

Trump and Xi Can't Stop the U.S.-China Spiral

The Delusions of Summitry and the Limits of Personalist Diplomacy

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The United States' epic twentieth-century successes in diplomacy set dangerously high expectations. Germany and Japan surrendered unconditionally in 1945; U.S. President Harry Truman created NATO in 1949; President John F. Kennedy resolved the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 through secret diplomatic exchanges with the Soviet premier; and in the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan, with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, negotiated landmark arms-control agreements to wind down the Cold War. Such victories accustomed many Americans to imagining that their skilled leaders could break seemingly intractable political deadlocks in decisive ways.

This hope runs especially deep in China watchers. Their sense of how diplomacy between the United States and China can unfold at its best was shaped by that game-changing moment in 1972 when U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, redrew the world's geopolitical map in the course of a weeklong visit with Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai, transforming the [Cold War](#) from a largely bipolar contest into a triangular one. Then, in 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter threw the door open to China in a theatrical way by welcoming the country's paramount leader, Deng Xiaoping, to the White House and restoring formal diplomatic relations with Beijing.

Today, as U.S.-Chinese relations spiral into an ever more adversarial state, the longing for another breakthrough delivered by "great men" is especially acute. U.S. President Donald Trump has egged on that desire by boastfully insisting that he alone can cut the kinds of deals the United States needs through force of personality. Even seasoned foreign policy hands who consider themselves realistic have been prone to entertaining unrealistic visions of success. When a Beijing summit between Trump and Xi was announced for the spring of 2026, the meeting was sanguinely billed in [Foreign Affairs](#) as "a geopolitical heavyweight matchup" that could "change the course of U.S.-China competition."

Sadly, no such breakthrough came to pass. The May summit in Beijing, which I attended as a member of the press corps for this magazine, may have helped sustain a cryptic peace—a "constructive strategic stability," as Xi euphemistically termed it. But it did not change the fundamentally adversarial nature of the relationship between the two countries. They remain locked in a dynamic of strategic ambiguity marked by endless bouts of punitive "chokehold" diplomacy, with each exploiting its control over critical supply chains to pressure the other.

Now, another Trump-Xi summit is scheduled to begin in Washington on September 23, and yearnings for a conclusive breakthrough are resurfacing. They should be tempered. The same limitations that crimped the May summit will constrain the upcoming one. The problem is not simply that the United States and China have different ideologies and political systems. It is also that neither of their leaders is suited to the kind of bargaining their current rivalry demands. Xi

equates compromise with weakness and has a hard time understanding the give-a-little-to-get-a-little logic that is the heart and soul of diplomacy. And Trump is so contradictory and impetuous that his pandering, “tech bro” side is in such an uncomfortable state of tension with his belligerent side that effective diplomacy becomes almost impossible.

In the past, the [United States](#) and China achieved breakthroughs when conditions were just right and leaders with great diplomatic acuity were in charge. The circumstances today are less favorable. Despite Trump’s simulacrum of camaraderie, he and Xi simply do not have the symmetries to build the kind of genuine fraternity and trust needed to resolve deep structural problems. As long as these two men lead their respective countries, the likelihood is that their summits will barely be able to manage the rivalry at best. At worst, they may exacerbate it by letting push come to shove.

THE TRUST FACTOR

Historically, successful U.S.-Chinese summits have relied heavily on leaders’ ability to break through the barriers of distrust. But the kind of superficial flattery and bonhomie in which Trump can excel when he is trying to make nice does not generate the deeper confidence that has assured Chinese leaders in the past. And for Beijing and Washington it has never been easy to establish that kind of trust: Chinese leaders are steeped in paranoid fears about foreigners’ ambitions to bring regime change to communist systems. Nixon understood this; before he went to China, he laid the groundwork in [Foreign Affairs](#), saying it was time to welcome China into “the family of nations.” Such a framing suggested that at least for the moment, he was willing to accept China’s system for the sake of uniting behind the common interest of opposing Soviet expansionism.

To increase transparency and trust ahead of their meeting, Nixon sent [Kissinger](#) and Kissinger’s deputy, Winston Lord, to Beijing to meet with Mao’s deputy, Zhou. Kissinger ended up greatly admiring Zhou, even extolling him as “one of the two or three most impressive men I have ever met.” Such encomiums telegraphed the kind of “mutual respect” that China’s Marxist-Leninist leaders have always craved from the West. And unlike Trump, who praised Xi in May as a “great leader” and declared that it was “an honor” to be his “friend,” Kissinger meant what he said.

