



View from the Beltway

Trump and Xi

BY OWEN ULLMANN

Bully buddies in arms.

It has become abundantly clear that President Donald Trump conducts foreign policy by using the Bully Pulpit ... only without the pulpit. He homes in on weaker opponents across the globe and tries to bully them into acceding to his wishes through a combination of bluster, economic sanctions, and military threats.

Many of his weaker adversaries immediately buckle. In 2025, Japan and South Korea quickly negotiated new trade deals with the United States along with expressing effusive praise for Trump to avoid punishing tariffs. Neighbors Mexico and Canada have repeatedly sought to mollify Trump by making economic concessions, often with limited success. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has assiduously courted Trump's support ever since the U.S. president berated Zelensky for daring to stand up to him at an Oval Office meeting in February 2025.

Many more nations—many of them tiny—fended off tariffs by agreeing to trade agreements calling for commitments to increase purchases of U.S. goods, eliminate local content requirements, or invest in U.S. supply chains. They include Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Argentina, Switzerland, Liechtenstein,

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Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Venezuela is bending over backwards to cooperate with Trump's demands after U.S. forces kidnapped its long-time dictator, Nicolas Maduro, and put him behind bars in on U.S. soil.

More recently, a number of countries have dared to challenge Trump. Denmark, faced with threats that the United States might seize

Danish-controlled Greenland by force, rallied European NATO members to stand behind it. Trump backed down. Prime Ministers Mark Carney of Canada and Keir Starmer of the United Kingdom risked retaliatory tariffs as well as Trump tantrums for refusing to bow to his every demand.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi incurred Trump's wrath for numerous affronts large and small, from his continued purchase of discounted Russian oil that finances Russia's war against Ukraine to his refusal to nominate Trump for the Nobel Peace Prize. They struck a new trade deal in early February after Modi agreed to buy more oil from the United States and possibly Venezuela instead of Russia.

Brazil has been in Trump's sights, too. He imposed 50 percent tariffs on Brazilian goods and sent an angry letter demanding the release of former

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President Jair Bolsonaro, a Trump ally imprisoned for leading a failed coup against the current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Lula refused and imposed his own tariffs. Trump later scrapped tariffs on Brazilian coffee because of the soaring cost to all the U.S. consumers who depend on their morning java.

Then there's Trump's treatment of China and its paramount leader, Xi Jinping. Despite—or more likely because of—China's economic and geopolitical might that is second only to that of the United States, Trump has an unnaturally warm relationship with President Xi. Why? Because Xi operates as a bully, just like Trump—only he wields far more power over China than Trump does over the United States. That's a political power Trump no doubt greatly envies.

It's no secret that Trump admires strong leaders of major adversaries.

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Russia's Vladimir Putin was a member of Trump's fan club until he proved reluctant to go along with a U.S.-brokered ceasefire with Ukraine that dashed Trump's longshot hopes for that Nobel prize. Modi, who has garnered growing authority during his twelve years in power, has had an on-again, off-again relationship with Trump. North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un also has won Trump's admiration.

Xi, however, holds a special status with Trump even though he has



U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, in Busan, South Korea, on October 30, 2025. A week before the 2024 presidential election, Trump heaped praise on Xi during an interview with podcaster Joe Rogan. Noting public criticism for calling Xi “brilliant,” Trump said, “Well, he’s a brilliant guy. He controls 1.4 billion people with an iron fist.”

stood his ground in response to every threat and punitive action unleashed by the U.S. president. The explanation must be that old schoolyard adage about bullies: Be careful when you pick on someone your own size. To use Trump's analogy in disparaging Zelensky's lack of cards to play against Russia, Xi has as many cards to play as his American counterpart. So, when Trump imposed punishing tariffs, Xi reciprocated. When Trump restricted high-tech exports to China, Xi restricted U.S. imports of crucial “rare earth” minerals and banned U.S. soybean purchases American farmers depend on. Similar tit-for-tat moves continued until the two leaders agreed to a ceasefire and a framework agreement that remains nebulous to this day.

Their truce was reached in October. Following a nearly two-hour meeting at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Busan, South Korea, Trump praised Xi as a “very distinguished and respected” leader, adding, “I think we're going to have a fantastic relationship for a long period of time.” He described their meeting as a “twelve out of ten.” A more restrained Xi said China and the United States “should be partners and friends.” Since then, Trump has reversed bipartisan restrictions on the sale of the most advanced artificial intelligence chips to China, a move that would narrow the U.S. edge in the race for global technological superiority. Trump also approved a controversial U.S. spinoff of China's highly popular TikTok app to allay fears



*Indian Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** met Russian President **Vladimir Putin** in July 2024 at Putin's residence at Novo-Ogaryovo outside Moscow. Modi has incurred Trump's wrath for numerous affronts, including his continued purchase of discounted Russian oil that finances Russia's war against Ukraine.*

that the platform is collecting valuable data on its two hundred million American users.

