

Print Edition

Monday 21 September 2026

EDITION NO. 60 • 2 PIECES • 10 PAGES

IN THIS EDITION

1. How we can beat China • Noahpinion 1
 2. The republican Republican: thoughts on Donald Trump's wish for a United Ireland • Process & Product, with Gavan Reilly 5
-

How we can beat China

BY NOAH SMITH • NOAHPINION • 20 SEPTEMBER 2026



Art by GPT-6, original by Zhang Zeduan

In 1946, George Kennan, who was acting as the head of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, wrote a message to the Secretary of State, known as the “Long Telegram”. In the Long Telegram, Kennan laid out a theory of how Soviet power could be defeated. He argued that Soviet leaders would always be hostile to the U.S., but that they were also cautious — they wouldn’t recklessly start a world war like Germany had. He also argued that the Soviet system was weak and unstable, and that given enough time, it would collapse from its own internal contradictions. This became known as the doctrine of “containment”, and it ended up being exactly the strategy that the

U.S. used to win the Cold War. It took 45 years for the strategy to work and the USSR to fall.

I am certainly no George Kennan. I've never lived in China, I haven't been there in many years, I don't speak Chinese, and I certainly don't talk to any leaders there. I'm also not a career diplomat or a professional geopolitics guy of any kind. So although I'm going to write a blog post with the same general goal as Kennan's Long Telegram, I don't want to suggest that it's anywhere near as authoritative or insightful.

But I'm still going to write a post about "how to beat China", because I think it's useful to think through these sorts of big strategic questions. This post is also an important follow-up to a series of posts I wrote about geopolitics during the Biden years, about U.S.-China competition:

(There were more, but I figure your appetite for clicking through old posts is limited.)

The basic premise of those posts was that the competition between a China-led New Axis and the U.S. and our old allies — Europe, Japan and Korea, hopefully India, etc. — would define the upcoming era of geopolitics. And my conclusion was that we should use an updated version of the basic strategy we used against the USSR in Cold War 1. I recommended that we should build up economic power within our bloc of allies, establish military deterrence, and wait for China's internal contradictions to do the heavy lifting of removing the threat.

That strategy was always going to be harder than it was in Cold War 1, because China A) is a lot bigger than the USSR, B) has a better economic model, and C) is a lot more globally integrated. The strategy I recommended was much tighter economic cooperation between the U.S. and a maximally large set of allies, to build up a bloc capable of overmatching even the mighty Chinese manufacturing juggernaut. This is the approach that's being promoted by experts like Rush Doshi and Kurt Campbell. If you're interested in reading about how that approach would work, and why it would be helpful, I recommend Doshi's interview with ChinaTalk:



ChinaTalkAllied Scale: Net Assessment with Rush DoshiHow should America maximize its odds when competing with China? Can Trump's approach to alliances succeed in strengthening deterrence? And what will it take for China to diplomatically capitalize...Read morea year ago · 48 likes · 17 comments · Jordan Schneider and Lily Ottinger

Anyway, I still think building up an anti-China economic juggernaut would be a great thing to do, and I still think the U.S. would benefit from closer economic integration with its friends and allies. But I think the election of Trump shows why this strategy probably isn't going to work. The United States is simply too internally divided to engage in the sort of far-seeing, purposeful, smart kind of international competition that we pursued so effectively in the 20th century. Americans care more about fighting other Americans than about fighting the Chinese, and that state of affairs will persist for a while.

Donald Trump's presidency is an outgrowth of America's internal divisions; he cares much more about fighting his own internal enemies than about prosecuting international rivalries. He has willfully degraded or torn up America's key alliances, especially with Europe, and created enmity where friendship once reigned. He has flagrantly trampled on every principle of human rights, mutually beneficial economic cooperation, democracy, and international non-aggression that the post-WW2 U.S.-led international order fought to uphold. He has, in short, made it impossible to prosecute the sort of Cold War 2 strategy that I spent the Biden years advocating.

This doesn't mean America's alliance system is necessarily dead forever. As Doshi and Campbell pointed out in a recent article, the old alliances could be reconstituted, if America credibly overcame its internal divisions and returned to being the mostly unified, stable, reliable great power that it was last century. But overcoming those divisions is going to take decades at the very least, and that's exactly the window of time during which China will be at its peak of relative power.

So I think we've basically missed the chance to use that strategy effectively, and I've recalibrated my thinking. This post is meant to explain my recalibration. I do think there's a path to defeating Chinese power, but it doesn't look like what I previously had in mind.

Who is “we”, what does it mean to “beat” China, and why should we even care?

Before getting to the question of how to beat China, we need to answer the questions of *who* and *why* should do this “beating”. In 2024 the answer was obvious — the U.S. and its erstwhile allies still represented a far more liberal power than China and its allies, so ensuring that the former was more powerful than the latter would further the cause of global liberalism. China threw minorities in concentration camps, threatened its neighbors with invasion and war, supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and repressed free expression all over the world. That was — and is — behavior worth resisting.

