



Family Matters: How the KMT-CCP Meeting Ripples Through US and China Strategies

Tang Meng Kit



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By Tang Meng Kit

SYNOPSIS

The present leaders of the CCP in China and the KMT in Taiwan met in Beijing for the first time during a personal visit by Cheng Li-wun from Taipei to get acquainted with Xi Jinping and to update on the “family situation”. There is no immediate policy decision even though a considerable amount of analysis and speculation prevailed.

COMMENTARY

On 10 April 2026, a carefully staged event unfolded in Beijing. Taiwan’s Kuomintang (KMT) Party Chairwoman Cheng Li-wun met Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the [first](#) high-level KMT–CCP engagement in nearly a decade. Both sides framed the meeting not as diplomacy, but as a [“family matter”](#) rooted in shared historical and constitutional narratives.

On the surface, the meeting produced no agreements, no institutional breakthroughs, and no visible de-escalation in cross-Strait military activity. However, even limited interactions involving China and Taiwan can generate outsized systemic effects. The Cheng–Xi meeting is an event that Beijing can repurpose beyond the immediate cross-Strait context.

Its significance lies in reshaping perceptions of the US–China competition. More precisely, it works as narrative preconditioning. It sets a frame for how cross-Strait relations are understood before any crisis or decision arises. By casting the meeting as a sign of internal accommodation, Beijing can later portray US or allied actions as interference in a domestic matter.

At a moment when Washington's attention is divided by its [ongoing war with Iran](#), which has also disrupted earlier plans for a [Trump–Xi meeting](#), Beijing has an opportunity to position Taiwan more strongly as an internal issue, trending toward political accommodation between itself and Taipei.

This reframing does not alter much on the ground. It does something more subtle: It weakens the perceived legitimacy of US intervention, placing a heavier burden of justification on it to intervene in cross-Strait matters.

Politics at Home, Leverage Abroad

Cheng's rise to [KMT leadership](#) in late 2025 opened the door to re-engagement. Her endorsement of the ["1992 Consensus"](#) and the [April "peace mission"](#) aimed to reopen stalled cross-Strait channels.

Her aims were modest: to reopen communication, test institutionalised exchanges, and signal that dialogue could resume without altering Taiwan's security posture or its ties with the United States.

Without authority from Lai Ching-te, the leader of the Taiwanese political party in power, Cheng's visit served primarily as political signalling. Symbolism outweighed substance. Its outcomes reflected KMT positions, not state policy, and would need adoption by the Lai administration to carry official weight. As an opposition party, the KMT cannot make binding commitments. The meeting matters more outside Taiwan. It gives Beijing a narrative of cross-Strait accommodation, even though no government policy has changed.

Electoral considerations provide additional context. Since emerging from internal party contestation, Cheng has sought to stabilise the KMT ahead of the November [2026 local elections](#) and the 2028 presidential race. Engagement with Beijing is one of the party's distinctive policy offerings, exuding competence in cross-Strait management to voters who prioritise predictability over confrontation.

However, a shared-identity narrative has its limits. Long-running National Chengchi University [polling](#) tracking identity trends since the 1990s shows that people identifying as Taiwanese have consistently exceeded 60 per cent since the mid-2010s. Engagement may signal manageability, but not convergence, and its electoral payoff remains uncertain. If the KMT performs poorly in the November 2026 local elections, it would suggest that Beijing's "family matter" framing lacks domestic traction in Taiwan.

These domestic constraints intersect with defence politics. The KMT's [repeated blocking](#) of the Lai administration's NT\$1.25 trillion (US\$39.6 billion) special defence budget complicates any image of a unified defence posture. The contrast is stark: the governing party advances higher defence spending while the opposition simultaneously engages with Beijing and opposes the same budget.

Beijing can recast this divergence in diplomatic forums with allies, and in public messaging, presenting it as evidence that cross-Strait tensions stem as much from

Taiwan's internal contestation as from external pressure, thereby raising the threshold for external support.

A Family Narrative as Strategy, Not Sentiment

Beijing's handling of Cheng's visit follows a familiar [united-front approach](#): show reasonableness, normalise party-to-party contact, and signal progress without conceding substance. Engagement and pressure proceed in parallel. Even as the visit was framed as constructive, PLA [activity](#) around Taiwan continued unabated.

In his keynote remarks, Xi Jinping advanced a narrative built on identity, inevitability, and control. By [asserting](#) that “*compatriots on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are all members of the Chinese nation*”, he portrays political separation as incomplete national unity. Harder-edged [declarations](#), “*our territory cannot be divided, our country cannot be thrown into disorder, our nation cannot be fragmented*”, elevate reunification from policy preference to a non-negotiable principle. The longer [formulation](#), stressing that historical momentum “will not change”, casts external involvement as a disruption to an internal process.

