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WORLD • CHINA

China Hoped Trump Summit Would Cement Its Superpower Status. Now Xi Has to Wait.

The president's postponement of planned meeting signals that the U.S.—not Beijing—still sets the global agenda

By **Lingling Wei** [Follow](#)

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Xi Jinping sees summits with American leadership as a way to burnish China's superpower status. GILLES SABRIÉ FOR WSJ

Chinese leader Xi Jinping had hoped next month's summit with President Trump

would cement China's status as a peer superpower. But the U.S. request to delay it served as a frustrating reminder that Washington still drives the global agenda.

Trump, deciding he needed to stay in Washington to manage the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, asked to bump back the summit, originally scheduled for April 1 in Beijing, by "a month or so." The move signals that U.S. security concerns remain far more important than honoring Beijing's diplomatic calendar or bolstering Trump's personal connection with Xi, an authoritarian whom Trump has said he admires.

The request has been met with a mix of quiet irritation and public dismissal in Beijing, which is now sitting on the sidelines as the U.S. prosecutes a war that has roiled global oil markets and curbed energy exports from the Persian Gulf, a major source of crude for China. Officials in Beijing were already complaining privately about a lack of advanced planning on the summit from the White House.

"The delay again shows that on global security, the Americans remain the biggest game in town, and Trump is leaning into it," said Ian Bremmer, president of Eurasia Group, a political risk consulting firm.

The rebuke stings because it throws cold water on Beijing's narrative that it is a true global peer of the U.S.—a claim strengthened over the past year as China weathered Trump's tariffs and emerged defiant. For the first time, China weaponized its stranglehold on rare-earth minerals essential for American technology and defense sectors. It extracted concessions from Trump and forced Washington to acknowledge that China now possesses its own set of powerful economic levers.

And yet, China still has a long way to go for the world to accept it as a superpower on par with the U.S.



Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng made a pitch for China's trade policy at Davos in January. PENG ZIYANG/ZUMA PRESS

In January, a delegation led by Xi's economic czar, Vice Premier He Lifeng, arrived in Davos, Switzerland, site of the World Economic Forum, with a carefully calibrated pitch: China was no longer just the world's factory, but a "mega-sized market" and a free-trade harbor.

The message flopped. With a provocative speech at Davos and his threats against Greenland, Trump drowned out the Chinese delegation, leaving them feeling like an opening act for a star who had already stolen the show.

"The officials expected a positive and enthusiastic response to their willingness to embrace other countries," noted Eswar Prasad, a Cornell University professor who interacted with them in Davos. "But they recognized, to their dismay, that this message had fallen flat as Trump sucked up most of the attention."

The same dynamic is now playing out on a broader stage. Some Chinese officials have privately characterized the Iran crisis as a “bug” in the diplomatic process—a temporary glitch that shouldn’t be allowed to derail the more important business of the U.S.-China relationship.

While the Foreign Ministry continues to state diplomatically that both sides “remain in communication” about the leader-level meeting, the Global Times—a state-run, nationalistic tabloid that often serves as a mouthpiece for Beijing’s more aggressive instincts—has mocked the logic behind the delay.

