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Xi Comes to Washington: Expectations for the Trump–Xi Summit

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Trump–Xi summit in Washington should be judged by implementation of commitments, not by the number of new agreements announced.

President Trump should preserve U.S. leverage on Taiwan, technology, and Iran rather than trade strategic advantages for tactical stability.

The summit's success will depend on Chinese actions, not diplomatic optics, rhetoric, or symbolic deliverables.

On September 24, 2026, President Donald Trump is scheduled to host Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping for a summit in Washington, DC. This will be the leaders' second summit of 2026, following their Beijing Summit in May. Key deliverables from May's summit included the announcements of the concept of "constructive strategic stability," ostensible alignment on not wanting Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon, Chinese purchases of U.S. airline and agricultural products, and the planned U.S.–China Board of Trade and the U.S.–China Board of Investment.[1] This *Issue Brief* identifies potential high-level topics for the Washington Summit. This summit should be judged not by the number of agreements announced, but by whether it strengthens U.S. leverage, secures Chinese implementation of prior commitments, and avoids strategic concessions.

Potential Topics for the Washington Summit

The Washington Summit should be viewed as a maintenance check on the commitments made during the Beijing Summit.[2] Few major announcements should be expected, as few substantive new topics are likely to be broached. General Secretary Xi is expected to participate in meetings at the White House for one day and has no plans to attend the United Nations General Assembly, which occurs around the same time.[3] Potential topics that may be discussed include:

Constructive Strategic Stability. Both sides will likely seek to frame the relationship as constructive and stable since the May summit. Since the Beijing Summit, bilateral tensions have not produced a rupture in leader-level engagement, despite several ongoing disputes and coercive actions. On the one hand, this has made the U.S.–China relationship more predictable with a steadier "floor," likely in part due to both leaders' interest in maintaining stability at this time. On the other hand, the U.S.–China relationship remains structurally locked in a state of adversarial competition. As a result, the relationship has a low and firmly constrained "ceiling," and beneath the diplomatic pleasantries surrounding the summits, the United States and China continue to take targeted actions against each other. Of note, the United States's use of the term "constructive strategic stability" has been coupled with the term "on the basis of fairness and reciprocity."[4]

The Washington Summit will likely see references, both in remarks and readouts, to notions of constructive strategic stability. The United States should define stability as the absence of coercive Chinese behavior, not merely the continuation of leader-level dialogue. A stable relationship that constrains U.S. responses while permitting continued Chinese pressure would serve Beijing's interests more than U.S. interests.

Taiwan. Of all the topics that received attention after the May summit, the U.S. media covered Taiwan the most. While the Washington Summit may see additional discussions about Taiwan, there are unlikely to be any major policy shifts by either side.

Following President Trump's comment that arms sales to Taiwan can be "a very good negotiating chip" with China, speculation grew that U.S. policy on Taiwan was at risk of changing in Beijing's favor.[5] While other Administration officials have since emphasized that U.S. policy toward Taiwan has not changed, a pending arms sale package to Taiwan worth more than $14 billion is still being held up by a White House review.[6] China will likely seek the package's continued delay while continuing to oppose arms sales to Taiwan in general.

More broadly, China will likely seek to align the United States more closely with its position on Taiwan.[7] General Secretary Xi will likely argue, erroneously, that Taiwan's current leadership is seeking to declare independence and that this is destabilizing. The Administration should avoid accepting or aligning with China's position. Taiwan is a critical economic and security partner of the United States and a key node in the First Island Chain, which is a core U.S. interest.[8]

President Trump should make clear that U.S. decisions on Taiwan policy, including arms sales, will be based on Taiwan's security requirements and U.S. law and not used as bargaining leverage in any negotiation with Beijing.

