

# What will happen when Trump meets Xi?

## OPINION

US President Donald Trump will travel to Beijing for meetings with President Xi Jinping on May 14–15, 2026. Brookings experts weigh in below on how Trump and Xi's interaction will impact their areas of expertise and how the summit's success will be measured.



JARED BARTMAN/THE ECONOMIST

## Low expectations amid fears of escalation



By Jonathan Czin  
Chair in foreign policy studies

Outside observers should have low expectations for the upcoming summit between Trump and Xi. While the relationship has stabilized since the two leaders met last November, it remains fragile — defined more by an absence of friction than any affirmative agenda or deep dialogue on the substantial differences that bedevil the relationship. Many Chinese analysts expect a US snap back to a more competitive China policy, either after the midterms or after Trump steps down in 2029. Beijing seems focused on using this interregnum to en-

hance its position vis-à-vis the United States. Likewise, many in the Trump administration and on Capitol Hill favor a return to sustained strategic competition.

The summit's diplomacy has only reinforced the deeper drivers diminishing the likelihood of substantive gains. The reported meager bureaucratic preparations for this meeting limit the prospects for progress. Counterintuitively, by signaling early and loudly a desire for multiple presidential encounters this year, the Trump administration may have reduced Beijing's incentive to offer any major concessions. Chinese officials believe they will extract more value from concessions later,

calculating that Trump — the self-identified consummate dealmaker — will want to tout any agreement as a major breakthrough ahead of the midterm elections.

However, there are risks ahead that could make this meeting a high-water mark of Sino-US amity rather than a precursor to additional agreements. Most notably, the administration is trying to reconstruct its tariff regime after the Supreme Court ruled in February that many of the previous tariffs were unlawful. Beijing could argue that restoring tariff levels back to where they were violates the tenuous "cease-fire" in the trade war, opening up the possibility of a renewed cycle of escalation.

## Prolonging uneasy calm in US-China relations



By Ryan Hass  
Director of John L. Thornton China Center

A key lesson from 2025 for Trump and Xi was that they both could harm the other, but not without inviting painful retaliation. As a result, both leaders agreed to a trade war truce when they met on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Busan last October.

Trump appears focused on preserving this truce and using the time to build insulation against dependence on China for key inputs such as rare earths. This focus likely will guide his visit

to Beijing. In this sense, the summit can be understood more for what it aims to avoid (e.g., a breakdown in the relationship) than what it seeks to achieve.

To be clear, there will be outcomes from Trump's visit. Both leaders will likely announce Chinese purchases of American products, such as Boeing airplanes and agricultural goods. They also likely will announce a bilateral "Board of Trade" to identify non-sensitive sectors for purchase commitments and limited tariff adjustments.

Spaces to watch will include any announcement of major Chinese invest-

ments into the United States and any potential shift to long-standing American declaratory policy on Taiwan.

So long as the visit proceeds smoothly and Trump concludes he was treated respectfully, then the uneasy calm in the bilateral relationship will endure. If, on the other hand, Trump leaves feeling disrespected or trifled with, then he could have a change of heart. Trump may also be sensitive to being perceived as upstaged, particularly if Beijing rolls out the red carpet for Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately after his departure from Beijing.

## End of estrangement



By Susan A. Thornton  
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For Americans, the most significant result from Trump's upcoming visit to Beijing will be that it happened. Mistrust between the US and Chinese governments has skyrocketed since COVID-19. Communication between the two across the Pacific has been dramatically truncated. Joe Biden was the first US president since US-China relations were established

not to visit China. Congressional visits have similarly fallen off. This estrangement coincides with both elevated bilateral tensions and with sudden and dramatic changes in the global power structure, norms, and institutions. Presidential-level communication is currently the only guardrail in US-China relations; we need this channel to stop miscalculation from leading to conflict.

It is less than ideal, of course, that this meeting will happen against the backdrop of the war with Iran, but US policy contin-

ually allows the urgent to crowd out the important. Trump seems determined not to let that happen in this case. He deserves credit for already increasing communication with Xi in the first year of his second term; the Chinese leadership has also shown flexibility and willingness to keep this channel open. The two have stated that they may meet as many as a record four times this year. These meetings are our best hope for preventing miscalculation and should be welcomed as such. Ongoing estrangement is too dangerous.

## Uncertainty surrounds Taiwan



By Richard C. Bush  
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I have no idea how the Xi-Trump summit will affect Taiwan and its relationship with the United States. China watchers understand that China's policymaking occurs in a black box. Currently, the United States has no formal process. For outside observers of the Trump administration looking for intensive summit preparations regarding Taiwan or any other issue, they are not readily apparent. I hope that US officials are consulting with their Taiwan counterparts,

but I do not know whether they are.

Nor do I know how the two presidents will discuss Taiwan at the summit. That is, will they do so with other officials present or talk one-to-one with interpreters (no notetakers)? Whatever the case, will senior US officials have an opportunity in advance to brief Trump on how not to concede too much on Taiwan?

It is possible that Taiwan may get crowded out by other important issues: tariffs, export controls, Russia-Ukraine, and especially the war in Iran. But the Chinese are signaling that Taiwan cannot be avoid-

ed. So, Xi may seek changes in US declaratory policy, including on Taiwan's legal status. He may ask Trump to impose constraints on American arms sales to Taiwan and then enforce them. The simple fact is that Beijing could ameliorate many of its purported complaints about Taiwan's cross-strait policy by talking to officials of the government in Taipei and doing so without conditions. But it has not done so for 10 years. As far as US-Taiwan relations are concerned, in the immortal words of Carter administration official Burt Lance, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."



US President Donald Trump (R) meets with China's leader Xi Jinping (2nd-L) in Busan, South Korea, in October 2025.  
HAIYUN JIANG/THE NEW YORK TIMES

## It's time for US, China to talk about AI



By Kyle Chan  
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The United States and China are the world's two artificial intelligence (AI) superpowers. Virtually all of the most advanced and widely used AI models are developed by these two countries. As AI systems rapidly become more powerful, so too do the risks they create. Anthropic's newest model, Mythos, has raised new concerns about AI-enhanced cyberattack capabilities. Researchers are sounding the alarm that AI tools could help less sophisticated actors devel-

op novel bioweapons. The proliferation of AI agents, capable of operating autonomously for hours at a time, raises questions around unintended actions and loss of control over these systems.

And yet, the United States and China hardly talk about AI, at least at the official level. Both nations see AI as a key strategic technology, and their relationship in this domain is characterized by a low degree of trust and a high degree of competition. But this could change, given suggestions that Trump and Xi may finally discuss AI at their upcoming summit in Beijing. The United States and

China will almost certainly continue to compete fiercely in AI. But ideally, both leaders can also take steps toward working together in areas of shared interest.

Trump and Xi can begin by opening official communication channels on AI risks, developing nonbinding safety guidelines, and sharing limited information about AI misuse or safety incidents. Both countries will be wary of agreeing to anything that could tie their own hands. But restarting official dialogue between the United States and China on AI is a crucial first step toward addressing an increasingly high-stakes issue.