

Trump-Xi meeting in Washington: Managing tensions, not resolving them

written by Joseph Rozen | 30.09.2026

Xi Jinping landed at Joint Base Andrews on Sept. 23 for a rare honor: U.S. President Donald Trump personally greeted him on a military tarmac, ahead of a full State Arrival Ceremony the next morning featuring 479 troops, a Marine Platoon and a flyover pairing a B-2 bomber with four F-22s. A state dinner followed that night. It was Xi's first White House visit in roughly 11 years, and Washington arranged a spectacle.

The choreography was a deliberate reminder to Xi of exactly the capability Washington wants Beijing to keep respecting, timed for an audience that had just spent months testing how far that capability could be stretched. The warmth was real, but so was the signaling.

The official White House readout of the entire visit ran 19 words: The two leaders discussed the economy, trade, super intelligence (AI) and cooperation on numerous issues of shared importance. It didn't mention Iran or the Americans still detained in China. Beijing's own readout stayed at the same altitude, wishing to make 2026 a historic year. Neither president went into detail.

The one concrete outcome was an eight-point consensus that includes a \$30 billion tariff cut on non-sensitive goods in each direction, such as toys and cosmetics. Plus, China pledged to buy 10 million metric tons of American coal in 2027 and again in 2028. Every item is a category nobody was fighting over. So were the two Pandas Xi gifted to the Zoo Atlanta.

Many had high expectations for the meeting, but these were detached from reality. This was round two of a show that opened in Beijing in May, and it delivered exactly what round one should have taught anyone to expect.

The Boeing order floated in May approached 500 aircraft; by September, the number sat at 200-plus, with Boeing's own CEO downplaying even that. Most tellingly, China gave Washington a specific assurance in April that it would not

transfer surface-to-air missiles to Iran, an assurance the joint statement in May never explicitly reaffirmed.

AI was the one track billed as genuinely new. This came after a viral call from entrepreneur Dario Amodei, co-founder of Anthropic, to slow down development. It serves to raise questions about who wins the AI race between Beijing and Washington, as the former has no intention of slowing down.

The New York session had already produced the first dedicated bilateral AI talks of Trump's second term, with Washington proposing a notification mechanism for AI incidents that cross a national-security threshold. In Washington, the two sides went no further than acknowledging the value of cooperating on AI's dangers. Semiconductor export controls remained untouched, and Beijing's precondition for cooperation and joint authority over what "AI safety" even means never moved.

Then there's Iran, and this is where the standard commentary gets the story backwards. A common analytical line making the rounds, including in a Sept. 21 piece in *The National Interest*, argues the Iran war was a lesson for Beijing: Watch America fight on two fronts, see where the seams show, bank the intelligence for Taiwan.

There's real evidence of seams. Iranian missile and drone attacks caused an estimated \$400 million in damage to NSA Bahrain, the U.S. Navy base there. Redeploying the *USS George Washington* to relieve the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, after more than 250 days at sea, left the Western Pacific without a single U.S. carrier for the first time in decades.

But calling this a lesson China passively absorbed gets the causality wrong. China didn't learn from Iran's war. China helped run it.

The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission has documented what it calls "enabling Iran": Beijing gave Tehran access to its BeiDou satellite navigation system to improve missile targeting accuracy against Israeli and U.S. assets; supplied precision guidance components for Iran's missile program; shipped missile-fuel precursors throughout the war; and continued dual-use drone-component sales even as the fighting escalated. Moreover, Beijing influenced the ceasefire agreement drafts, using Pakistan as the official mediator on the front.

That distinction matters. Beijing built a live-fire test of U.S. security capacity while keeping its own hands publicly clean through months of calling for “de-escalation,” even as its own components showed up in Iranian strikes. The collected data and insights are of course very useful in dealing with Taiwan.

The Pentagon inspector acknowledged that the Iran war led to shortfalls in munitions with implications on other arenas. This reinforces the need for American allies to develop their military readiness and capabilities while embracing freedom of operation, like the Israeli model.

India and Japan are each going this path by deepening security relationships with Washington, but in a way that preserves operational independence and self-reliance on many of the defense manufacturing aspects. This creates a window of opportunity for Israel to strengthen relationships with India and Japan in technology and defense-industrial cooperation, as it cannot rely solely on Washington. This will also serve the national security interests of the United States.

The story of how Trump and Xi’s interactions unfold and affect Israel and the Indo-Pacific is only halfway through. They have two more meetings on the calendar: in China this November and at the G20 in Miami in December. This again proves that these meetings are part of a longer management process, not a resolution.

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