Iran. Iran remains the primary national security issue occupying the Administration's attention. Iran was discussed at the Beijing Summit, with a White House Fact Sheet stating that both leaders agreed that Iran "cannot have a nuclear weapon," the Strait of Hormuz must remain open, and no country can impose tolls on it, while the Chinese readout stated that China seeks the "reopening of the Strait of Hormuz as soon as possible."[9]

President Trump has warned Beijing multiple times against providing support for Iran, though China appears set on testing the boundaries as much as possible.[10] The Washington Summit will serve as an opportunity for President Trump to discuss the Iran conflict directly with Chinese officials, providing an indication of how far the Administration is willing to go to hold China accountable for its role in supporting the Iranian regime. On the one hand, President Trump has warned that his "economic D-Day" package will significantly harm both the Iranian regime and other countries and entities that support it, noting that violators "know who [they] are."[11] According to a Treasury Department press release, the United States is targeting networks and individuals that support Iran's malign activities and nuclear and missile procurements, a group that includes multiple China-based and Hong Kong-based firms and individuals.[12]

However, it is unclear to what extent the Administration will target culpable Chinese institutions. President Trump has publicly issued warnings to China but has not publicly stated what actions, if any, have been taken in response to reported Chinese violations. In August, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent confirmed that he met with China's Central Bank Governor Pan Gongsheng to discuss Iran-related sanctions, but he did not disclose any specific outcomes from the meeting.[13] Therefore, the Trump Administration seems to be walking a fine line of holding countries that support the Iranian regime accountable while seeking not to disrupt U.S.–China relations. This will prove a difficult balancing act, as China remains, by far, the biggest financial supporter of the Iranian regime, and any crackdown that omits Chinese entities may have limited impact on Iran.[14]

The Washington Summit may offer more details on how any sanctions-related package for Iran will impact China. The United States should require verifiable changes in Chinese conduct, rather than treating additional Chinese assurances as evidence of cooperation. Beijing's implementation, particularly its support for the Iranian regime and enforcement against prohibited transfers, should be the measure of progress.

Trade and Investment. One of the most notable outcomes from the Beijing Summit was the announcement that the United States and China would establish a U.S.–China Board of Trade and a U.S.–China Board of Investment. Details remain scarce. In early June, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative requested public comment on "the scope and operation of a mechanism to promote balanced and reciprocal trade with China."[15] Since then, neither side has provided substantive updates. Sean Stein, president of the U.S.–China Business Council, recently observed that he had not seen "evidence yet that [the Board of Investment is] going to be a sizeable deliverable for the next summit."[16] Of course, there is still time for more details to be finalized, and summits between world leaders serve as a strong incentive for departments and agencies to finalize potential deliverables. Furthermore, General Secretary Xi is reportedly "preparing a large business delegation to accompany him on his visit," which would be a rare occurrence, to signal China's "willingness to support investment and commercial ties" with the United States.[17] As it stands, however, the boards of trade and investment are unlikely to be fully operational before the summit, and more details will be needed from both sides before the boards can translate commitments into actionable mechanisms for trade and investment.

Separately, in July, the deal reached in May to sell China Boeing aircraft was reported to be "falling apart" because "China wants confidence that it won't become dependent on a support relationship the U.S. could later restrict."[18] If true, China's concern is interesting, given that Beijing is familiar with weaponizing supply-chain dependencies.[19] Although there have been no official updates, the potential souring of the deal further shows how the U.S.–China relationship lacks trust and remains locked in structural competition.

China's commitment to agricultural commodity purchases, agreed to during the Beijing Summit in May, has also come under question, with "soybean buying only really [picking] up in the last couple weeks."[20] While additional details may yet emerge, there is growing evidence that China is not upholding its commitments, which may further dampen the likelihood that major new deals will be announced at the Washington Summit.

These developments come as Secretary Bessent called on G20 countries to "examine their terms of trade with China" because "the world cannot have a China with a $1.2 trillion trade surplus."[21] Notably, G20 finance ministers were unable to reach a joint statement because China *alone* opposed language that called for the elimination of "non-market policies" to reduce trade imbalances or any references to "critical minerals."[22] During the G20 summit, Secretary Bessent signaled that one potential outcome of the Washington Summit is for the United States and China to reduce tariffs worth "$30 billion of non-strategic, non-critical goods on each side."[23]

The Washington Summit may produce updates on the proposed U.S.–China Board of Trade and the U.S.–China Board of Investment, as well as previous trade deals. There may also be an announcement of adjusted tariff rates on select goods. The Administration should be cautious about announcing any additional arrangements until China demonstrates measurable progress on the commitments publicized after the Beijing Summit. Meanwhile, any new trade or investment mechanisms should preserve U.S. authority to impose export controls, sanctions, and investment restrictions necessary for national security.

