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Issue Brief

From American Primacy to Negotiated Bipolarity: The Strategic Meaning of the Trump-Xi Summit

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S*ummary*

The Trump–Xi summit in Beijing reflected China's attempt to move the international system from American primacy towards a form of negotiated bipolarity. Xi Jinping approached the summit with consolidated domestic authority and growing strategic confidence, while Trump was weakened by domestic political pressures and ongoing geopolitical crises.

Introduction

The highly anticipated and strategically consequential state visit of US President Donald Trump to Beijing concluded on 15 May 2026. The event laid bare the complexity of contemporary geopolitics and the status of the “most important” bilateral relationship. At its core, the visit was not merely about trade, Taiwan, or crisis management. It was about status, recognition, and the future architecture of international order. China approached the summit not as a rising power seeking accommodation within an American-led system, but increasingly as a civilisational state demanding recognition as a co-equal centre of global power. The visit, therefore, exposed a deeper transition underway in international politics: the gradual movement from American primacy towards a form of negotiated bipolarity.

Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping entered the summit under very different political and strategic circumstances. Xi Jinping arrived having consolidated authority to a degree unseen in decades. Following the removal of General Zhang Youxia and the broader restructuring within the PLA, Xi further centralised decision-making, reduced opposition from the major elite, and tightened control over the military-security apparatus. While there is a slowdown in economic growth, from China’s perspective, slower growth is acceptable in pursuit of greater technological self-reliance, regime security, and strategic resilience. The 15th Five-Year Plan, mentioned several times during the summit, reflected this broader shift towards long-term techno-industrial independence.

Trump, by contrast, arrived in Beijing under mounting domestic and geopolitical strain. Facing declining¹ approval ratings, rising inflation, and upcoming midterm elections, all amid a widening conflict with Iran, the US president entered negotiations from a comparatively weaker political position. This asymmetry shaped the broader diplomatic environment: Beijing appeared more strategically patient, while Washington appeared more eager for immediate deliverables.

Diplomacy as Theatre: Symbolism, Hierarchy and Civilisational Messaging

From the outset, the summit demonstrated China’s sophisticated understanding of symbolism as an instrument of statecraft. While the American observers often interpret ceremonial diplomacy as a secondary spectacle, Beijing treats optics, choreography and political imagery as strategic messaging. Chinese political culture remains deeply hierarchical and historically conscious; protocol, therefore, carries

¹ [“Donald Trump Approval Tracker”](#), *The Economist*.

geopolitical meaning. The curated imagery of the military honours, access to Zhongnanhai, banquet arrangements, walking order, camera positioning, and the meetings at the Great Hall of the People and the Temple of Heaven were carefully designed to communicate not submission to the United States, but parity with it.

In particular, Xi telling Trump about 1000-year-old trees,² while at the centre of Chinese power, after visiting the 600-year-old Temple of Heaven and referencing the 250th anniversary of America's birth, was laden with symbolism. China was implicitly contrasting its civilisational continuity with America's relative historical youth. Beijing was not merely hosting an American president; it was situating the US within a broader historical narrative in which China portrayed itself as an enduring civilisational power returning to its central position in world affairs. The curated show was also backed by a uniform online chorus of ‘warm welcome’ messages across Chinese social media, reflecting the Party-state's ability to merge public sentiment, nationalism and diplomatic spectacle into a single narrative environment.³

To observers, the US–China summit was more pageantry than policy as no concrete deals or agreements were signed during the trip. However, China achieved all it could, policy-wise. The Chinese state and social media dubbed Trump's online tone as ‘restrained’.⁴ On Weibo, many users saw the summit as China acting from strength, with Xi appearing calm and dominant and Trump unusually restrained. The calmer Trump was interpreted as “Beijing successfully controlling the diplomatic environment”.⁵

Strategic Stability and Managed Bipolarity

Most importantly, the summit marked a full-circle moment in diplomacy for a “risen” China, no longer seeking accommodation from the US, but engaging its principal competitor from a position of accumulated power and strategic confidence. China places exceptional importance on narrative control, symbolic politics and perception management as instruments of statecraft. During the summit, Xi seized the opportunity to set the narrative for bilateral relations and, in doing so, also charted the course for global geopolitics.

