Trump, Xi, And The Battle For The Future World Order

The Trump–Xi summit may ultimately determine whether the emerging global order is shaped by confrontation and technological decoupling, or by strategic cooperation, regulated AI governance, and a renewed rules-based international framework

Saeed Shafqat | Analysis, Main Slider | May 13, 2026

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Much anticipated, President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping's summit meeting is scheduled for May 14–15, 2026, in Beijing. This meeting is taking place under the shadow of the ongoing U.S.–Israel–Iran–Lebanon war. Newspaper reports have identified at least five key agenda items: Artificial Intelligence, the sale of Boeing aircraft to China, exports of U.S. agricultural products, energy supply security, and the opening of the Strait of Hormuz. From the Chinese perspective, a central objective would be to persuade the United States to stop selling arms to Taiwan and uphold the One China policy. Clearly, this is a broad agenda with multiple dimensions and profound global implications.

Looking at the reported composition of President Trump's delegation, which includes Tim Cook of Apple, Larry Fink of BlackRock, Stephen Schwarzman of Blackstone, Kelly Ortberg of Boeing, Brian Sikes of Cargill, Jane Fraser of Citi, Jim Anderson of Coherent, Larry Culp of GE Aerospace, David Solomon of Goldman Sachs, Jacob Thaysen of Illumina, Michael Miebach of Mastercard, Dina Powell McCormick of Meta, Sanjay Mehrotra of Micron, Cristiano Amon of Qualcomm, Elon Musk of Tesla, and Ryan McInerney of Visa, it becomes evident that technology and AI pioneers, business magnates, cyberspace strategists, and financial power brokers are expected to assist the U.S. president in reshaping the contours of the emerging global order.

Within this context, it appears that Artificial Intelligence has emerged as the central arena of U.S.–China competition. As a general-purpose technology, AI carries far-reaching implications for economic productivity, military capability, governance, and strategic influence.

The United States' primary strengths lie in its innovation ecosystem, research institutions, and enduring faith in private-sector dynamism. China, however, has advanced rapidly through sustained state investment, massive data accumulation, and coherent industrial policy. U.S. responses have included export controls, investment restrictions, and efforts to secure supply chains.

Middle East Chaos Signals The Decline Of The Western-Led World Order

These measures reflect a broader shift towards technological decoupling and the securitisation of innovation. China's strategy, by contrast, emphasises self-reliance and global leadership in AI. The competition, therefore, is not merely economic or geopolitical; it is also normative, involving competing visions of digital governance and technological sovereignty, as reflected in China's 15th Five-Year Plan.

The critical question is whether this summit will intensify technological decoupling or create space for cooperative management. In a recent column, the well-known New York Times columnist Tom Friedman argued that the United States and China today face a challenge not from a rival state but from non-state actors, such as AI creators and major entrepreneurs.

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He suggests that both powers need to develop regulatory mechanisms and policy frameworks capable of restraining the uncontrolled expansion of AI through mutually agreed ethical standards, business models, and safeguards designed to ensure public good and global safety.

The forthcoming U.S.–China summit increasingly reveals the importance of leadership style and strategic culture in shaping the future global order. In this context, a comparative reflection on Henry Kissinger, Donald Trump, and Xi Jinping offers a useful analytical lens for understanding contemporary great-power competition and the emerging international landscape.

Henry Kissinger's diplomatic philosophy was rooted in classical realism, emphasising balance of power, strategic restraint, and incrementalism — a step-by-step approach to diplomacy. His "shuttle diplomacy" became diplomacy personified. Yet Kissinger consistently prioritised order and systemic stability over ideological confrontation, demonstrating a high tolerance for ambiguity and gradualism (Indyk, Martin. Master of the Game: Henry Kissinger and the Art of Middle East Diplomacy, 2021; Kissinger, Henry. On China, 2011).

The Illusion Of Dollar Strength In A Fracturing World Order

By contrast, U.S. policy under President Donald Trump reflects an unpredictable, disruptive, and transactional leadership style, marked by bilateralism, scepticism towards alliances and the United Nations system, and the use of economic coercion, principally in the form of tariffs and trade wars against China and much of the world. Trump's approach signalled a departure from institutionalised diplomacy towards a loyalty-driven, personalised, and immediate pursuit of national advantage embodied in the slogans "America First" and MAGA.

Xi Jinping, on the other hand, represents a coherently centralised, long-term, and state-centric strategic vision (Kevin Rudd, On Xi Jinping, 2024). His leadership emphasises national rejuvenation, technological self-reliance, and the expansion of China's global influence through initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Unlike the reactive and often short-term orientation of Trump's policies, Xi's strategy appears systematic, disciplined, and future-oriented, integrating economic, political, technological, and military instruments of power.

A key distinction between U.S. and Chinese strategic behaviour lies in their respective approaches to constructing and sustaining world order. The United States, particularly in the Kissingerian tradition, sought to manage and stabilise regions through alliances and diplomatic engagement, even while pursuing strategic dominance. Trump, however, has tended to devalue alliances and multilateralism while relying more heavily on the projection and potential use of U.S. military power.

China, under Xi Jinping, appears more inclined to operate within existing institutional frameworks and structures of economic interdependence, while simultaneously reshaping aspects of the global order without directly confronting the United States militarily.

Another critical dimension concerns ideology. While Kissinger largely downplayed ideology in favour of Realpolitik, the contemporary U.S.–China rivalry increasingly carries ideological overtones, particularly in American discourse on governance systems, technology, and global norms. China's approach, however, remains comparatively cautious and pragmatic. Beijing continues to behave as a reluctant great power: assertive yet measured, blending state control with economic globalisation rather than pursuing an overtly doctrinaire ideological project.

The Iran Crisis As A Catalyst For A New World Order

Strategically, U.S. behaviour has oscillated between engagement and containment, whereas China has pursued a carefully calibrated strategy of integration, technological advancement, and strategic expansion, reflected in its long-term planning under the 15th Five-Year Plan. This asymmetry reveals deeper differences rooted in political systems, historical experiences, and leadership worldviews.

Leadership styles matter profoundly. Kissinger's legacy illustrates the power of strategic patience and calibrated diplomacy, qualities that Xi Jinping appears to have carefully embraced. Trump's ongoing strategy accentuates the disruptive impact of unilateralism and transactional statecraft, while Xi Jinping's approach highlights the importance of coherent centralisation, long-term planning, and strategic vision. Together, these contrasting models illuminate the evolving contours of U.S.–China competition and the immense challenges involved in constructing a stable global order during this decade.

The May 14–15, 2026, summit between Trump and Xi could set the tone, direction, and agenda for the future management of AI, technology, and world order. However, if the United States and Israel choose to abandon the existing ceasefire and relaunch military strikes against Iran, the consequences could extend far beyond regional instability, potentially triggering uncontrollable global chaos.

Yet, there remains an optimistic possibility. Trump and Xi could attempt to devise a peace formula that guarantees comprehensive and lasting peace for Iran and the wider Middle East. In return, Iran could assure the international community that it will abandon any ambition to acquire nuclear weapons capability. Such an arrangement could represent a genuine win-win outcome — restoring trust in the major powers and paving the way for a fresh architecture of a mutually agreed, rules-based order. Whether this is a realistic possibility or merely a distant aspiration remains uncertain.

Is The Liberal World Order In Terminal Decline?

TAGS: US-China relations, Trump Xi summit 2026, Artificial Intelligence geopolitics, US China technology rivalry, global world order, TFT, Friday Times

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Saeed Shafqat

The author is Professor at Forman Christian College (FCC), Lahore, and Founding Director at the Centre for Public Policy & Governance (CPPG)

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