

China and the Power of One

February 2026

China's political direction since Donald Trump first entered the White House has often been described as reactive; a series of responses to tariffs, technology controls and diplomatic pressure. In reality, Beijing's trajectory has been shaped less by Washington's personalities than by a deeper conclusion reached within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), that the era of predictable external constraints is over, and that political coherence at home matters more than reassurance abroad.



Trump's rise, and later return to political prominence, reinforced a belief already taking hold in Beijing by the late 2010s, that strategic competition with the US is structural, not cyclical. Economic interdependence, once assumed to be a stabiliser, was reinterpreted as a vulnerability. The lesson drawn was not confrontation, but consolidation.

Anti-corruption as a tool of system design

At the centre of that consolidation stands Xi Jinping. His anti-corruption campaign, now more than a decade old, is frequently framed as an effort to cleanse the Party. Its deeper function has been architectural. By binding Party discipline directly to state administration, the campaign has reshaped elite incentives and compressed informal power upward. Advancement depends less on regional performance or factional alignment than on political reliability. The effect has been to reduce visible corruption while narrowing the scope for autonomous decision-making across the system.

This has produced a form of governance that prizes unity and predictability over experimentation. Once a hallmark of China's reform era, local initiative has been replaced by vertical alignment.

Corruption has not disappeared so much as it has been reorganised: less transactional, more centralised and inseparable from loyalty enforcement. The result is a system built around what might be called the “power of one”, even as collective institutions formally remain in place.

Multipolarity and the case for centralisation

This internal logic has been reinforced by a changing global environment. As the international system drifts toward a looser multipolar configuration marked by competition without a single rule-setter, Beijing has treated internal control as a strategic asset. Economic policy, industrial planning, security governance, and ideological discipline are now viewed as interdependent. Fragmentation at home is seen as risk abroad.

Europe and the politics of withdrawal

China’s recent posture toward Europe reflects this shift. Relations with the EU have not collapsed, but the substance has reduced dramatically. Political dialogue continues, yet expectations have been deliberately shrunk. Chinese diplomatic language has moved away from partnership narratives toward conditional engagement, emphasising sovereignty and non-interference. This reflects frustration with the EU’s increasing tendency to align economic policy with security logic, particularly in technology and regulation.

What stands out is not escalation but disengagement. Beijing appears to have concluded that persuasion has diminishing returns. Engagement remains available, but it is increasingly procedural, transactional and routed through multilateral frameworks rather than sustained political investment.

The UK: engagement without endorsement

The UK illustrates this pattern even more clearly. While trade and consular channels remain open, political trust has not been restored. Diplomatic interactions are carefully crafted and notably devoid of symbolic reassurance. For those familiar with Chinese signalling, the absence of affirmative language is itself a message: London is no longer treated as a strategic interlocutor with independent agency, but as a constrained actor whose room for manoeuvre is limited.

This external recalibration mirrors China’s internal political design. Just as Xi has reduced reliance on diffuse elite consensus at home, Beijing has reduced reliance on normative alignment abroad. Ambiguity and distance are preferred to vulnerability.

Succession, ambiguity and controlled uncertainty

That same logic applies to succession. Speculation surrounding Xi Jinping's health has drawn attention to a question the system has deliberately kept opaque. The removal of term limits and the erosion of collective leadership norms have left China without a visible transition pathway. While there are persistent rumours that Xi has a preferred successor in mind, no designation has been made.

This appears intentional. Naming an heir prematurely would expose that individual to pressure from residual elite networks within the Party, state, and security apparatus - a loose Chinese analogue to a praetorian guard whose influence rests on access rather than formal authority. By withholding succession signals, Xi prevents any future leader from consolidating power too early. Ambiguity functions as a stabilising tool.

But it is not without risk. While uncertainty suppresses factional competition in the short term, it also deprives the system of a rehearsed transition mechanism. When leadership change eventually comes, it may do so under compressed timelines and heightened tension, with stability depending more on elite restraint than institutional procedure.

Conclusion

China today is not withdrawing from the world, nor is it seeking confrontation with the EU or UK. It is recalibrating expectations. Engagement is no longer framed as partnership, but as alignment of interests under defined conditions. The "power of one" has delivered control and coherence, but at the cost of redundancy.

Whether that trade-off proves sustainable will shape not only China's future, but the tone of its relations with the rest of the world.

KCS Group International – Strategic Intelligence & Corporate Security

KCS Group International is a leading provider of security and intelligence services, operating in some of the world's most difficult environments on complex cases of fraud, theft, corruption or market dynamics. We gather intelligence through the discreet use of human sources to level the playing field and help our clients identify and deal with any risks, weaknesses and threats which could impact on their business, financially or reputationally.

Our key areas of expertise include: Corporate Intelligence Services – New market or sector entry research – Know your customer screening.

In addition, we offer a unique service in the areas of Cyber Security and Cyber Risk. This covers penetration testing, vulnerability assessments, intelligence gathering and cyber security audits – providing unparalleled analysis, contingency planning and implementation.

To find out more or to arrange a meeting to discuss your business needs, please email the team at info@kcsgroup.com or call (00 44) 20 7245 1191 – www.kcsgroup.com