² Khushboo Razdan, “[Xi-Trump Talks Live: Leaders Set to Meet Again Over Tea and Working Lunch](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 13 May 2026.

³ Resham, “[Xi-Trump Summit and How China's Media Played It](#)”, *StratNewsGlobal*, 14 May 2026.

⁴ Meredith Chen, “[Rapid-fire to Restrained: China State Visit Reveals Changed Trump Social Media](#)”, *South China Morning Post*, 14 May 2026.

⁵ Michelle Ye Hee Lee, Huiyee Chiew and Lyric Li, “[Xi, in Summit Victory, Projected Stability and Conceded Nothing to Trump](#)”, *The Washington Post*, 17 May 2026.

Xi set out a new vision for the relationship—“constructive strategic stability”⁶ setting the terms of engagement or providing “strategic guidance for the next three years and beyond”. Xi outlined four dimensions of this framework:⁷

- a. “Positive stability with cooperation as mainstay”, in other words, China wants reasonable cooperation while keeping in mind it is, in fact, a competitive relationship.
- b. “Healthy stability with competition within proper limits”, meaning limited or controlled competition which is favourable and advantageous to China.
- c. “Constant stability with manageable differences”, in other words, exercising restraint within an overall framework of competition.
- d. “Lasting stability with expectable peace” acknowledges long-term competition, which is controlled and manageable to allow lasting peace.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called it “a new starting point”⁸, displaying newfound confidence as an equal power. Taken together, these formulations amount to a Chinese framework for managed bipolarity: long-term strategic competition without uncontrolled escalation or direct military confrontation. Unlike earlier Chinese rhetoric, which avoided openly characterising the relationship as a systemic rivalry, Beijing now appears increasingly comfortable acknowledging competition. China appears to accept that the problems in this relationship are structural rather than temporary, without seeking full-scale conflict or containment. Therefore, from a Chinese vantage point, “strategic stability” is not just for crisis management but an attempt to redefine the rules of great-power competition.

Xi posed a very revealing question to Trump: “Can China and the United States overcome the Thucydides Trap and create a new paradigm of major-country relations?”⁹ The subtext—only peers fall into Thucydides trap. With this line, Xi proclaimed the two countries to be equal great powers with the duty of managing the international order. But Xi posing the question also shifted the onus of preventing a catastrophic confrontation during a period of power transition onto the US. For Beijing, parity with Washington is not merely strategic but civilisational. Recognition

⁶ [“Building a ‘Constructive China-U.S. Strategic Stability Relationship’ is the Most Important Political Consensus”](#), *People’s Daily*, 16 May 2026.

⁷ [“President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with U.S. President Donald Trump”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 14 May 2026.

⁸ [“Briefing by Foreign Minister Wang Yi on China-U.S. Summit and Common Understandings”](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 15 May 2026.

⁹ [“President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with U.S. President Donald Trump”](#), no. 7.

as an equal power validates the Communist Party of China’s broader narrative of national rejuvenation after the ‘Century of Humiliation’. Symbolic equality, therefore, carries domestic legitimacy value, not just diplomatic value.

Taiwan emerged as the clearest example of how Beijing now seeks to operationalise this framework of strategic parity. The official report reads as follows.

Xi stressed that the Taiwan question is the most important issue in China-U.S. relations. If it is handled properly, the bilateral relationship will enjoy overall stability. Otherwise, the two countries will clash and even come into conflict, putting the entire relationship in great jeopardy.¹⁰

Xi actually warned the US that it must recognise the limits of its Indo-Pacific posture and avoid crossing Beijing’s red lines.

The timing and tone of Xi’s intervention were notable. Throughout the summit, Beijing avoided overt confrontation and maintained highly cordial symbolism. Xi’s use of the Taiwan issue to demonstrate confidence and strategic resolve also displayed a weakened US commitment towards Taiwan. This was viewed as strategically favourable, symbolic of China coming from a position of strength.