For his part, Zhou helped establish a rapport by wielding humor. “You probably thought the Chinese Communist Party has three heads and six arms,” he joked with Kissinger when the two first met in 1971. “But, lo and behold, I am like you! Someone you can talk reason with and talk honestly.” What distinguished their negotiations was that Kissinger and Zhou each established a true intellectual appreciation for the other as a partner.

When President Jimmy Carter and Deng met in 1979, they recreated this kind of summitry magic. Relations between China and the United States had by then converged to the degree that Carter was willing to abandon [Taiwan](#), a longtime American ally, and transfer diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. The summit pageantry gave that transformation in relations public legitimacy. At the time, it was difficult to imagine two more dissimilar figures than the plainspoken, four-foot, 11-inch Deng, whom Mao had described as “a pin wrapped in a ball of

cotton,” and Carter, the convivial peanut farmer who had served as a submarine officer in the U.S. Navy during the Cold War.

Yet when the unlikely pair met in Washington, they interacted in such a relaxed and friendly manner that it became abundantly evident to observers that they not only respected each other but also enjoyed each other’s company. Despite his deep reservations, Carter even met Deng’s request to invite Nixon back to the White House to attend a state banquet for Deng five years after the disgraced president’s resignation. Their deportment and evident congeniality signaled in the most demonstrative way that it was now all right for people on opposite sides of a political divide to let bygones be bygones and start getting along. Critically, this personal chemistry was aired not just across the United States but also across China, in the first live overseas satellite broadcast ever undertaken by Chinese state television.

Another moment of remarkable fraternity between the two countries unfolded in 1998, when President Bill Clinton flew to Beijing to meet with the Chinese Communist Party’s general secretary, Jiang Zemin. Despite the penumbra of distrust that had shadowed U.S.-Chinese relations since the 1989 crackdown in [Tiananmen Square](#), the two leaders jovially marched together into the Great Hall of the People for a press conference after a ceremonial honor guard and 21-gun salute not far from the very places where the massacre had happened. After Clinton bantered with Jiang about topics as routine as nonproliferation and trade and as forbidden as the Dalai Lama and human rights, the two men took questions from reporters. Remarkably, Jiang had ordered state television to broadcast the news conference live, a decision that gave party propagandists no opportunity to censor the remarks. It was clear that a new post-1989 era of engagement was now welcome by both sides.

The Art of Indifference

It is unknown what went on in Trump and Xi’s private meetings during May’s Beijing summit. But in public, the courtship was strikingly one-sided. As Xi formally opened the summit in the elephantine Great Hall of the People, Trump was moved to proclaim that the two men “had a fantastic relationship.” He later boasted that he and Xi had “settled a lot of different problems that other people wouldn’t have been able to solve.” But there was something strained about his ersatz and unreciprocated bonhomie that hinted at the summit’s deeper limitations. Through all of Trump’s efforts to ingratiate himself, Xi remained characteristically aloof, offering only a very meager display of rapport in response.

There were many other signs that Xi would not readily yield to Trump’s supplications. When Air Force One landed in Beijing, Trump was met not by Xi but by Vice President Han Zheng, who ranks only eighth in the party hierarchy. And the fact that Trump and Xi skipped a joint news conference at which they might have demonstrated some real camaraderie and that Trump did not give a talk at a university or other public venue—something several U.S. presidents had done on past visits to China—robbed the summit of other critical elements of goodwill. But neither leader seemed willing to risk such unscripted moments.

Instead, Xi staged a highly theatrical but substantively thin visit to Zhongnanhai, the walled compound near the Forbidden City where top Communist [Party](#) leaders live. There, Trump could

not resist asking if Xi had brought other global leaders to this cloistered preserve. “It’s extremely rare,” Xi replied. But then he divulged that he had treated Russian President Vladimir Putin to a visit. Perhaps sensing Trump’s disappointment, Xi failed to mention that the U.S. presidents Nixon, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama had also been feted there.

When I arrived at the Beijing airport for my flight home, just after Trump departed, I saw how artfully Xi had choreographed the larger context of this summit to make Trump seem like just one more routine visitor. Gazing out a terminal window onto the tarmac, I spotted a military transport plane. It was a [Russian](#) Ilyushin II-76 that had just arrived from Moscow loaded with armored limousines, chase vehicles, communications equipment, and other gear for Putin’s own summit that was coming right up—his 25th visit to China in 26 years in power. Air Force One had barely cleared Chinese airspace and here was Xi welcoming Putin back, reminding Trump and the broader world that China had other powerful partners and was no longer so dependent on the United States.