Technology and AI. The race for AI dominance is speeding ahead, and the United States and China are driving it. Although AI was not a major focus of the Beijing Summit, the Washington Summit may provide a greater opportunity to discuss AI-related guardrails or expectations. Topics for discussion could include export controls, AI safety standards, and cybersecurity.

Debates about broader U.S. export control policies are underway in Congress, which is currently considering several bills to limit high-end chip sales to China and close chip-smuggling loopholes.[24] While the United States is well ahead of China in both hardware and software, some analysts believe there is now only "a 24-36 month window for the United States to make preparations for a Chinese AI industry that is no longer compute-constrained—and to brace for an inevitable tidal wave of inexpensive Chinese compute exported to global markets."[25]

The Heritage Foundation has consistently argued against exporting more high-end chips to China and helping China narrow the compute gap sooner than it could through domestic production.[26] The Trump Administration should avoid any arrangement to send more of America's most advanced chips to China and reject any agreement that weakens existing controls on advanced semiconductors, semiconductor-manufacturing equipment, or other technologies that could enhance China's military and intelligence capabilities.

Beyond technology sales, there may be additional discussions devoted to establishing safety guardrails or finding mutual understanding on AI governance, although U.S. officials should remain skeptical that any non-enforceable or non-verifiable guardrails will meaningfully constrain Chinese behavior.

Wrongfully Detained Americans. Another topic for discussion may be the worrying increase in the coercive detention of U.S. citizens by China. Almost immediately after the Beijing Summit, China detained U.S. citizen Min Zin, a researcher focused on Southeast Asia, while he was attending "an academic conference at the invitation of the Chinese government."[27] On August 20, 2026, the State Department officially determined Min Zin to be wrongfully detained, making him one of two U.S. citizens officially designated as wrongfully detained in China, along with Dr. Youlin Chen.[28]

In a rare success story, on July 4, Zion Church Pastor Ezra Jin was released and returned to the United States.[29] While this is excellent news, it is worth restating that *he never should have been imprisoned in the first place*. Just a few weeks later, the Trump Administration "partially removed Hong Kong-related sanctions and trade restrictions" imposed in 2020, although it did not go so far as to recognize Hong Kong as autonomous.[30] Indeed, the State Department reiterated that Hong Kong "is no longer sufficiently autonomous to justify differential treatment in relation to the PRC," while the Treasury Department stated that 38 of 49 people would remain sanctioned under relevant executive orders and legislation.[31] Nonetheless, the Administration must be sensitive to perceptions that it is offering concessions for the release of U.S. citizens, which could incentivize further detainments or malign actions by Beijing.

In his discussions with General Secretary Xi, President Trump should call for the immediate and *unconditional* release of Min Zin and Dr. Youlin Chen and resist exchanging unrelated national-security concessions for their freedom.

Election Interference. In July, President Trump released declassified intelligence intended to show that China, along with other foreign adversaries, had "compromised U.S. voter data on a massive scale" and demonstrated capabilities to exploit U.S. election integrity by obtaining the "personal data of 220 million American voters." This is the "largest known compromise of U.S. voter information in history."[32] The Chinese government denied the claims as "malicious smears" that have "long been proven to be groundless."[33]

While it is possible that President Trump will mention these findings during the Washington Summit, it is unlikely that the Administration will seek to impose severe costs given that no specific actions have been announced to hold China accountable for its actions in the months since the revelation. President Trump should nonetheless convey to General Secretary Xi that future interference in the U.S. electoral system will be met with severe consequences.

Conclusion

The Washington Summit is unlikely to transform the underlying structure of U.S.–China relations or produce a large number of durable agreements. That outcome would not necessarily constitute failure. Instead, the summit should be judged by whether China demonstrates measurable progress on its previous commitments, whether the United States protects its citizens and interests, and whether President Trump preserves American strategic leverage. Ultimately, avoiding agreements that exchange lasting U.S. strategic advantages for temporary diplomatic gains is preferable to announcing deliverables whose costs exceed their benefits.

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