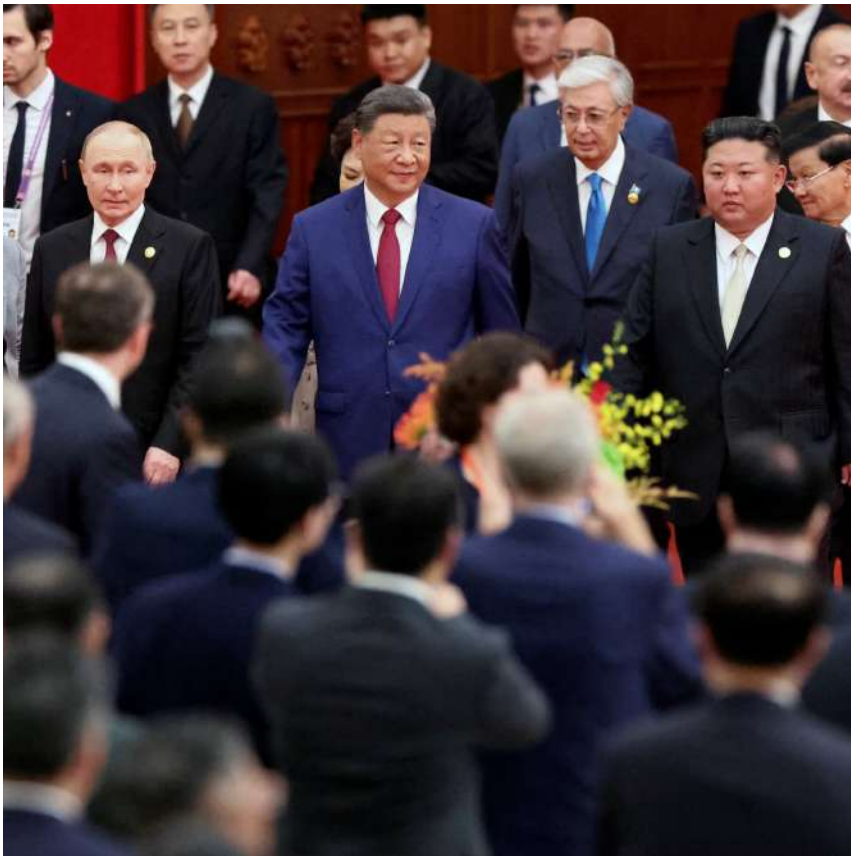
The outlet has characterized the Iran war as a mess of Washington’s own making that is now being used as leverage to drag China into the conflict. The newspaper argued that Trump was trying to force Beijing to help police the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of world oil supplies typically flow, in exchange for his presence in the Great Hall of the People, a sprawling, neoclassical state palace on Tiananmen Square.

Indeed, the price of a rescheduled summit has become a central point of contention. Some Chinese officials are suggesting that as long as the U.S. war in Iran continues, it would be hard for Washington to firm up a date. The officials argue that while Trump might want China to use its influence to push Tehran to yield—particularly on the Strait of Hormuz—Beijing’s cooperation won’t come free. While China is positioning itself to mediate, these officials said, any pressure it puts on Iran would be matched by a demand for the U.S. to cease its strikes so it doesn’t look like a total American victory.

For now, the frustration is palpable. Beijing finds itself in the awkward position of waiting for a final nod from a president who seems more interested in his war-room maps than his flight itinerary to China.

Danny Russel, a former senior U.S. diplomat and vice president at the Asia Society Policy Institute, said Beijing viewed “the sudden, last-minute postponement as disrespectful.” Still, despite the scheduling slights, Xi wants this summit as much as Trump does.

“They are pragmatists and still view a meeting as crucial to managing Trump,” Russel said.



Chinese leader Xi Jinping flanked by U.S. rivals—Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—during their September visit to Beijing. FLORENCE LO/REUTERS

With the Chinese economy facing significant headwinds, a successful meeting offers a rare chance to stabilize the relationship and project an image of global parity.

For Xi, hosting the American president is the ultimate validation. It follows a year where he played host to a “who’s who” of American rivals, including Russian

President Vladimir Putin, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and leaders from Iran. None of those visits, however, carry the weight of a sitting U.S. president's arrival in Beijing.

The silver lining for China, Russel said, is that “the delay spares Beijing the awkwardness of hosting Trump while condemning his attack on Iran as illegal aggression.”

Beyond the optics, there is a strategic calculation regarding Taiwan. As Washington's commitment to Taipei feels increasingly unpredictable, the mere fact of Trump's presence in Beijing would be a victory for Xi, analysts inside and outside China say.

Beijing seems to calculate that the sight of Trump and Xi standing together will shake confidence in Taipei, those analysts say, signaling to the island and the world that when the two superpowers sit down to talk, the interests of smaller allies are always on the table.

Such calculus is a key pillar of Xi's mantra of “changes unseen in a century”—a vision of a post-Western world where Beijing increasingly sets the terms.

Yet, as 2026 unfolds, it is Trump's brand of change—from the military intervention in Venezuela to the strikes in Iran—that remains the primary driver of the global tempo. By unilaterally pausing the summit to tend to a war, Trump has underscored an irony for Beijing: China might be ready to reshape the international order, but for now, it is still reacting to an American president intent on dismantling it.

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