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China Primer: U.S.-China Relations

The United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC, or China) lead the world in the size of their economies, defense budgets, and research and technology investments. Both are among the five nuclear-armed, veto-wielding permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. While the first Trump Administration and the Biden Administration described the U.S.-China relationship as one of "strategic competition," the second Trump Administration has stated that it seeks a "balance of power" and a "stable peace" with China. At a May 2026 summit, President Donald J. Trump and Communist Party General Secretary and PRC President Xi Jinping committed to "build a constructive relationship of strategic stability." (A White House fact sheet added the phrase "on the basis of fairness and reciprocity," which is absent from PRC readouts.)

Some U.S. and PRC policies appear intended to foster stability in relations, particularly ahead of Xi's planned September 24, 2026, state visit to Washington, DC. (The PRC has not confirmed the date for Xi's visit.) Other actions and statements from the Administration and the PRC government appear to align with a relationship of strategic competition. In its oversight and legislative activities, the 119th Congress has focused on the challenges and risks that China poses to U.S. interests, including by reauthorizing the House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party (H.Res. 5) first established in the 118th Congress (H.Res. 11).

Second Trump Administration Policy

The second Trump Administration has outlined aspects of its approach to China in two major public documents, the December 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) and the January 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS). Language about China in those documents is in some places conciliatory and in other places combative, which could reflect strategic framing, policy differences within the Administration, or both. The NSS pledges that the Administration will "[w]in the economic future" in Asia, in part through "a genuinely mutually advantageous economic relationship with Beijing." The NSS also states that the Administration seeks to "rebalance America's economic relationship with China, prioritizing reciprocity and fairness to restore American economic independence." The NSS does not explicitly identify China as a competitor.

The NDS states that "President Trump seeks a stable peace, fair trade, and respectful relations with China." The NDS adds that the goal of the Department of Defense (which is "using a secondary Department of War designation" under Executive Order 14347, dated September 5, 2025) "is not to dominate China; nor is it to strangle or humiliate them," but rather, "[t]o prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate us or our allies," and to achieve "a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific that allows all of us to enjoy a decent peace." The NDS explicitly states that U.S. defense strategy toward the PRC "does not require regime change." The NDS makes no mention of Taiwan, the self-governing democracy over which the PRC claims sovereignty. The NDS states the Department's intention to "erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain," a reference to the string of islands in Asia that includes Japan, Taiwan, and parts of the Philippines and Indonesia. (See CRS In Focus IF12481, *Taiwan: Defense and Military Issues*.)

To manage the bilateral relationship and address key issues, the Administration has prioritized leader-level engagement and regular meetings of senior foreign policy, trade, and economic officials. President Trump and Xi have held two summits since 2025, with up to three more possible this year, including Xi's U.S. state visit in September. (See **Table 1**.) China has invited President Trump to travel to Shenzhen, PRC, in November 2026 for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Meeting it is hosting this year. If the President attends APEC, some analysts expect Xi to reciprocate and attend the 2026 G-20 summit in Miami, FL. (PRC Premier Li Qiang represented China at the 2025 G-20 summit in South Africa).

Table 1. Trump-Xi Summits, 2025-2026

Date	Location	Details
Oct. 30, 2025	Busan, South Korea	First Trump-Xi in-person meeting since 2019 in Osaka, Japan
May 14-15, 2026	Beijing, PRC	First presidential visit to PRC since Trump's 2017 trip
*Sept. 24, 2026	Washington, DC	Would be Xi's first U.S. visit since 2023 and second U.S. state visit (the first was in 2015)
*Nov. 18-19, 2026	Shenzhen, PRC	Possible meeting on APEC sidelines
*Dec. 14-15, 2026	Miami, FL	Possible meeting on G-20 sidelines

Source: White House.

Note: * Planned or proposed meetings.

At the Busan summit in October 2025, Trump and Xi agreed to establish two tracks for ongoing cabinet-level engagement. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and PRC Vice Premier He Lifeng lead an economic track. Secretary of State and National Security Advisor Marco Rubio and China's top diplomat, Wang Yi, lead a political track.

PRC Leader Xi's Planned State Visit

Areas of focus at the September 2026 summit may include the following.

Trade and Investment

Since 2017, the U.S. government has stepped up its use of tariffs, export controls, investment review, and other tools to address PRC practices of concern, to promote and protect U.S. national security and competitiveness vis-à-vis China, and to reduce U.S. trade reliance on China. Since 2025, the Trump Administration has increased tariffs on China and other countries. The PRC has responded to U.S. tariffs by imposing tariffs, market restrictions, and export controls on key production inputs (e.g. rare earths) and by canceling orders of U.S. goods. Since 2025, most PRC retaliation has involved nontariff actions as the PRC ran out of items to effectively tariff given the trade imbalance. The PRC has also expanded the scope of its export controls to cover more trade and require disclosure about the end use of PRC inputs, likely raising PRC visibility into and leverage over U.S. supply chains. See CRS In Focus IF12990, *U.S.-China Tariff Actions Since 2018: An Overview*.

