

The Trump–Xi Summit in Washington: Reading Between the Lines

The three-day Donald Trump–Xi Jinping summit, held on 23–25 September 2026, has been widely described as rich in ceremony but poor in substance. The leaders of the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) failed to achieve a breakthrough on any of the major international disputes currently at stake, nor did they announce any significant new initiatives. Analysts and experts are therefore being forced to read considerably more into the omissions, ambiguities, and subjects left unaddressed in the two sides’ official statements. For that reason, particular attention should be paid not only to the declarations of the two principal actors at the summit—the President of the United States and the President of the PRC—but also to what they chose not to say explicitly.

There is one point on which summit observers appear broadly to agree. To paraphrase an Anglo-Saxon saying, Donald Trump demonstrated that he has an expensive watch; Xi Jinping, by contrast, made clear that he has considerably more time. Although the US president went to unusual lengths to display hospitality towards his guest—including personally greeting him at the airport, a widely noted departure from the standard protocol for a White House visit—it was difficult from the outset to overlook the fact that Trump, rather than Xi, appeared to be under greater time pressure. The US-initiated trade war has not resulted in a reduction in Chinese exports. The attack on Iran, rather than producing a blitzkrieg, has stalled, with no clear prospect of either victory or even a ceasefire. And even setting aside the media boycott, the White House faces a communications problem: it has yet to develop a narrative capable of helping the president support the Republican Party ahead of the midterm elections in November. Trump cannot be dismissed as a political actor, but he appears to have lost momentum and, by comparison with the Chinese leader, came across as more erraticⁱ.

However, there is yet another question: the guest in the White House actually is? Xi Jinping is widely perceived as one of the most powerful leaders in the history of the PRC. In practice, however, increasingly conspicuous cracks are beginning to appear in that image. China has just adopted a new PRC national defense mobilization law, further strengthening Xi’s control over the armed forces. Yet the very institution through which that control is exercised—the Central Military Commission—has been increasingly disrupted by a series of anti-corruption investigations over recent months. At the same time, although Chinese technology companies are increasingly closing the gap with their American competitors, ideological constraints—including censorship and restrictions on access to data that is already tightly managed—may prove to be as significant a brake on their development as their limited access to the most advanced NVIDIA processors. And while Xi is undoubtedly a highly effective leader of the PRC, the outside world cannot even be certain about reports concerning his healthⁱⁱ. Unanswered questions inevitably generate uncertainty.

For those reading between the lines, one particularly significant development is the changing narrative surrounding Chinese–American cooperation during the Second World War. In conventional political discourse, references to the wartime alliance between Beijing and Washington might be interpreted as conciliatory. Taiwan’s authorities, however, responded immediately by pointing out that the PRC was established only after the conflict had ended and that the only Chinese political entity capable of cooperating with Washington at the time was the Republic of Chinaⁱⁱⁱ. Although the leaders’ ninety-minute strategic discussion took place without observers, the available information suggests that Xi is consistently seeking to reshape the diplomatic and historical narrative surrounding Taipei.

Until now, the US position has generally been framed as not supporting the Taiwanese independence. The Chinese leader would now like Washington to go a step further not supporting to opposing it. Such pressure is not new, but in light of the May summit in Beijing—during which Donald Trump referred to Taiwan as a bargaining chip—the future of the island is being closely watched by all US allies in East Asia and the Pacific.

The issue of Iran required somewhat less interpretation of the wording used by the two sides. President Trump pressed China to distance itself from its traditional partner in the Persian Gulf and to support Washington in finding a way to end the conflict and to restore full freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. His expectations were nevertheless moderated by the Chinese side, as they had been previously, while claims regarding concrete outcomes were subsequently challenged by Iran itself. David Perdue, the US ambassador to Beijing, stated that President Trump had made clear to Xi that direct or indirect Chinese support for Tehran was completely unacceptable to the United States. Iranian authorities, however, said on Friday, September 25, that they had received assurances that the PRC would not restrict political, economic, or military cooperation with Iran^{iv}.

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the summit's concrete outcomes have made little impression. Businesses can certainly breathe a sigh of relief, but they should not be surprised by another extension of the temporary tariff arrangement or by tariff exemptions covering strategically non-sensitive products worth 30 billion USD. Equity markets and investors are more likely to focus on whether China fulfills its earlier commitments to import US agricultural products and to supply rare earths. An agreement to maintain a trade dialogue, as well as a separate dialogue on the development of artificial intelligence—or, in Donald Trump's preferred terminology, "superintelligence"—had already been signaled before. In practice, the outcome is widely seen as depending more on the parties' operational engagement than on diplomacy at the highest level^v. Given the limited reaction on the major stock exchanges, the global economy appears to be becoming accustomed—though certainly not happy—with a pattern in which Chinese and American policymakers defer final decisions rather than resolve the underlying disputes.

So what was missing? Looking at the diplomacy surrounding US–PRC summits, what is absent is the broader context that could provide a meaningful point of reference for the carefully choreographed ceremonies in Beijing in May and the pageantry of the White House in September 2026. The two principal actors in these events appear to treat them primarily as stages for domestic political positioning. The resulting two-dimensional, Trump–Xi depiction of international relations lacks strategic depth. As the statements issued by Taipei concerning Chinese actions and by Tehran concerning US actions demonstrate, without the additional actors on the stage, the broader picture is difficult to see. The devil, as ever, is in the details. Yet as long as both leaders continue along their current course, observers will remain dependent on reading between the lines to uncover them.

ⁱ Reuters, *How Trump's diplomatic week exposed the limits of his power*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/how-trumps-diplomatic-week-exposed-limits-his-power-2026-09-25/>, October 28, 2026.

ⁱⁱ The Wall Street Journal, *Xi Jinping Skipped One Dinner—and Sparked a Flurry of Questions About His Health*, https://www.wsj.com/world/china/xi-jinping-skipped-one-dinnerand-sparked-a-flurry-of-questions-about-his-health-348b55b7?eafs_enabled=false, October 28, 2026.

ⁱⁱⁱ Reuters, *Taiwan pushes back after Xi seeks to win over Trump on World War Two narrative*,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/taiwan-pushes-back-after-xi-seeks-win-over-trump-world-war-two-narrative-2026-09-28/>, October 28, 2026.

^{iv} Reuters, *Trump warns Xi over Chinese support for Iran, receives assurances, US envoy says*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-told-xi-that-china-helping-iran-is-unacceptable-us-ambassador-says-2026-09-25/>, October 28, 2026.

^v Reuters, *Trump-Xi summit finds new ways to disappoint*, https://www.breakingviews.com/columns/considered-view/trump-xi-summit-finds-new-ways-disappoint-2026-09-28/?utm_source=reuters.com&utm_medium=referral, October 28, 2026.