These moves by Trump can't be explained simply by the common ridicule from critics that when challenged by opponents small and large, he is the TACO president: Trump Always Chickens Out. Rather, Xi is in a class of his own because of both his country's enormous clout and his own unprecedented authority. China is the sole challenger to U.S. global dominance in economic power, technology, national security, and global relations. As the world's pre-eminent manufacturer and home to a domestic market of 1.4

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billion consumers, China is a lure for countries that feel harmed by Trump's trade barriers. It already has cut deals

with much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In January, America's oldest and closest allies, Canada and the United Kingdom, negotiated new arrangements with China after being spurned by Trump.

China also has been the source of billions in loans for infrastructure projects around the world as part of its "Belt and Road" initiative to strengthen its geopolitical clout. And it is spending heavily on technological advancements and on its military arsenal to close the gap with U.S. forces stationed around the world. That trend raises the increased prospect of a major standoff with the United States over quasi-independent Taiwan, which Xi has vowed to reunite with the mainland as part of his legacy despite American support for the status quo. These ambitious goals are part of Xi's master plan to achieve global supremacy over the United States by

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2049, the hundredth anniversary of the Communist Party's revolution.

China's muscle-flexing comes as Xi has solidified his own position as the country's most powerful leader, in some ways eclipsing Communist Party icon Mao Zedong. Since taking power in 2012, he has bullied his way to dismantling collective decision-making through ruthless anti-corruption purges that eliminated potential rivals and installed loyalists across the party, the military, and government.

He cemented this control by abolishing presidential term limits in 2018, so he could rule indefinitely

rather than for only two five-year terms, as had been the custom. And he has enshrined his self-centric ideology, "Xi Jinping Thought," into the constitution. Under his leadership, the

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party dominates all aspects of government, society, and the economy. In the case of the latter, Xi has repeatedly clamped down on aspects of a free market that might not be under his control, such as an abrupt ban on cryptocurrency in 2021 and a campaign against billionaires who might become too powerful and pose challenges to his authoritarian rule. The net result is a role often referred to as "the chairman of everything."

No wonder Trump, who would like to be the president of everything, admires him. A week before the 2024 presidential election, Trump heaped praise on Xi during an interview with podcaster Joe Rogan. Noting public criticism for calling Xi "brilliant," Trump said, "Well, he's a brilliant guy. He controls 1.4 billion people with an iron fist." Trump went on to call Xi a "very fierce person." In 2025, Trump conceded that Xi was a "very tough" leader who posed unique challenges in one-on-one negotiations.

Of course, it takes one to know one, and Xi has repeatedly accused the United States of "bullying" practices that won't work with him. The fact that Xi pushed back against Trump's economic penalties with retaliatory moves of his own seems to have earned Trump's respect, something he has refused to bestow upon traditional allies, such as the European Union.

Trump also probably sees his own tactics at play in the way Xi bullies

weaker nations to achieve economic and foreign policy successes. Some examples:

■ **South China Sea aggression.** China has used its superior naval forces to claim control of disputed waters also claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and other countries in the region.

■ **Economic sanctions.** Beijing has imposed tariffs, boycotts, and import restrictions to punish countries for actions it opposes. Targets have in-

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cluded Australia after it called for an independent investigation into whether China was the original source of Covid-19, Canada following its 2018 arrest of a Huawei executive at the request of the United States for allegedly violating sanctions against Iran, and South Korea for deploying a U.S. missile defense system in 2017.

■ **Debt diplomacy.** China's "Belt and Road" initiative has been criticized for luring smaller nations into enormous debts they can't service, providing an opening for Beijing to negotiate relief in return for control of the countries' ports, land, or other infrastructure projects.

■ **Belligerent rhetoric.** Much like Trump, Xi has used strong, threatening language against any adversary that might challenge China's goals. In 2021, marking the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi declared that

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the Chinese people would never allow foreign forces to "bully, oppress, or enslave us. ... Anyone who attempts to do so will face broken heads and bloodshed in front of the iron Great Wall of the 1.4 billion Chinese people."

■ **Hammering Hong Kong.** Under Xi, the Chinese government has systematically suppressed Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, converting the former British colony from an open, free-wheeling, quasi-Western society into a cowed populace threatened with punishment under severe national security laws.

Despite so many crucial issues dividing Washington and Beijing, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said on January 21 that the U.S. relationship with China has reached a "very good equilibrium" so that disagreements are less likely to turn into full-scale economic conflict. In an interview with *Politico* at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Bessent said Trump and Xi have a good rapport and could meet up to four times this year. "When the leaders are setting the tone for the overall relationship, if there are glitches, if there are hiccups, then they can jump on phone calls and de-escalate very quickly," he said.

That would be reassuring to the world should Taiwan re-emerge as a global flashpoint. Xi's incessant calls for reunification have been accompanied by threatening military training exercises around the island that suggest the Chinese leader is determined to take control by force. At the same time, Trump has continued longstanding U.S. support for Taiwan. Just this past December, his administration notified Congress of a record \$11 billion arms sale to

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Taiwan that is specifically aimed at deterring Chinese attacks. The package includes precision missiles, howitzers, and drones.

Could Chinese moves against Taiwan rupture Trump's and Xi's bromance or would the two see things bully-to-bully and work out a transactional arrangement by which Trump trades Taiwan for Xi's betrayal of allies such as North Korea, Cuba, or Iran?

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