

Time Bought, Leverage Preserved: Outcomes of the Trump–Xi Summit in Washington

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Washington Summit in September advanced U.S. interests without altering the fundamentally competitive nature of the U.S.–China relationship.

President Trump preserved U.S. leverage by securing targeted agreements while refusing to give ground on Taiwan, export controls, or other core strategic interests.

The summit bought time and reduced near-term tensions, but its ultimate success will depend on Chinese compliance with its commitments and continued U.S. resolve.

From September 23 to 25, 2026, Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping visited Washington, DC, for a summit with President Donald Trump. A previous Heritage Foundation analysis expected the summit to be limited to tactical agreements rather than transformative breakthroughs.¹ The outcomes largely matched those expectations. This *Issue Brief* reviews the Washington Summit’s deliverables, assesses its outcomes, and looks ahead at the U.S.–China relationship’s trajectory.

Outcomes

The Washington Summit marked the second series of in-person meetings between President Trump and General Secretary Xi in 2026. Shortly before the summit began, the United States and China announced that the Busan trade truce, which was

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reached in 2025 to stabilize tariff rates and the flow of rare earths, was extended from November 10, 2026, to January 10, 2027.²

On September 25, the White House published a fact sheet detailing the summit's outcomes.³ The outcomes include:

- The United States welcomed Chinese progress on cracking down on fentanyl precursor chemicals while “strongly encouraging” additional actions, including the “permanent scheduling” of morphine and the imposition of “maximum sentences, including the death penalty where applicable,” for 21 Chinese citizens arrested for illicit drug production.
- The United States welcomed two pandas destined for the Atlanta Zoo.
- The two countries operationalized the Board of Trade by reaching a consensus for “more favorable tariff treatment for \$30 billion of non-sensitive goods in each direction.”
- China committed to importing “at least 10 million metric tons of coal from the United States in 2027 and again [in] 2028.”
- The two countries “established” the Board of Investment but provided no additional operational details.
- The two countries “continue to work on U.S. concerns regarding supply chain shortages related to rare earths and other critical minerals, with the goal of ensuring shipment levels return to appropriate levels.”
- President Trump will visit China in November for the meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum while General Secretary Xi will visit the United States in December for the G20.
- The leaders “agreed that Iran can never have a nuclear weapon and no country or institution can be allowed to impose tolls on international waterways.”
- While stating that the United States and China were “allies in World War II and fought side by side to win the war,” the fact sheet immediately follows up by stating that the United States’ “forward military

presence has preserved a Free and Open Indo-Pacific contributing to generations of American prosperity.”

- The leaders also discussed Russia, North Korea, “trilateral arms control,” and “super intelligence.”
- The two countries “established the U.S.–China Super Intelligence (SI) Dialogue to exchange views on risks and benefits related to SI,” which includes a “bilateral communication channel for SI incidents.”

On September 26, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published its own readout outlining eight outcomes:⁴

1. The two countries agreed to build “a constructive China–U.S. relationship of strategic stability on the basis of respect, fairness, and reciprocity.”
2. The two heads of state intend to attend each other’s hosting of APEC and the G20.
3. Both leaders agreed that Iran “should honor its commitment to not developing nuclear weapons, and no country or institution can be allowed to impose tolls on international waterways.”
4. Both leaders “recall that China and the U.S. were allies in World War II and fought side by side to win the war.”
5. The two countries reached an agreement on reciprocal tariff reductions on \$30 billion worth of goods.
6. The two countries highlighted cooperation on counter-narcotics and law enforcement operations.
7. Both sides agreed to establish the “China–U.S. AI Dialogue” and “establish a bilateral communication channel for AI [artificial intelligence] incidents.”
8. The United States welcomed two pandas arriving at the Atlanta Zoo.

Interestingly, the Chinese readout also claimed that the United States and China agreed to “conclude a memorandum of understanding on crisis communication and prevention as soon as possible.”⁵ The United States fact sheet did not include this reference, and a U.S. official has since stated that the claim “is not accurate and was not even discussed.”⁶ One issue not included in the White House fact sheet was addressing wrongfully detained Americans and other political prisoners, such as Min Zin, who was detained shortly after the May summit, and Jimmy Lai. President Trump has since confirmed to reporters that “I did” raise their cases during his meetings with General Secretary Xi.⁷

Combined, the White House fact sheet and Chinese readout show that the U.S.–China relationship’s “floor” remains steady, but the “ceiling” remains constrained to short-term agreements that do not address the most contentious issues that underlie the bilateral relationship.