Since 2025, senior-level U.S.-PRC trade talks have focused on tariffs and PRC nontariff retaliatory actions. The talks have not resolved U.S. concerns and have widened into other areas, such as export controls. PRC actions appear to have fostered a dynamic in which U.S. officials have sought to delay PRC measures in exchange for concurrent delays in U.S. actions, potentially distracting from U.S. efforts to address systemic issues. In 2025, both sides paused some tariff and export control actions for a year, until November 2026; some say PRC follow-through has been uneven.

The Administration's decisions to allow U.S. technology firm Nvidia to export the H200 chip to the PRC (and to set terms by which the U.S. government collects 25% of the proceeds) prompted congressional legislation seeking to limit the sale of advanced chips and semiconductor equipment to China. Former U.S. officials criticized the Nvidia licensing decision and what they saw as a negotiating of national security decisions in exchange for trade concessions, saying that such actions contradict past U.S. practice. The Administration's rescission of the 2025 Artificial Intelligence (AI) Diffusion Rule ended proposed efforts to curtail PRC firms' use of advanced computing and data centers in third countries. PRC firms are competing using third-country data centers, open-source AI models, and reported unauthorized training of models on U.S. models. The summit may include a discussion of AI safety and risk management, an area where U.S. and PRC approaches differ widely. See CRS Report R48642, *U.S. Export Controls and China: Advanced Semiconductors*.

U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) Jamieson Greer has said the President seeks stability and is not looking for a "massive confrontation" or "full-on conflict" with China, suggesting limits to U.S. willingness to pressure China given deep economic ties and the PRC's tendency to retaliate. For example, USTR has pressed the PRC to ease rare earth exports with limited result. Greer has also said he is seeking a "managed trade" arrangement with China, an approach that typically sets import/export quotas. PRC offers to make purchases of U.S. goods in exchange for trade concessions have involved purchases the PRC typically makes but has withheld during talks (e.g., aircraft, beef, and soybeans), raising questions about whether PRC commitments will boost U.S. exports to China above normal levels. In May 2026, the two sides agreed to create trade and investment boards to identify goods on which tariffs could be lifted and areas for PRC investment in the U.S. market. Other issues for discussion include PRC industrial policies, overcapacity, and exports and global investment in sectors such as electric vehicles, as well as PRC guidance directing firms not to abide by U.S. sanctions and European trade investigations. (See CRS In Focus IF11284, *U.S.-China Trade Relations*.)

American Detainees

The Department of State announced on August 20, 2026, that Secretary Rubio had designated Burma-born American scholar Min Zin as "wrongfully detained in China," following Zin's June 3, 2026, detention. The Department confirmed the same designation for PRC-born U.S. seismologist Dr. Youlin Chen, whom the PRC detained in November 2024 and charged with espionage in May 2025. Some Members of Congress have called for release of both.

Taiwan and the South China Sea

During his visit to Beijing in May 2026, the President stated in a Fox News interview that he was holding "in abeyance" a $14 billion arms sales package for Taiwan—a follow-on to an $11 billion package announced in December 2025. The President stated that the second arms package was "a very good negotiating chip for us" with the PRC. Some Members of Congress have pressed the Administration to approve the package. (See CRS In Focus IF10275, *Taiwan: Background and U.S. Relations*.) Separately this year, the PRC has carried out a "special maritime traffic law enforcement" operation in waters east of Taiwan and has increased its presence in the area of Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, inflaming tensions with the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally, and the United States.

Iran

China is the largest importer from Iran of crude oil and other exports. The United States has expanded sanctions on Iran and imposed secondary sanctions on some PRC firms doing business with Iran but has not sanctioned major PRC firms and banks to date. With the United States and Israel engaged in a conflict with Iran, the President stated after the Beijing summit that Xi had "promised me that he's not sending any weapons to Iran" and "I take him at his word." Reuters reported in July 2026 that Iran expected to take delivery of 300-400 PRC-manufactured man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) "within weeks."

The 119th Congress and China

The 119th Congress is considering legislation to strengthen export controls and address concerns about data security, technology competition, and the PRC government's ties to PRC firms. The FY2026 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 119-60) has provisions on outbound investment to China. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2026 (P.L. 119-75) appropriates not less than $400 million for the Countering PRC Influence Fund, administered by the Department of State. It also appropriates funds for the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), which the Trump Administration had sought to reduce. USAGM funds the Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, which broadcast into China. Some congressional travel to China has resumed; the 119th Congress accounts for four of the five Member delegations to visit China since 2019.

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