FEATURE

Trump and Xi strike cordial tone at summit amid underlying tensions

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President Trump and China's President Xi Jinping shake hands as they leave after their talks at the Gimhae Air Base, located next to the Gimhae International Airport in Busan on October 30, 2025.
Andrew Caballero-Reynolds/AFP via Getty Images

WASHINGTON — President Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping met Thursday afternoon for around three hours at the White House during the first day of a two-day summit between the leaders of the world's two largest economies.

The two will attend a state dinner in the evening. The guest list includes a number of high-profile U.S. tech executives including SpaceX/Tesla's Elon Musk, Apple's Tim Cook, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, OpenAI's Sam Altman and Nvidia's Jensen Huang.

Despite the pageantry of the morning's ceremonies at the White House — which included hundreds of U.S. military personnel and a B-2 stealth bomber flyover — expectations for any big breakthroughs on issues ranging from AI to Iran to a trade war truce are low.

AI in focus

In a post on Truth Social Thursday morning, President Trump wrote that artificial intelligence will be a big topic of discussion in today's meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping, "but I want to leave it exactly where it is. That is China's position also. Our guardrail is the DOJ!"

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said Sunday that Washington and Beijing are discussing ways to warn each other about AI incidents that pose national security risks. AI executives in the U.S. have warned each other in recent weeks to slow down their development of the technology in order to ensure public safety.

In a response to Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei's essay titled "We Must Pace the Frontier," a spokesperson for China's government dismissed the proposal as unfair, accusing the call for safety rules as an attempt to hold back Chinese competition.



Artificial Intelligence robots demonstrate working on power grid control units during a media organized tour at Guangdong Power Grid Robotics Laboratory in Guangzhou, in southern China's Guangdong province, on April 16. Andy Wong/AP

For its part, China's AI industry is backed by hundreds of billions in state-led funds and a government that has said that AI-powered technology should permeate 90% of China's key industrial sectors by 2030.

Addressing AI concerns, the Chinese leader said in his remarks Thursday morning that both the U.S. and China have "the capability and responsibility to develop and manage AI for good, and ensure that the development of AI is always under human control and serves the well-being of the people."

Iran on the agenda

Xi's state visit this week comes as the U.S. continues a months-long naval blockade on Iranian ports in the Strait of Hormuz, cutting off an estimated 12% of China's oil imports. China is Iran's largest trading partner, and Trump may ask Xi to play a part in peace talks with Tehran, analysts say.

Nate Swanson, director of the Iran Strategy Project with the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative, says China could provide an offramp for President Trump.

"I think China can play a role to be a broker or the one that drives parties to consensus and decision," says Swanson, "but I don't know if they can bring it all together and be the driving

factor behind it. They have less to lose, but they still have a lot of leverage over the situation."

Last month, the Trump administration intensified economic pressure on Iran by targeting its financial enablers, including Chinese entities. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent says Washington and Beijing discussed these sanctions during a weekend meeting with Chinese officials, saying Chinese financial authorities "have been very engaged in the process."



China's overall exports increased this year, despite a sharp drop in trade with the United State
STR/AFP via Getty Images/AFPs.

Trade talks continue

On Wednesday, Bessent said the two countries had agreed to extend a trade truce until January, an announcement Beijing has not officially confirmed.

In Busan last year, Washington and Beijing agreed to scale back hefty tariffs on each other's goods that skyrocketed past 100% in 2025. As part of the deal, China agreed to suspend export controls on rare earth materials crucial for high-tech products and to buy American agricultural products, while the U.S. reduced some of its tariffs on Chinese goods.

Despite the détente, both the U.S. and China continue to impose high tariffs on each other's goods. The Congressional Research Service estimates the U.S. average tariff rate on China in July at more than 36% and China's average rate on U.S. goods hovering around 30%. Economists expect Trump and Xi to agree to a one-year extension of the trade truce made in Busan.

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