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Beyond the Thucydides Trap: The Trump-Xi Summit and the Future of USA-China Rivalry

On May 13, 2026, when the US President Donald Trump touched down in Beijing, it became the first visit to Chinese soil in the last nine years. The last American President to visit China was [Trump himself back in 2017](#). In the Great Hall of the People, [Trump declared](#), “The relationship between China and the USA is going to be better than ever before”. While Xi Jinping [responded](#) by committing to building a “Constructive strategic stability”. The two-day high-stakes visit culminated in a state banquet, a visit to the Temple of Heaven, and a mutual agreement for [Xi Jinping’s Washington visit](#) in the fall of 2026.

Yet, beneath the tactfully choreographed ceremony lies a far more complex diplomatic reality – years of friction, a shift in the balance of power, an ongoing war in Iran, the perennial Taiwan issue and global economic order. Thus, to fully understand the significance of this Summit, one must look beyond its immediate diplomatic implications. Rather, there is a need to examine the deeper [theoretical lens invoked by Xi Jinping](#): the concept of ‘Thucydides Trap’.

What is the Thucydides Trap? Ancient Warning for a Modern World

The term ‘Thucydides Trap’ is named after the ancient Greek historian and military commander Thucydides, who had [chronicled](#) the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) between Athens and Sparta. One of his [often cited observations](#) is: “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta”

However, in the modern discourse, its first usage was made by American writer Herman Wouk in his 1980 speech. In it, he drew an analogy between the Greek rivalry and the Cold War. Subsequently, Harvard political scientist [Graham Allison expanded it](#) into his 2017 book ‘Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides Trap?’

The [concept is simple](#) yet intellectually powerful: “When a rising power threatens to displace a ruling one, the most likely outcome is war.” However, he himself pointed out that the war can be avoided, as he specifically noted the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union. It did not result in a direct military conflict because both sides had developed a strategy to [allow competition while being short of hot war](#).

Also, it should be noted that President Xi Jinping has, through various international platforms, raised the issue of the ‘Thucydides Trap’. In 2013, [Xi stated](#), “We need to work together to avoid the Thucydides Trap, which is a destructive tension between emerging powers and existing powers, or between two existing powers.” [Again in 2023](#), Xi met with then Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer in China, stating that the trap is “not inevitable”.

History Repeating? The Backdrop

To understand the 2026 Summit, one must carefully trace how the bilateral relationship between the two countries reached this juncture. During his first tenure (2017-2020), President Trump adopted a confrontational approach towards Beijing. In July, 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) [imposed sanctions](#) on the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau as well as senior Chinese Communist Party officials under the Global Magnitsky Act “for their connection to serious human rights abuse against ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, which reportedly include mass arbitrary detention and severe physical abuse”.

When the Biden Administration came to power (2021-2024), it [presented a further complex picture](#). At one end, while it expanded economic pressure on China, on the other hand, it also reversed certain specific measures, like [lifting sanctions](#) from China’s Ministry of Public Security’s Institute of Forensic Science in November 2023, a move that House Republicans later sought to reverse through legislation, arguing the sanctions had been removed as a bargaining chip in negotiations over fentanyl cooperation.

When Trump returned to the Oval Office in 2025, it was widely speculated that the same confrontational approach of 2017-2020 would resume. Even he did escalate the [tariff duties beyond 140 per cent](#) for the Chinese goods. But, as geopolitics rarely fits expectations neatly, with the in-person meeting of the two leaders in October 2025 at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in Busan, South Korea, a fragile [one-year trade truce](#), which eased tariffs, was announced. The recent Beijing Summit in May 2026 was the next chapter in the warm waters of diplomacy.

China’s True Position

One of the most significant realities that is currently driving American foreign policy is that China is no longer a rising superpower. On many fronts, it has already become a superpower. Consider the global banking field. According to [S&P Global Market Intelligence's April 2025 Report](#) on the world's 100 largest banks, the top four banks in the world in terms of total assets are Chinese. Together, the four banks hold approximately 25 trillion USD in assets.

Next, delving into the question of critical minerals. Critically, critical minerals are the most decisive economic and military leverage in the twenty-first century. According to [a recent report](#) by the International Energy Agency (IEA), "for a remarkable 19 out of 20 important strategic minerals, China is the leading refiner, with an average market share of 70%." China [dominates the entire rare earths](#) value chain. China mines over 60 per cent and processes over 80 per cent of the world's rare earths, and produces around 90 per cent of the world's high-performance rare earth magnets. Added to this, China has a [monopoly over 2 rare earth elements](#) - dysprosium and terbium, which are essential for the magnets capable of withstanding high temperatures and thus used in the F-35 jets as well as in Tesla's humanoid robots. The truth that the US has to accept is that it is [dependent on China](#) for the rare earth minerals.

China also comes to the table with a long-term strategy that the USA's democracy structurally struggles to match. Xi Jinping's national rejuvenation plan was implemented through initiatives like [Made in China 2025](#) and its roadmap towards the [centenary of the People's Republic in 2049](#). These reflect a multi-decade programme which is largely immune to the four-year electoral cycle.

