

Beijing used Trump's visit to announce a New World Order

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When US President [Donald Trump](#) boarded Air Force One to return home after his much-awaited and once-postponed visit to China, observers were hard put to describe what had come of the meetings between the leaders of the world's two most powerful nations. There were some minor takeaways. For example, [China](#) promised to order 200 (as opposed to an expected 500) aeroplanes from Boeing. It also lifted restrictions on imports from US beef plants, imposed in response to the tariff aggression of the US administration that has played out over the last year. But such small gestures of economic cooperation as opposed to conflict were underwhelming, to say the least, given Trump's reputation for extreme demands on and transactional engagement with the rest of the world.

It did not help that official read-outs from the two sides and journalistic reports based on conversations with unnamed, high-level sources presented differing assessments. While the US read-out spoke of an agreement towards increased [Chinese purchases](#) of agricultural products and energy from the US, statements from the Chinese merely referred to "balanced" and "positive" outcomes from trade talks during the visit. While the US flagged an agreement on further limiting the flow of fentanyl precursors into the US, which Trump had named as a major irritant in the relationship between the two countries, Chinese statements made no direct reference to the issue. Clearly, actual economic concessions by either side were few and received mention only as symbolic messages of an improvement in the fraught ties between the two countries.

Hindsight suggests that it was not in the economic but in the political and strategic realms that the messages from Beijing in the form of statements and silences were telling. Thus, while the Chinese side simply referred to an exchange of views on the situation in West Asia, the US claimed that the two sides had agreed that Iran should not acquire nuclear weapons capability. Specifically, while there was no mention of the Strait of Hormuz in the Chinese read-outs, the US claimed that there was agreement on the need to ensure the free flow of energy through the strait and that China was clear that there should be no weaponisation of the strait or imposition of tolls on ship movement.

Threat to US Hegemony

But beyond these, there were two very explicit statements from Chinese President Xi Jinping that, ultimately, defined the visit. One was his warning that the two countries should not fall into the "Thucydides Trap" of war precipitated by the fears of a ruling hegemon in the face of the rapid rise of a potential challenger. This statement explicitly underlined the Chinese reading that it saw itself as a threat to US hegemony and that US efforts to contain its principal rival should be reined in to prevent unspeakable consequences.

The second was Xi's statement that Taiwan, the merger of which with the Chinese mainland was inevitable, was "the most important issue in China-US relations", which "if mishandled" could result in "collision or even clashes" between the two nations and push the China-US relationship into dangerous territory.

What was remarkable was not just Xi's candour on these two important issues. It was also the absence of any strong response from the US to these statements. In an implicit response to the Thucydides reference, Trump in fact said: "The relationship between China and the USA is going to be better than ever before." And the official White House statement had no mention of Taiwan.

According to reports, Trump told journalists aboard the returning Air Force One flight that no commitments were offered by him on Taiwan and that the possible contentious \$14 billion arms sale to the current government of that territory was still on the table. Moreover, in an uncharacteristic resort to diplomacy, he reportedly retorted, "I don't talk about that," when questioned whether the US would defend Taiwan in the event of a conflict with the mainland.

Absent any significant results on a host of recent economic, political, and strategic conflicts—from the trade in chips and rare earth magnets to the wars in Ukraine and West Asia—the above statements from Xi are the ones that define the outcome of the visit. The message is clearly that in the reading of the undisputed leader of an "emerging" China, global geopolitics is at an inflection point. Eight decades after the end of a world war that marked the displacement of Britain by the US as global hegemon, the time has come, Xi seems to think, for one more such epochal development involving the displacement of the US by China as world leader.

Seeing that historic shift as inevitable and irreversible, Xi's interest seems to be in ensuring that, this time around, the context of the transition is not as violent as the previous one. Hence, the need to explicitly call for avoiding a Thucydides Trap and accept the transition as the normal course of things in a world where "change was the only absolute". This is what Xi possibly meant when he said that Trump's visit to China, the first in a long while by a sitting US President, marked the beginning of a "constructive strategic stable relationship". Telling his US counterpart in their first meeting during the visit that the two countries "should be partners, not rivals", Xi went on to clarify on another occasion: "Achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and making America great again can go hand in hand."

This summit was less about forging agreement and cooperation between two major world powers and more about China making a declaration. Xi may be right or wrong. But he is clear that China's time as global hegemon has come. It is for time to tell and the rest of the world to experience whether that is true and, if so, what that means.

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