But the election of Trump changes that calculus. Trump threatens other countries with invasion, and sometimes even attacks them if he thinks they're weak enough. He can't throw minorities in camps just for being minorities yet, but he's building a sort of gulag archipelago under the fig leaf of immigrant detention. His foreign policy is increasingly based on “civilizational” concerns instead of human rights or democracy.

Trump has thus forfeited America's claim to moral superiority over China. It's true that Trump and his ragtag movement are far less competent than the Chinese Communist Party, but that doesn't mean that increasing American power will lead to a more liberal world. At this point, it probably won't. And of course Democrats will try to undo some of Trump's geopolitical shifts, but if past experience is any guide, they will have only marginal success. Moreover, the GOP is not going to revert back to Reaganism after Trump leaves office; they will keep fighting for their illiberal visions both at home and abroad for a long time to come.

None of that means, however, that liberalism as an idea is dead. Europe, Japan, and many other countries that were on America's side in the Cold War still uphold the basic ideas of democracy and human rights, as do many developing nations. The average person living in Tokyo or Paris or Bangalore still enjoys far more personal freedom and dignity than does the average person in Shenzhen or Shanghai.

And even leaving aside the relative merits of different social and governmental systems, there are plenty of people in plenty of countries who simply don't deserve to be trampled on by the bootheel of the CCP. Japanese people, Indians, Filipinos, Koreans, and so on deserve to be able to determine their own destiny without being subject to the whims of the powerful men in Beijing. And Ukrainians, Estonians, Poles, etc. deserve to be free from the Russian tyranny that China quietly backs.

So when I say "how we can beat China", what I actually mean is how we can *keep China from dominating other countries*. This doesn't mean we should try to make China collapse, or impoverish the Chinese people, etc. Instead, it just means how smaller nations — and nations who value human rights and democracy — can resist Chinese power.

And at some point, if the U.S. ever does manage to tamp down its internal divisions and return to being a liberal power, it will still mean the same thing.

Many hegemons eventually beat themselves

CONTINUES ONLINE · <https://www.noahpinion.blog/p/how-we-can-beat-china>

The republican Republican: thoughts on Donald Trump's wish for a United Ireland

BY GAVAN REILLY · PROCESS & PRODUCT, WITH GAVAN REILLY · 13 SEPTEMBER 2026



THE PRESIDENT OF the United States likes this place. We knew that already. It's partly his land holdings in Clare; it's partly a semi-Celtic affinity, given his Scottish mother; it's partly that his kids were raised by a nanny from Belturbet. But he's always been fond of the place and shown some interest in its affairs, even showing up at a Friends of Sinn Féin dinner in 1995, mid-IRA ceasefire, though this *may* have been the politically agnostic act of a New York socialite out for a schmooze two blocks over from Trump Tower.

THERE ARE TWO things you become acutely aware of when you've made a few trips to the United States for St Patrick's Day events, whether in Washington or beyond.

The first is that the United States is still emotionally invested in the peace of Northern Ireland. St Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland the island, not Ireland the jurisdiction, and the civic and political events – aside from the high-profile setpieces at the White House – are 32-county affairs. Ministers from Stormont are just as likely to be making visits and have high-level engagements as those of Dublin. The UK's Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is an annual visitor, and the British Embassy in

Washington hosts an annual breakfast on March 17 for those who aren't on the elite invite list for the counterpart breakfast hosted at the home of the Vice President and attended by the Taoiseach.

Institutional deep-state-America clings to all this because it makes America feel good about itself. The anniversary of 9/11 is a timely reminder that this century has not exactly been a golden age of American action overseas. Afghanistan and Iraq are not exactly textbook examples of glistening intervention. Curating peace on this island and political institutions with broad public support is Washington's last great example of (pseudo-)nation building.

This might be inferred as a way of saying America doesn't want to upset the apple cart. Perhaps it is: having midwived the peace, is a border poll and unity merely the outworking of the Good Friday Agreement? Or, if Trump's urgency is premature, does America really want to open those wounds again?

The second thing you realise is that the version of Irishness exhibited by those marching in parades on the boulevards and avenues of the major U.S. cities is to some extent trapped in time. The major constituent groups of the biggest parades are groups like the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Council of Gaelic Societies, whose values are derived from previous generations of emigrants rather than those who relocate today with their more modern paradigms – and who therefore become time capsules, institutionally inured from social transformations back in the old country. Only from 2014 were LGBTQ+ groups allowed to participate in New York's parade. That's chiefly organised by the Ancient Order of Hibernians, a Catholics-only club who voted against allowing women members as recently as 2022. Philadelphia's parade – another embodiment of the John Hinde, *Flight of the Doves* Ireland – is headed not only by an Irish tricolour but also, jointly, by the flag of the Holy See. Many of the flags behind them are pointedly green-white-and-gold, rather than orange.