IMPERVIOUS BY DESIGN

Trump’s zeal to curry favor with Xi in hopes of a grand deal was hardly a strategy for a U.S.-Chinese breakthrough. Although Xi may have been gratified by Trump’s flatteries—and taken them as proof that “the East is rising and the West is declining”—he remains deeply distrustful of Washington’s motives. Over the course of Trump’s two terms in office, his China policy has swung wildly between conciliation and confrontation. Very little groundwork had been done in advance of the summit to help set expectations and convey a coherent agenda to Chinese diplomats. Even if better preparations had been made, Chinese leaders would have known that Trump prefers to elude the advice of so-called experts, trust his own feral and often conflicting instincts, and just wing it.

But although Trump’s diplomatic limitations were amply demonstrated in Beijing, Xi’s own personal shortcomings also dampened the prospects of any significant deal. Xi’s character, Leninist ideology, and tightly controlled leadership style are incongruent with American notions of summitry, not to mention Trump’s own unconstrained leadership style. With his muted facial expressions, Xi is a difficult leader to read. Although he cultivates an air of disciplined strength, he also comes across as man ill at ease with cosmopolitan leaders and often seems most comfortable hiding behind ceremony and ritual. Xi’s opaqueness lends him a certain air of authority, but preserving this aura requires him to eschew unscripted moments lest he might reveal embarrassing awkwardness or clumsiness. But such moments are often when imperious leaders become real people and diplomacy can actually succeed. And in Beijing, Xi missed an invitation proffered by Trump—as clumsy as it was—to engage in a little bro culture that would have demonstrated his own openness to some sort of “a deal.”

American leaders love to personalize diplomacy. Xi’s playbook draws instead from an ancient and much more severe Chinese tradition of statecraft known as legalism. Unlike Confucianism, which prescribed a softer, more ethics-based kind of statecraft, legalism emphasized a strong, ruthless, Machiavellian form of leadership that relies on top-down controls. In this tradition, the law is not used to restrain the state, but as an instrument of state power to make citizens

subservient. Xi has overtly revealed his affinity for legalism, as Mao did decades earlier. In speeches, he has extolled Han Fei, the third-century BC thinker who was one of legalism's main proponents. "When those who uphold the law are strong, the state is strong," he said in a 2024 address.

Legalism emphasized that leaders should remain aloof from the governed. Above all, Han Fei counseled, leaders must avoid heartfelt emotional responses to affairs of state lest they be interpreted as signs of vulnerability or weakness. "Be empty, still, idle, and from your place of darkness observe the defects of others," he advised. "See, but do not appear to see. Listen, but do not appear to listen. Know, but do not let it be known that you know."

Xi's reserved and opaque public demeanor embodies such admonitions. Moreover, his lack of sentimentality and record of purging even friends has made him a model of enigmatic legalist rule, and more like Mao than any other Chinese leader since.

THE DANGERS OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Observers must right-size their expectations for the coming summit—and refrain from putting too much hope in Trump's ability to transform Xi into a collaborative comrade through bullying, flattery, or blandishments like the huge slices of chocolate cake he tried to tempt the Chinese leader with during a 2017 meeting at Mar-a-Lago.

Xi, in reality, is not a particularly secure man. His upbringing was shadowed by family hardship, disorder, and betrayal. He has mastered the art of control, not only when it comes to interacting with Chinese citizens and officials but also in terms of his own emotions. He has learned how to hide his insecurities behind a mask of invincibility. As Han Fei advised, "a ruler must not reveal his desires." Instead, he must "repose in nonaction above, so that below, his ministers tremble with fear."

It would thus be advisable for [Trump administration](#) officials not only to lower their own expectations but also to guard against their chief's tendency to feel spurned and insulted by the impassivity that is Xi's very hallmark. Ever sensitive to imputations that he has failed to convince a powerful leader to yield to his wiles, Trump could emerge from the summit feeling so neglected that he reverts to the other side of the contradiction that distinguishes his political personality, namely, retaliation.

After all, it only took two months after Trump kowtowed to Xi in Beijing for glints of his hawkishness to resurface. Claiming once more that he had defeated Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential race, Trump cited new, unverified evidence that Beijing had tampered with the election. Next, he announced new tariffs against China, justifying them as efforts to discourage forced labor there and needling a longtime sticking point in U.S.-Chinese relations. Should Trump end up feeling so unrequited at this next meeting with Xi that he starts hurling more lightning bolts at China, this summit could end up being even less productive than the one in May.