



Everyone Goes to Beijing: China's Rise as the World's Strategic Middleman

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By Tang Meng Kit

SYNOPSIS

In 2026, Beijing emerged as the world's strategic middleman, benefiting from crises in Iran, Ukraine, and over the issue of Taiwan. It drew leaders from around the globe, a trend amplified by the Taiwanese oppositionist Cheng Li-wun's visit and US President Donald Trump's summit with President Xi Jinping. Beijing's growing indispensability, however, rests on keeping disputes unresolved, as it erodes the deterrence architecture Taiwan depends on.

COMMENTARY

When Donald Trump sat across from Xi Jinping in Beijing in May and [described](#) a US\$14 billion weapons package for Taiwan as "a very good negotiating chip," the remark drew attention well beyond the summit room. Beijing had not engineered that moment, nor would Xi have endorsed that phrasing. Yet months of diplomacy across three simultaneous crises had already created the conditions in which Trump's framing made strategic sense to Beijing. The remark was blunter than Beijing preferred, yet it ultimately worked to its advantage by treating longstanding US security commitments to Taiwan as a bargaining chip in great-power negotiations.

Beijing did not create the crises of 2026 elsewhere in the world. It viewed them as opportunities and gave governments with very different priorities reasons to visit Beijing. Adversaries, allies, and energy-importing states arrived within months of one another, each pursuing objectives that were often not aligned.

The first crisis was Iran. [Coordinated](#) US-Israel strikes on February 28 [disrupted](#) the Strait of Hormuz, triggering severe shocks in Asian energy markets, including Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand. China, Iran's largest oil buyer, quickly

offered alternative supplies to neighbouring states. This crisis strengthened Beijing's diplomatic position in the region.

The Ukraine war, in its fifth year, remained too difficult for Washington to resolve and too costly for Moscow to concede. A prolonged war also keeps Washington's strategic attention divided.

Taiwan was the third pillar in this interlocking architecture of instability. President Lai Ching-te's defence budget had [repeatedly been blocked](#) in the Taiwanese legislature. A US\$14 billion arms package [remained stalled](#) in Washington. In April, Cheng Li-wun, leader of Taiwan's main opposition party, [visited](#) Beijing and warned against turning the Strait into a geopolitical chessboard.

These were not separate developments. Together, they created an interlocking diplomatic opportunity for Beijing, as each crisis reinforced the others and encouraged countries to engage with China.

By mid-2026, governments with very different priorities had increasingly concluded that engagement with Beijing was difficult to avoid. Within months of one another, Xi hosted the Canadian, British and Spanish prime ministers, Gulf heads of state, and Southeast Asian leaders. Mark Carney's January visit, Canada's first at prime ministerial level since 2017, reflected trade pressures more than ideological change. Apparently, more foreign leaders are scheduled to visit Beijing before the year is over.

The dynamic was most visible at its smallest scale. KMT chair Cheng Li-wun [arrived](#) in Beijing on April 7 and met Xi on April 10, marking the party's first chairperson-level visit to the mainland in a decade. The timing strongly suggested strategic intent.

Xi secured Cheng's endorsement of the view that cross-Strait relations [should remain](#) "firmly in the hands of the Chinese people" and that both sides should oppose external interference. These formulations cast US arms sales as intrusions into what Beijing regards as a domestic matter, a [warning](#) echoed by Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council.

Cheng also reaffirmed the 1992 Consensus, a [term coined](#) by KMT official Su Chi in 2000 to describe an alleged 1992 understanding that each side could maintain its own interpretation of "one China." Beijing has long since abandoned that ambiguity in favour of a singular territorial claim. The formula no longer holds the same meaning for both sides.

The consequences of Cheng's visit to Beijing were felt domestically. Within weeks of her return, Taiwan's legislature [cut](#) Lai's proposed defence budget by about a third. There was hardly any dispute. Taiwan's own political process produced an outcome that aligned with Beijing's preferences.

A month before Trump arrived in Beijing, Cheng had published an essay in [Foreign Affairs](#) arguing that Taiwan need not choose between Beijing and Washington. The

article echoed elements of Beijing's preferred cross-Strait framing in one of Washington's most influential foreign policy journals.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's [post-summit claim](#) that Washington "understands China's position and does not support Taiwan moving towards independence" said nothing new. Multiple US administrations expressed that sentiment. What changed was the framing: Beijing presented a standing American position as a concession it had extracted, and Washington did not correct the record.

Trump's remark about the intended arms sale to Taiwan compounded the damage. Since 1982, the [Six Assurances](#) have kept arms sales to Taiwan outside US-China negotiations, a principle nine successive US administrations have maintained because its value lay entirely in its unconditional character. However, a firewall that an American president treats as negotiable is no firewall at all.

The issue is no longer only about whether Taiwan receives the weapons, but about whether their delivery is still considered certain. Taiwan now faces uncertainty in Washington while remaining divided at home over defence policy.

European governments sought Beijing's support for the war in Ukraine. Gulf and Southeast Asian states needed energy security. Canada sought trade relief, while Taiwan's opposition sought room for cross-Strait dialogue. Those interests were often not aligned, yet each encouraged further visits to Beijing through demonstration effects and lowered political costs.

When Xi told Trump that Chinese national rejuvenation and Trump's Make America Great Again vision could advance together, he was framing his objective in language his guest would find flattering. The rejuvenation Xi envisions has Taiwan's reunification at its centre.

Beijing's position has serious constraints. Slowing growth, local debt, demographic decline, and a fragile property sector narrow its room for manoeuvre. A power that cannot stabilise its own economy faces a credibility ceiling on its promise to stabilise others. Taiwan's 62 per cent identification as [Taiwanese-only](#), a figure that has held across successive surveys, represents a generational consolidation that party-to-party diplomacy cannot reach.

Settling the Ukraine and Iran conflicts, or reducing tensions across the Taiwan Strait, would each lessen Beijing's diplomatic leverage.

Many national leaders travelled to Beijing because Washington had become less predictable or because no other capital could address their immediate concerns. Those visits reflected national interests, but they also illustrated how closely Beijing has become woven into crises far beyond China. Whether that position ultimately produces greater stability or deeper dependence on Beijing remains an open question.

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