Analysis

The Washington Summit produced three main takeaways:

1. **The United States Did Not Concede on Strategic Policy Issues.**

Ultimately, this is perhaps the best U.S. outcome from the summit. Based on the agreements announced, the United States did not alter its policy positions on Taiwan, export controls, and strategic economic sectors. General Secretary Xi’s most recent attempt to have the United States oppose Taiwanese independence did not succeed.⁸ Unlike the May summit, President Trump has kept to a stricter script when discussing Taiwan policy publicly, only telling reporters that Xi “understands very much how I feel.”⁹ This should reduce some anxieties across the Indo–Pacific, including in Taiwan. Furthermore, through the Board of Trade, China is expected to import “agricultural goods, fish and seafood, logs and wood products, cosmetics, and medical devices,” while the United States will import “primarily consumer products, including appliances, toys, holiday decorations, and car seats.”¹⁰

This list is important because the goods with reduced tariffs are non-sensitive, with few national security implications. The Trump Administration rightly kept export controls “off the table.”¹¹ Ultimately, the United States reached agreements that support its economic interests without sacrificing strategically significant policy positions

or sectors to get an agreement across the finish line. That is a desirable and defensible outcome.

2. **Time Was Bought, But Structural Issues Are No Closer to Being Resolved.** One of the summit's most important outcomes is the two-month extension of the U.S.–China trade truce, which extends the deadline from November 10, 2026, to January 10, 2027.¹² Initially, the United States reportedly preferred a six-month extension.¹³ By contrast, some analysts believe that the Chinese side was seeking a longer extension, perhaps up to a two-year extension, to the end of President Trump's second term.¹⁴ The Administration was right to prefer a shorter extension because it allows the United States to regularly assess China's compliance, and the Administration's messaging suggests China has not been entirely upholding its end of the bargain. At the same time, this extension will not fundamentally alter U.S.–China relations. Both sides will continue to compete while “buying time” to strengthen their advantages and reduce external vulnerabilities. While the truce extension incentivizes compliance, it is unlikely to result in any breakthroughs.
3. **Optics Mattered, But They Were More Complicated Than Perceived.** Much attention has been paid to General Secretary Xi's reception in Washington. On the surface, many have criticized President Trump's willingness to, literally, roll out the red carpet for the Chinese leader. This summit served as the first state visit for a Chinese leader in more than 10 years and an unusual instance of President Trump personally greeting a visiting foreign leader on the tarmac. A closer review, however, reveals that the optics may have been more mixed than some have perceived.

As General Secretary Xi was welcomed by President Trump at Joint Base Andrews, two B-1B Lancer bombers flew over both leaders,¹⁵ sending a very different message than President Trump's greeting in Beijing by dozens of children waving flags and singing songs. The next day, a B-2 Spirit bomber and four F-22 Raptors flew over the White House as President Trump and Xi participated in a military ceremony.¹⁶ Then, during the state dinner, performances included selections from *Les Misérables*, including “Do You Hear the People Sing?” which was censored in China following 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong.¹⁷ At the National Archives, President Trump showed General Secretary Xi America's founding documents.

A “last minute” change was made, however, to remove a display of Chinese artifacts after Beijing became “irate” over the planned inclusion of the 1951 Treaty of San Francisco, because “the U.S. and Japan signed it, but not China.”¹⁸ Notably, the treaty “leaves the status of Taiwan undetermined and does not state that the island belongs to Beijing.”¹⁹ The United States also reportedly considered showcasing the Six Assurances and the Three Communiqués, but the documents were “ultimately not included.”²⁰ Overall, while it will not fundamentally alter the trajectory of U.S.–China relations, the summit’s pageantry carried different messages and symbolism designed to demonstrate American strength while potentially pressing into Chinese sensitivities, even as some actions may be perceived as unnecessary.

Looking Ahead

With the trade truce sustained and future meetings expected to occur in only two months, policy analysts should track five primary issues through the start of 2027.

1. **The Trade Truce.** While it is possible for the truce to be extended further in 2027, analysts should also consider under which conditions the truce will not be extended. Both sides are emphasizing a “reciprocal” nature to “constructive strategic stability,” with rare earths, fentanyl, Taiwan, and trade already known to be potential flashpoints. Before the summit, the United States believed that China was only “fulfilling two-thirds of [its rare earth commitments].”²¹ Almost immediately after the summit, U.S. Ambassador to China David Perdue warned that “it’s going to be a bumpy road over the next year” as the United States seeks to “establish independence again on rare earth elements, pharmaceuticals, [and] commercial shipbuilding.”²² These statements raise the question of whether the United States will determine that extending the truce is no longer in its interest. China could also make the same decision if it believes it could extract U.S. concessions by reimposing significant export controls on rare earths. China could also reassess its position following the U.S. midterm elections. Therefore, while both sides currently have incentives to continue the truce, analysts should not automatically assume this will be the case, especially if evidence grows of Chinese noncompliance.

