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Why the Trump-Xi rapport is just as critical as geopolitical structure

By Yao Bowen

SYNOPSIS

Donald Trump's rapport with Xi Jinping should not be dismissed as diplomatic theatre. Structural competition will persist, but their direct relationship could serve as a crisis circuit-breaker, allowing both leaders to bypass bureaucratic inertia, nationalist pressure, and escalation risks in moments of danger. This optimistic view of the Trump-Xi relationship is based on the author's perception.

COMMENTARY

President Donald Trump's recent state visit to Beijing offered a striking counterpoint to prevailing wisdom in contemporary geopolitics. Despite the bureaucratic machinery of Washington and Beijing remaining locked in systemic confrontation, the essence of US-China diplomacy remains intensely personal.

This spectacle is not an anomaly; it is the continuation of a uniquely resilient personal dynamic. Throughout years of cascading tariffs, tech blockades, and military posturing, Trump and Xi Jinping have maintained a subtle, mutual restraint that defies the vitriol of modern political discourse.

Trump, a leader famously uninhibited in his public lambasting of foreign and domestic rivals, has consistently shielded Xi from his rhetorical crossfire, repeatedly praising the Chinese president as a "brilliant" and "great leader." Xi has reciprocated this diplomatic immunity with rare gestures of personal deference, such as hosting Trump for a private tour of Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound of the Chinese Communist Party, during Trump's recent visit.

This mutual appreciation is deeply transactional yet fundamentally psychological. As former National Security Advisor John Bolton noted in his memoirs, Xi told Trump

during his first term that Beijing looked forward to dealing with him for "[six more years](#)" – a rare admission from a Chinese leader expressing a clear preference for a specific American counterpart.

To most traditional international relations scholars, however, this personal chemistry is nothing more than theatrical window dressing. The structural realist consensus holds that deep material forces – the Thucydides Trap, shifting power balances, and incompatible ideological systems – inevitably outweigh individual agency. History is routinely weaponised to support this bleak conclusion.

On the eve of World War I, the extensive and affectionate "[Willy-Nicky correspondence](#)" between Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia did nothing to halt the rigid mobilisation schedules of their respective military machines. Similarly, the personal rapport and wartime compromises forged by the "Big Three" – Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin – at Yalta evaporated almost immediately after the end of hostilities and Roosevelt's death. These precedents suggest that personal ties often collapse under structural pressure.

Yet this rigid structural determinism suffers from a profound blind spot. It ignores the fact that, at specific, hyper-critical junctures, personal ties between strongmen can serve as the ultimate circuit breaker against systemic collapse. This is especially true when leaders possess the domestic political capital to bypass their own hawkish bureaucracies.

During the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the structural momentum of the Cold War was propelling the United States and the Soviet Union towards an existential nuclear exchange. Ultimately, the private, unpublicised [correspondence between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev](#) – and their fragile, mutual recognition of each other's underlying rationality – enabled them to defy their respective military commanders and engineer a secret compromise. A decade later, it took the iconoclastic, anti-communist credentials of Richard Nixon and the absolute, unassailable authority of Mao Zedong to shatter twenty years of rigid ideological gridlock. Nixon and Mao similarly used personalised [diplomacy](#) to override entrenched ideological hostility.

Today, the international landscape is fractured by a dangerous convergence of flashpoints. The war in Ukraine, instability in the Middle East, Japan's more assertive strategic posture, and persistent tensions across the Taiwan Strait all heighten the risks of crisis spillover. In this hyper-fragmented environment, the foreign policy establishments of both Washington and Beijing have succumbed to a dangerous institutional momentum.

In the United States, a rigid, bipartisan anti-China consensus has taken root within the "Deep State" – the permanent bureaucracy of the Pentagon, State Department, and Commerce Department – where officials are incentivised to continually escalate economic and technological restrictions. In Beijing, wolf-warrior institutional inertia threatens to match Washington step for step. Under standard diplomatic operating procedures, a minor tactical miscalculation in the South China Sea or an accidental

military collision near Taiwan could easily trigger an uncontrollable escalatory spiral, fuelled by nationalist domestic pressures and bureaucratic path dependency.

This is precisely where the Trump-Xi rapport shifts from a diplomatic curiosity into a vital strategic asset. Both leaders are uniquely positioned as "system-override" actors. Trump operates with intense disdain for traditional Washington institutions and has a fiercely loyal political base that insulates him from accusations of being "soft on China." Xi, as the undisputed "core" of the Chinese Communist Party, commands the domestic authority required to enforce major strategic concessions without fear of bureaucratic pushback or elite dissent.

Indeed, a modern iteration of the "[Only Nixon could go to China](#)" paradigm may be at play here. Having formally initiated the US strategic competition with Beijing during his first term through unprecedented trade wars and hawkish rhetoric, Trump has firmly established his anti-China, America-First credentials.

Paradoxically, this hawkish legacy grants him unique domestic political cover. Much like Nixon's impeccable anti-communist record allowed him to bridge the Cold War chasm without facing accusations of betrayal, Trump's established role as the original architect of confrontation arguably makes him the only American politician who can afford to be pragmatic and flexible. His hawkish record gives him more latitude than many conventional politicians to justify tactical flexibility towards Beijing.

In a moment of acute systemic crisis, their personal relationship serves as a direct, unmediated communication channel. When a crisis erupts, standard diplomatic channels are often paralysed by the need for legalistic posturing and face-saving delays. A direct phone call between Trump and Xi, however, enables immediate, hyper-pragmatic transaction.

Because Trump views international relations through a non-ideological, commercial lens, he can translate a rigid, existential geopolitical flashpoint into a negotiable business proposition. If a conflict looms over Taiwan or supply chain chokepoints, the two men can bypass ideological grandstanding and strike a tactical truce based on reciprocal economic or strategic trade-offs. They could instead seek a limited bargain that lowers immediate military risk without resolving the broader rivalry.

The thin and erratic thread of personal trust between Trump and Xi is no substitute for stable institutions, but it may still be one of the few remaining safeguards against catastrophic escalation.

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