair, Trump could have picked a worse candidate than former Georgia **Senator [David Perdue](#)**.

Prior to entering the Senate in 2015, Perdue was a top corporate executive with business dealings in China.

At different periods of his life, he lived in Singapore and China's Hong Kong SAR, and in the Senate, he served on the Foreign Relations Committee. Questions have been raised about the suitability of some of Trump's picks, but in picking Perdue, he has found someone who is fairly well qualified for the role of Ambassador.

### **[Wild Card - Elon Musk](#)**



The richest man in the world has been called the “buddy in chief” of President Trump. He spent over [\\$200 million](#) dollars in the 2024 Presidential campaign and was an important surrogate for Trump on the campaign trail. Since the election, he has also been seen hanging out with Trump in various locations and has been proposed as the co-head of the new Department of Government Efficiency ([DOGE](#)) – despite the name, it is not actually a government department. Musk has become a big personality in MAGA-world, but unlike many of the other figures in that world, he also has extensive ties with China. His EV company, Tesla, has a large factory in [Shanghai](#), which accounts for about 40% of Tesla's manufacturing capacity and is thought to have generated around \$54 billion for the company over the last 3 years. China is also one of the largest markets for Tesla outside the United States. Musk himself also has a good working relationship with the Chinese Prime Minister, Li Qiang, dating back to Li's time as Party Secretary of Shanghai, and Musk met with Chinese President Xi Jinping during Xi's visit to San Francisco in 2023.

All of this means that Musk could be a valuable bridge between the US government, the

American business community, and China. Certainly, Musk appears willing to take on the role, but it will all depend on whether Musk can drown out the loud voices of the China hawks that still crowd the corridors of power in Washington, DC.

## Conclusion

So far it looks like the Trump administration is going to be staffed mostly with China hawks. With the possible exception of Elon Musk (who isn't going to hold a government position anyway), Donald Trump is likely to be surrounded by people who favor competition and confrontation rather than cooperation. There are, however, reasons to be optimistic (or at least not too pessimistic). First, a confrontational stance with China is hardly a decisive break with the Biden administration: sadly, confrontation is just baked-in to US policy these days, and it is just something we are going to have to deal with regardless of the party in the White House. Second, China is the top priority of a few of the officials we have listed here. The US is facing an unprecedented crisis at home and abroad. With the US foreign policy establishment finding renewed focus on the Middle East and with Republicans eager to find a resolution to the Ukraine crisis, it is possible that Chinese policymakers might be able to find space for constructive dialogue with the new administration.

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