2. **APEC and the G20.** It is possible for the leaders' APEC and G20 meetings to result in additional deliverables, but if the September summit itself produced few unexpected outcomes, these two meetings will likely have even fewer outcomes. Instead, the purpose of these meetings will likely be to sustain a floor in the relationship, maintain leader-to-leader interactions, serve as a "safety valve" to address any immediate disputes, and lay the groundwork for 2027 interactions, including a potential trade truce extension. One emerging issue, however, could be establishing "reciprocal nuclear site visits" following "US concerns about China's rapidly growing nuclear weapons program and after the last remaining arms control agreement between the US and Russia expired earlier this year."²³ If the reporting is accurate, the discussions demonstrate the issue's increased importance to the Trump Administration, even if potential visits would provide only limited visibility into China's broader and rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal.
3. **Taiwan Policy.** On one hand, the Trump Administration did not offer any concessions on Taiwan. On the other hand, questions about a stalled \$14 billion arms package for Taiwan remain. The additional planned meetings may complicate the timing of the package, potentially pushing action into early 2027, which is another reason why the two-month truce extension matters. To be clear: The Trump Administration approved nearly 40 percent more arms sales to Taiwan in 2025 alone than the Biden Administration did in its full four years.²⁴ In fact, no U.S. President has approved more arms sales to Taiwan in American history than President Trump.²⁵ Still, it is in America's security and economic interests to approve the currently stalled arms sale package as soon as reasonably possible because it supports deterrence across the Taiwan Strait and helps to sustain a free and open Indo-Pacific. It is also important to avoid setting the precedent that Taiwan arms packages are negotiable.
4. **AI Policy.** Debates within the United States about AI safety, namely about the potential need to "slow down" AI development or "pace the frontier," are increasingly relevant to the U.S.-China relationship. China engages in widespread distillation attacks on U.S. large language models, such as Claude, ChatGPT, and Gemini.²⁶ This means that Chinese developers can generate large volumes of outputs from U.S. models and use those outputs to train Chinese models to replicate

aspects of the U.S. models' capabilities.²⁷ In other words, China's AI "advancements" are linked in important, though not exclusive, respects to U.S. AI advancements. The Trump Administration has in recent months grown more vocal in condemning these practices.²⁸ Furthermore, as AI-related security incidents continue to occur, including breaking out of digital sandboxes and conducting autonomous hacking,²⁹ the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must tackle a significant challenge: How can China advance AI without potentially compromising the CCP's grasp on power?³⁰ Thus, the establishment of a U.S.–China Super Intelligence Dialogue is a reasonable starting point to address shared interests and concerns about AI developments, but it should be viewed as merely the starting point for bilateral conversations regarding AI. Additionally, as with other issues, a "dialogue" will not solve significant and ongoing policy challenges about AI, and mistrust between the two countries will severely restrict cooperation. To this point, the United States should be wary of Chinese AI commitments and operate under the assumption that China will seek to gain advantages while protecting the CCP's legitimacy in any cooperative arrangement.

5. **Wrongfully Detained Americans.** While it is good news that President Trump raised Min Zin's case directly with General Secretary Xi, it is unfortunate that no additional breakthrough has yet been announced. It did take multiple weeks following the May summit to secure and announce Pastor Ezra Jin's release, however, so it is possible that discussions are ongoing through diplomatic channels. More broadly, it is important that "hostage diplomacy" does not become a routine part of China's playbook as a means of extracting concessions from the United States. If a suitable deal, in accordance with U.S. national security interests, cannot be reached to secure Min Zin and Dr. Youlin Chen, the United States should consider imposing costs in response to Beijing's unjust actions against American citizens.

Conclusion

The Washington Summit met expectations. While diplomatic interactions will continue, the United States and China remain locked in a state of competition, and meetings can only hide so much of the deep mistrust between them. In a highly competitive relationship, avoiding bad outcomes and limiting the escalation of tensions can be a meaningful success. Even

within a narrow operating lane, the Trump Administration's China policy should continue to prioritize holding China accountable to its commitments, safeguarding U.S. advantages, and putting the American people first.

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