The US omitted Taiwan entirely from its official readout¹¹ and fact sheet.¹² Still, during an interview after the summit, when asked about the US\$ 14 billion arms package to Taiwan, Trump replied, “I’m holding that in abeyance, and it depends on China. It’s a very good negotiating chip for us.”¹³ The comments introduced uncertainty regarding the credibility of US regional commitments. The perception of declining US willingness to deter aggression could make the Taiwan Strait significantly more dangerous in the near future. In deterrence theory, ambiguity can prevent escalation, but excessive ambiguity can also invite miscalculation if adversaries perceive a decline in resolve.

Equally significant was Trump’s invocation of “G2”¹⁴ language during subsequent interviews, reinforcing Beijing’s longstanding desire to frame the bilateral relationship as one between two co-managing superpowers rather than between a

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ [“From the Bilateral Meeting in Beijing: President Trump Had a Good Meeting with President Xi of China”](#), The White House (@WhiteHouse) on X, 14 May 2026.

¹² [“Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic Deals with China, Delivering for American Workers, Farmers, and Industry”](#), The White House, 17 May 2026.

¹³ Madison Colombo, [“Trump Warns Taiwan Not to Expect Blank Check from US Military After Intense Xi Summit”](#), *Fox News*, 15 May 2026.

¹⁴ Wang Xiangwei, [“Commentary: Few Deals from Trump-Xi Summit, But It’s the Underlying Shift that Matters”](#), *Channel News Asia*, 19 May 2026.

hegemon and challenger. On Iran, the two sides had better convergence with the calls for a ceasefire, opposition to the militarisation of the Strait and a toll charge for its use. Both countries agreed that Iran can never have a nuclear weapon.¹⁵ The war has impacted China as well, with its enormous energy needs; therefore, a ceasefire is only logical. However, China is unlikely to abandon Iran, not only for its resources but for its geopolitical importance.

On trade and investment, Xi noted, “where disagreements and frictions exist, equal-footed consultation is the only right choice”.¹⁶ The US cleared the sale of H200 chips to 10 Chinese firms, pending Chinese regulatory approval. However, given Beijing’s growing emphasis on technological self-reliance, China may delay or limit the deal. China has confirmed the purchase of 200 Boeing jets from the US,¹⁷ which also suggests that the development and large-scale deployment of the domestically produced COMAC C919 may still be progressing more slowly than anticipated, despite Beijing’s long-term objective of positioning it as a competitor to Western aviation manufacturers.

Reports also suggested commitments to buying agro products. If past evidence (the Phase 1 deal) is considered, China is unlikely to recreate agricultural import dependence on the US after steadily reducing it since 2020. Moreover, as Xi put it, no one is allowed to “seize us by the throat”¹⁸ on food security. Trump’s disclosure that China will buy US oil also raises the same problem of creating dependence on your primary rival. No commitments on rare earths were disclosed. The readouts announced the creation of a board of trade and a board of investment, which is a positive outcome, as it may provide the much-needed platform for regular discussions and for maintaining the relationship. The military-to-military communication was emphasised by both the US and China. However, several economic and military confidence-building mechanisms, including the US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), the Comprehensive Economic Dialogue (CED), and multiple military communication frameworks, have been established over the years only to gradually lose relevance, collapse during crises, or be suspended amid rising strategic tensions.

¹⁵ [“From the Bilateral Meeting in Beijing: President Trump Had a Good Meeting with President Xi of China”](#), no. 11.

¹⁶ [“President Xi Jinping Holds Talks with U.S. President Donald Trump”](#), no. 7.

¹⁷ Peter Hoskins, [“China Confirms It Will Buy 200 Boeing Jets After Trump-Xi Summit”](#), *BBC*, 20 May 2026.

¹⁸ [“Xi Jinping Delivers a Video Address to the Opening Ceremony of the 2021 ‘Understanding China’ International Conference \(Guangzhou\)”](#), *Xinhua News Agency*, 3 December 2021. “习近平向2021年‘读懂中国’国际会议（广州）开幕式发表视频致辞”, *Xinhua News Agency*, 3 December 2021.

