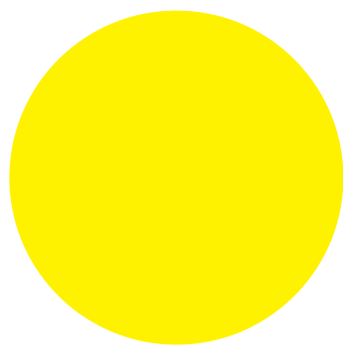


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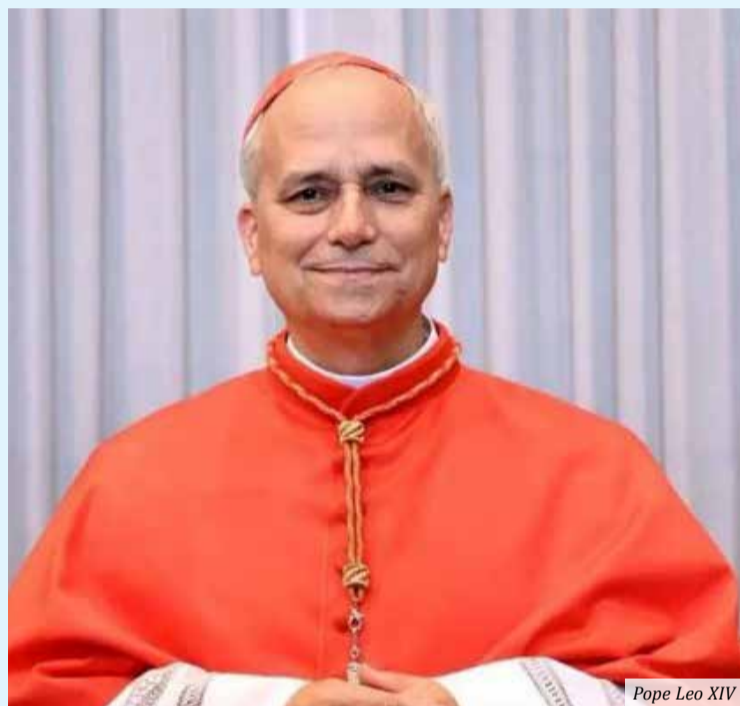
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Trump's China trip yielded no economic gain

By Majid Shakeri
Economic analyst

OPINION

US President Donald Trump's relationship with China remains shaped, in nearly every dimension, by Washington's failed tariff war against Beijing last year. Although the tariffs were initially rolled out against much of the world, China was always the main target, largely because it holds the largest trade surplus with the United States and much of the global economy.

Beijing's response, particularly its use of rare earth minerals as leverage, alongside the US Supreme Court's questioning of the legal basis for the tariff campaign, handed Washington a major setback. The result is that the US now appears compelled, at least for the next four or five years, to dial back its direct confronta-

tional tone toward China while it works to reduce its dependence on rare earth supplies.

That does not mean pressure has disappeared. Washington continues to push through alternative channels. But publicly, the United States can no longer apply the kind of overt pressure it used during Trump's first term or under former president Joe Biden.

For China, the issue extends well beyond trade. Beijing increasingly views any naval blockade targeting Iran as part of a broader American effort to contain China itself. Chinese officials see such moves through the lens of growing US naval pressure on China's own strategic and commercial interests. As a result, Chinese policymakers are now reviewing blockade scenarios not only in relation to Iran, but across a much wider geography stretching from the Sea of Oman to the Taiwan Strait.

Washington announced in 2019 that it would gradually deploy an independent fleet to operate in the Indian Ocean. Since then, Chinese strategists have increasingly framed the concept of blockade as a direct challenge to China rather than simply a pressure tactic aimed at Tehran.

At the same time, worsening global climate conditions have pushed Beijing to treat energy policy as a security issue, not merely an economic one. China is trying, as much as possible, to avoid disruptions to the structure and balance of its energy supply. That concern became even more pronounced after the fall of Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela in early January, which reinforced the perception in Beijing that Washington is prepared to use control over oil flows as a geopolitical weapon against China.

In Iran, there has been an assumption that Beijing would refuse to cooperate

with any blockade effort. Now recent developments have made clear that the issue of the Strait of Hormuz is tied first and foremost to ending the American blockade itself. As long as that pressure remains in place, Iran has little reason to reopen the strait or facilitate the movement of goods and energy shipments through it.

From Iran's perspective, it was the United States that turned the strait into a conflict zone in the first place by making it unsafe. That, in turn, strengthened Iran's belief that as long as the US maintains its pressure campaign, the Islamic Republic must preserve security control over the broader strategic corridor, now understood to stretch from southern Iraq to the western shores of the United Arab Emirates. China is fully aware of this calculation.

That is precisely why Beijing continues to insist that the region should not be

militarized. In China's view, the United States should not use the strait as a route for military deployments, nor should it once again expand its bases in the southern Persian Gulf into large-scale international military hubs equipped with long-range radar systems.

Regional American bases have become instruments for destabilizing the Persian Gulf. Iran, China, Russia and several other countries all oppose the militarization of the region.

Although Washington postponed Trump's trip to China in hopes of arriving with stronger leverage on the Iran issue and presenting the visit as a diplomatic step forward, the United States failed to secure any major breakthrough on its core objective. Strategically, the meeting bears little resemblance to the image American officials envisioned four or six months ago, and the gains Washington hoped to achieve have not materialized.