The Summit Being a Necessity

The Trump Administration has framed its Beijing visit as a demonstration of rebalancing the relationship and a demand for reciprocity. The delegation, comprising Kelly Ortberg, the CEO of Boeing, Jensen Huang, the CEO of Nvidia, Elon Musk and Tim Cook, implies a statement of economic muscle. But the subtext of the visit was considerably more complicated. Trump arrived in Beijing with his [domestic standing at the lowest point](#) of his second tenure.

On his single most prominent campaign at home of ending the [Ukraine-Russia war within 24 hours](#) of taking office has not been materialised yet. Added to it, [the USA's involvement](#) in the Israel-Iran conflict has also attracted sustained domestic criticism and enormous diplomatic and

military bandwidth. Thus, the visit to Beijing served a dual purpose – it was a geopolitical necessity as well as a diplomatic win urgently needed for the domestic audience.

Taiwan: The Live Wire Between Superpowers

No analysis of the US-China relations is complete without confronting Taiwan. Taiwan is a self-governing island that Beijing claims as its own territory. Added, it has never renounced using force to reclaim it. During this Summit as well, President Xi placed [Taiwan at the very centre](#) of the conversation, terming it as “the most important issue” between the two countries and intimidated Trump that any mishandling of China’s claims over Taiwan could cause “clashes and even conflicts”.

Surprisingly, even before Trump’s visit, the Chinese Embassy in the US had [posted on X](#), “The four red lines in China-US relations must not be challenged,” and the very first red line was “The Taiwan Question”. This reflects the aggressive policy that China has adopted recently, even to counter economic power like the USA. However, the political discourse from the USA is [conspicuously vague on Taiwan](#).

While Trump has said, “It’s a very good negotiating chip for us, frankly. It’s a lot of weapons” for the 14 billion USD arms package to Taiwan, however, it’s unclear what the USA would want the Chinese counterpart to do in return. Added to this, the [shift in the USA’s focus](#) towards Iran from the Pacific region is a threat to Taiwan, as Beijing is aware that the USA cannot keep a strong presence at all the fronts of the globe.

Beyond the Thucydides Trap: Why Direct War Remains Unlikely

Both the USA and China are well aware of the capabilities of each other, both being nuclear powers. And as Ronald Reagan’s maxim goes, “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Both parties know about the mutual destruction that any probable war can cause to them, along with undoing the growth gained over a period of decades. The economic interdependence argument is equally powerful. [China dominates supply chains](#) that the United States cannot immediately replace — from rare earth elements to permanent magnets to lithium-ion battery components. This would have a spillover effect, destabilising every economy on the earth. Even Xi Jinping [aptly captured](#) this as, “I am in you, and you are in me”,

referring to the USA-China relationship. He also cautioned, “The goal should be to seek common ground and keep the differences small. This is true between countries, households, and family members alike.”

However, what is more plausible is a prolonged Cold War-style rivalry between the USA and China rather than a direct war. In such a scenario, China’s structural advantages like long-term planning, manufacturing supremacy, rare earth control, and a political system that is better able to endure economic hardship than a democracy up for mid-term elections, will be quite significant.

The Cold War 2.0 Framework

If direct kinetic war engagement is unlikely, then what shape will this rivalry take?

Historically speaking, the [closest precedent](#) to this scenario would be the Cold War that was fought by the United States and the Soviet Union for almost four decades. In this war, both countries were constantly fighting against each other through competitions on nuclear weapons, the space race, or even proxy wars such as those in Korea, Vietnam, Angola, and Afghanistan, but without ever engaging in actual warfare.

A similar architecture may be emerging for the USA-China. Although there would be differences. Unlike the Soviet Union, China is deeply integrated into the global economic system. It is a strong competitor and even a leading partner on many fronts. It appears obvious that the upcoming conflict will put a lot more strain on the United States than on China in the short run. The state that has to cope with low popularity ratings in its own country, military actions abroad in the Middle East, and poor logistics is not as prepared for negotiations as the state that has a long-term plan, the production process under control, and access to natural resources for further development of technology.

Conclusion

The Thucydides Trap is not an iron law of history. But definitely, it is a warning about the structural issues which, if left unaddressed, tend towards untoward outcomes. The Trump-Xi bilateral meeting in May 2026 was thus not merely a bilateral diplomatic event. It was a

deliberate attempt by both powers to manage those structural pressures before they spiral out of control.

The China of today is not the same China of 2001, when it [joined](#) the World Trade Organisation, nor even the same China of 2008, which staged the Beijing Olympics. Today's China controls four out of five of the [world's largest banks](#), exercises almost total control over the raw materials that fuel the economies of the 21st century, [maintains a nuclear arsenal](#), and operates according to a long-term strategy that goes well beyond the next electoral cycle.

How the United States manages to cope with this new reality is the central challenge of our time.

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