The large business delegation that accompanied Trump did not secure any signed agreements or deals, which sums up the visit: Trump wanted deliverables, while Xi wanted strategic positioning. Trump failed to bring home a list of deals which he could use to elevate his approval ratings. However, Xi achieved his goals of establishing China as an equal to the US. From the Chinese perspective, Washington came to Beijing because it needs China.

The Russia Factor and China’s Dual-Track Strategy

The contrast became sharper when compared with Xi’s subsequent summit¹⁹ with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Unlike the Trump visit, which produced symbolism without major deliverables, the Xi–Putin meeting resulted in dozens of signed agreements across energy, finance, technology, logistics and strategic coordination.²⁰ The contrast highlighted Beijing’s differentiated diplomacy: managed competition with Washington alongside deepening strategic convergence with Moscow. While China seeks “constructive strategic stability” with the US, it appears increasingly comfortable building parallel continental partnerships aimed at reducing vulnerability to Western pressure and reshaping parts of the international order.

Notably, during Xi Jinping’s subsequent summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the two sides signed a joint declaration advocating a “multipolar world order”. The wording was significant. While Beijing increasingly appears comfortable portraying the international system as moving towards a form of negotiated bipolarity between China and the US, Moscow remains uneasy with any framework that implicitly reduces Russia to a secondary pole beneath a US–China duopoly. The Russian emphasis on multipolarity, therefore, reflects both strategic preference and geopolitical necessity: a rejection of American primacy, but also resistance to an emerging order dominated by two superpowers in which Russia risks becoming the junior partner to China.

This subtle divergence highlighted an important nuance within the broader Sino-Russian alignment. Beijing appears focused on managing competition with Washington from a position of recognised parity, whereas Moscow continues to push for a more diffuse international system with multiple centres of power. The difference also demonstrates that despite growing strategic convergence against Western

¹⁹ Laura Zhou, [“Xi and Putin’s United Front—From Tigers to Trade: The Summit Takeaways”](#), *South China Morning Post*, 20 May 2026.

²⁰ [“Xi and Putin Wrap Up Talks in Beijing With No Final Details on Gas Pipeline”](#), *BBC News*, 20 May 2026.

pressure, China and Russia do not necessarily share identical visions of the future global order.

The juxtaposition of the two summits was also revealing. Trump arrived seeking deals but achieved mostly optics; Putin arrived already positioned within a broader anti-sanctions and anti-containment framework that produced tangible strategic outcomes. Together, the two meetings reflected Beijing’s dual-track strategy: stabilise rivalry with the United States while simultaneously consolidating alternative geopolitical networks across Eurasia.

Yet China’s confidence should not obscure its structural vulnerabilities. Beijing continues to confront slowing growth, demographic decline, property-sector instability, dependence on maritime energy imports, and technological bottlenecks in advanced semiconductor manufacturing. This makes China’s push for “strategic stability” not merely a language of confidence, but also one of risk management during a prolonged period of external pressure and internal transition. Beijing seeks to avoid premature confrontation during a period in which its relative power continues to expand but remains constrained by structural weaknesses and external pressure.

Conclusion: The Politics of Negotiated Bipolarity

The Beijing summit ultimately revealed less about immediate policy breakthroughs and more about the changing psychology of international order. China approached the visit not as a rising power seeking accommodation, but as a civilisational state demanding recognition as a co-manager of global stability. Through symbolism, language, and carefully calibrated diplomacy, Beijing attempted to normalise the idea of negotiated bipolarity, a world no longer organised solely around American primacy but around managed co-existence between rival centres of power.

The United States, meanwhile, appeared caught between two competing impulses: containing China strategically while simultaneously seeking selective cooperation to avoid uncontrolled escalation. That contradiction was visible throughout the summit, particularly on Taiwan, trade and strategic stability.

Yet beneath China’s confidence also lies caution. Beijing’s emphasis on “stable competition” reflects not only strength but awareness of vulnerability during a prolonged era of geopolitical contestation. The result is a relationship increasingly defined neither by partnership nor Cold War-style confrontation, but by selective interdependence under conditions of deep mistrust.

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