

# As Russia advances and Trump retreats, China's ascendancy is clear

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While the world's attention is drawn to US President Donald Trump's tug of war with China over trade tariffs and technological embargoes, a new development in the Ukraine war is catching the eye of geopolitical observers.

Pokrovsk, a city in Donetsk Oblast, has emerged as the [most critical flashpoint](#) in Russia's war on Ukraine. At the intersection of major supply highways and a key railway junction, it serves as a [vital logistics hub](#) for Ukrainian forces defending central and western Donetsk. Controlling it would give Russia a chokehold on the gateway to deeper Ukrainian defences in the region, sever their supporting lines and encircle large sections of their fighting units.

Accurate reports have become luxuries since the war broke out in February 2022, but from what has been made known, it appears at the time of writing that Pokrovsk is very likely to be Russia's pivotal gain. What seems to be Moscow's most sustained momentum since early 2024 is threatening to turn Pokrovsk into a "fortress belt" collapse point for the Ukrainians.

Capping the significance of the development, however, is its great power rivalry implication.

Trump [seems frustrated](#) by his lack of progress in achieving a ceasefire in Ukraine, as he had claimed he could and would. Stuck between Russian President Vladimir Putin's seemingly malleable but actually persistent demand to address the "root cause" of the war and a defiant Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, buttressed by Europe and refusing to cede territory for a truce, Trump has lately begun to sound resigned, saying "let them fight it out".

Placed in the context of great power relations between the United States, Russia and China, the situation can be viewed as analogous to the Korean war in the early 1950s. The key difference is that then, Chinese soldiers fought against the US-led UN army with the Soviet Union on the sidelines as China's sponsor ally, but now, it is China that plays at detachment while maintaining friendly terms with a Russia fighting a war on Ukrainian soil against US-led Nato forces.

Russian troops were gaining momentum in Pokrovsk even as Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in Busan, South Korea, reaching [an agreement](#) to pause their economic warfare for a year. It marks a turning point in the relationship between the world's sitting superpower and its rising rival – the particular significance of which is that China's ascendancy to the position of equality with the US is now clear for all to see.

Three major categories of concessions by the US substantiate that conviction: a [reduction](#) in fentanyl-related tariffs and an extension of the pause on higher “reciprocal” tariffs; a [suspension](#) of port fees to be imposed on Chinese ships; and the [delay](#) of the latest US export controls that would deny Chinese companies access to American technology. Trump claimed a win for American farmers and companies; the White House said China [agreed to resume](#) buying US soybeans and [put on hold](#) its new rare earths export control regime.

“When President Xi of China walked out of his meeting with President Trump in South Korea yesterday, he projected the confidence of a man who'd played his hand well,” observed a New York Times column on the Busan summit. It added: “Xi seemed to grasp what Trump needed: a deal that he could sell as a victory at home.”

For his part, Trump left the summit sounding euphoric, claiming his “G2” meeting with Xi was “a great one”. Pete Hegseth, his secretary of war, reinforced the message, saying: “As President Trump said, his historic ‘G2 meeting’ set the tone for everlasting peace and success for the US and China.”

Doesn't all this ring the bell? Yes, detente, a Nixonian Cold War strategy masterminded by the late Henry Kissinger, former US national security adviser and secretary of state, at a time when the Chinese had joined the North Vietnamese in all but name in their war against the Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the Soviet Union standing behind them – although the Sino-Soviet rupture later widened to the extent of breaking up for a period.

Hence detente, whereby America, retreating from Vietnam and licking its wounds, finessed Beijing's estrangement from Moscow and worked with the latter for a less tense bilateral relationship while the overall rivalling posture remained.

It worked, according to Niall Ferguson, a renowned historian who co-coined the term [“Chimerica”](#) and a Kissinger biographer designated by Kissinger himself. He lauded US president Richard Nixon and Kissinger for the detente, which he believed had helped the nation, afflicted by the Vietnam war syndrome, to recover and stage a comeback, eventually dismembering the Soviet Union and winning the Cold War in less than two decades.

Events in Busan and Pokrovsk, however, show that, be it a Trumpian G2 or detente, this time, it is Beijing which is in the position that Nixonian America occupied:

bargaining with Washington as between equals with Russia on its side and, as Ferguson seems to be suggesting, fighting a robust proxy war for it on the Ukrainian battlefield.

This is not to say Beijing and Moscow have officially forged an axis between them with Russia acting as China's proxy – far from it, given the Russians' obsession with their European identity and their Christian extraction in the form of Eastern Orthodoxy.

It's just that, amid the obscurity of fluid geopolitical developments, China is showing an unmistakable tendency of coming out on top.

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