In Cheng's response, which echoed that “*the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the shared aspiration of people on both sides*,” the vocabulary overlaps even as the intent behind it diverges sharply. Beijing uses this shared language to assert reunification as historically inevitable, while the KMT employs it to signal openness to cross-Strait engagement without endorsing political merger.

This asymmetry makes the exchange useful to Beijing. It can take the KMT's conciliatory language and present it abroad as acceptance of reunification. Yet it remains unbound by the KMT's intent. The KMT seeks coexistence, not convergence.

The exchange rests on constitutional ambiguity. Both the PRC and Taiwan derive their competing sovereignty claims from the same pre-1949 Republican order, an unresolved inheritance that lends the “family” narrative historical plausibility.

Taiwan's residual territorial framework, rooted in the ROC Constitution's formal claim over China, sufficiently overlaps with Beijing's position to sustain this framing. Cross-Strait relations are thus recast as intra-Chinese rather than interstate, rendering external involvement as interference rather than engagement.

The result is beneficial for Beijing: no concessions, no de-escalation, only a reserve of narratives that it can deploy in future diplomatic settings.

Geopolitical Ripples: Reframing the Bargaining Space

The Cheng–Xi meeting matters less for what it achieved than for how it can be used. By presenting the encounter as evidence of cross-Strait accommodation emerging through internal channels, Beijing gains a reusable diplomatic asset that can frame future US or allied actions as disruptive to a process already underway. The mechanism is indirect yet consequential.

First, visible cross-Strait engagement introduces ambiguity about Taiwan's internal trajectory. Second, that ambiguity raises the reputational and diplomatic costs of US intervention. Third, even marginal increases in escalation risk can induce hesitation over decisions such as the timing of arms sales, high-level visits, and rhetorical signalling.

Historical precedent suggests the limits of this effect. Under former president Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016), sustained executive-level engagement with Beijing did not weaken US commitments, even though it coincided with more cautious rhetoric and occasional delays in arms sales by Washington. The Obama administration also hedged carefully during the peak of US–China engagement in 2009–2011. If constraints were modest even then, their scope under today's party-to-party, non-executive contact, since the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) took over the presidency, is likely narrower still.

Such signalling provides no leverage on its own but offers an additional rationale for restraint when restraint is already preferred. In this sense, narrative does not dictate policy. Instead, it shapes the conditions under which policy is chosen.

Current asymmetries reinforce this dynamic. The United States remains preoccupied with the [Iran conflict](#), including maritime security concerns in the [Strait of Hormuz](#) and [fragile ceasefire diplomacy](#). While the ceasefire holds, it consumes attention and political capital. By contrast, Beijing operates with a more focused strategic approach.

Timing, therefore, matters. At the prospective [Trump–Xi summit](#) this month, Beijing can cite the Cheng–Xi meeting as evidence of stabilisation on the Taiwan issue through internal channels, arguing that external actions risk disrupting an emerging dialogue, even if conditions on the ground remain largely unchanged.

Washington need not accept this framing, but rejecting it entails a higher diplomatic cost. In a constrained decision-making environment, even small increases in friction can tilt marginal choices.

Implications for Allies and Collective Deterrence

The implications extend beyond US–China bargaining. For allies such as Japan and Australia, visible cross-Strait engagement complicates deterrence signalling. The challenge is not confusion but calibration. If Taiwan appears internally engaged, strong external signalling risks being perceived as escalatory. If signalling is softened, the credibility of deterrence may weaken.

In Japan, where Taiwan contingencies are closely linked to the defence of its [southwestern islands](#), the “internal accommodation” narrative poses a messaging dilemma: how to justify preparedness without appearing to pre-empt a political process. In Australia, balancing alliance commitments with [economic exposure to China](#), the same ambiguity widens the scope for cautious hedging.

Beijing does not need to divide its allies directly. It only needs to create enough uncertainty to make alignment more politically and strategically risky.

Internal Moves, External Consequences

Cheng's visit was limited in form, yet its effects emerge from the dynamics it sets in motion. By reinforcing a "family matter" narrative, it expands Beijing's capacity to frame cross-Strait developments as internally managed, recasting actions intended to assert agency or sustain deterrence as elements an accommodation process already defined by Beijing.

This advantage, however, is not fixed. It depends on perception, which is reversible. A breakdown in dialogue, renewed escalation, or clearer signals of Taiwanese political consolidation could quickly erode the narrative.

The immediate tests are clear: the Trump–Xi summit and Taiwan's 2026 local elections will show whether this signal endures or fades. More broadly, the question is whether Beijing can sustain this narrative advantage without corresponding changes on the ground.

In great-power competition, material capabilities set the limits. But narratives shape the space in which choices are made. The Cheng–Xi meeting does not resolve the Taiwan question, but it does something quieter yet consequential: it adjusts the terms of engagement, shifting pressure outward and narrowing the space for action by external parties.

Tang Meng Kit is a Singaporean freelance analyst and commentator who also works as an aerospace engineer. He graduated from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore in 2025.

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