This is relevant because the sentimental version of the auld sod which lives on in these groups is very much a four-green-fields unpartitioned version. So deep are America's Irish roots (as distinct to its Ulster-Scots roots) that the biggest and most influential historical groups predate partition itself. The Constitution of Ireland, amended by the people of the Republic in 1998, no longer lays a territorial claim to the six northeastern counties. In the hearts and minds of the movements that shape America's major understanding of Ireland – and the hereditary mood of those whose diluted Irishness they scaffolded – they were never let go in the first place.



WE NOW AT LEAST KNOW that Donald Trump wasn't just ad libbing when he took the pointed question from PA's David Young in the dim wood-panelled room of Farmleigh House on Saturday morning. The President was asked about the tenor of his earlier encounter with his counterpart head of state, President Catherine Connolly – and whether she had broached the topic of America's role in the Middle East.

"We discussed a lot of things quickly. We weren't there very long. But it was a very nice meeting, a very respectful meeting. We did discuss Northern Ireland – I always find it to be very interesting, as we did [discuss it] earlier" – he said, turning briefly towards the Taoiseach who murmured agreement. "I find it to be a very interesting discussion because we know people from Northern Ireland, and we know people of Ireland, and they sometimes say 'Hey, when are you guys getting together?', right?"

And then, the kicker. Trump added: "We do ask that question every time." The Taoieach, sitting back and smiling, ventured: "You do. You're consistent in that regard."

That was the opening which warranted the follow-up question that sent shock waves around the world. The President – in remarks which went largely unreported, given the clarity of what he'd say next – had openly admitted to asking Catherine Connolly about a United Ireland... and the Taoiseach had confirmed he often inquired about it.



From this vantage point I was able to see closely how long the faces of the Irish delegation became, as the pre-meeting questions kept going and going...

THIS BRINGS TO MIND my own takeaway experience of the last time I was in Washington. It was the St Patrick's Day visit of 2025, and Trump was two months into his second term. (I'd also covered Enda Kenny's trip in 2017, two months into his first term, when the host was visibly unsure exactly how to conduct meetings with international counterparts. No such hesitancy for the second term.)

Since the start of Trump's first term, the usual format of an Oval Office 'pool spray' with the President and Taoiseach is that the two leaders will make opening remarks to each other – and possibly entertain a few minutes of yelled questions from the reporters in the room – before hoofing everybody out to conduct the rest of the meeting in private. 2025 was clearly a departure: the schedule had allowed 60 minutes for the two men to sit in the Oval, but the 'opening' questions ran for 51 minutes. That put the Taoiseach in a tricky position – he couldn't have expected Trump to entertain questions for quite so long, and likely held back on some topics thinking he'd have a chance to be more frank after the reporters had left. As it turned out, the press conference effectively was the meeting and there was scant time left for any business afterward.

But what was mentioned, in that short time – and again as Martin joined Trump in 'The Beast' for their subsequent drive to lunch at the Capitol – was Northern Ireland. Specifically, the President wondered if the Good Friday model of power-sharing could be transposed into the Middle East and be used as a template for some sort of solution in Gaza.

Bear in mind, this is March 2025. Israel's campaign in Gaza is almost 18 months old, and the reinstalled Trump is visibly modelling himself as 'the Peace President' in a barely veiled campaign to secure himself a Nobel Prize – the one bauble Barack Obama had gained that Trump had not yet secured for himself. It would not be until January 2026 that Trump told Norway's prime minister his failure to win the prize (which the Norwégi-

an government does not award!) meant he was no longer bound “to think purely of Peace”.

WAS TRUMP’S INPUT designed simply to piss off Andy Burnham? Perhaps. His government’s move to issue sanctions against illegal settlers in the West Bank, and to pursue a ban on importing goods from those stolen territories, might well have drawn the ire of the White House. But to be seen to ‘reward’ Ireland with extra territory doesn’t stack up: Ireland has already taken precisely the same measures.

Was it to curry electoral favour with the increasingly conservative Irish voter base in the States? That’s plausible. Making an international trip within two months of enormously important midterms is a luxury few Presidents would undertake – especially given the real motive of this trip is for Trump to further publicise the credentials of the golf course he owns. (He also said yesterday, not really joking, that he thinks the Ryder Cup should be held in Turnberry, the course in Scotland he visited in summer 2025.) Although the power of the Irish lobby is not what it was, nailing his colours to the mast on ‘the Irish question’ may be no harm in rounding up more votes for his House and Senate congressional candidates – especially given he spent the midweek in Dallas, at an unusual mid-term Republican National Convention, explicitly asking voters to imagine he himself was on the ballot.

Or... given his seeming longstanding fixation with the North as a political project, it might just be possible that Trump has a personal-cum-professional interest in its next iteration.



This Substack has fallen into some abeyance in the last few months as I’ve taken up a new role as a columnist for TheJournalie, filing weekly on the theme of Politics by Numbers. This week’s one is fairly personal, as the parent of a non-verbal child.

And while I'm here: *The Secret Life of Leinster House* – my 2025 Irish Times bestseller about the inner lives of politicians and those around them – is out in paperback in a couple of weeks and you can preorder it now.