Trump, Xi and the Post-Unipolar World

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Neele Seifert

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A Guest Contribution by Gianni Pittella, Former Vice President of the European Parliament

The meeting between Donald Trump and Xi Jinping in Beijing is far more than another high-level diplomatic encounter. It reflects the deeper transformation of the international system now underway: the erosion of the post-Cold War order, the return of great-power competition, and the growing fusion between geopolitics, technology and economics.

What is unfolding is not merely a dispute between two rival states. The United States and China are increasingly shaping the architecture of a new global equilibrium — unstable, fragmented and still lacking shared rules. The Beijing summit therefore matters less for the agreements it may produce than for what it reveals about the direction of world politics itself.

The first important point is that Washington and Beijing are no longer trying to eliminate their rivalry. They are attempting to manage it. The era in which economic interdependence was expected to gradually soften political competition has ended. The relationship between the two powers has become structural, systemic and long term.

During Trump's first presidency, tensions largely revolved around trade imbalances and tariffs. Today the confrontation is broader and far more strategic. It concerns advanced semiconductors, artificial intelligence, cyber security, critical infrastructure, rare earths, military technologies, supply chains and geopolitical influence across multiple regions of the world.

China has spent the last decade preparing for this new phase. Beijing has progressively reduced its dependence on Western technology, invested heavily in industrial self-sufficiency and expanded its geopolitical reach through financial networks, infrastructure projects and strategic partnerships. The Chinese leadership sees technological autonomy not simply as an economic objective but as a national security imperative.

For the United States, meanwhile, China is no longer viewed merely as a competitor within globalization. It is increasingly perceived as the only power capable of challenging American primacy in the twenty-first century. This perception now enjoys bipartisan support in Washington, making the strategic rivalry with Beijing likely to survive electoral cycles and changes of administration.

The result is a form of permanent competition in which both sides seek to avoid direct military confrontation while simultaneously preparing for a prolonged geopolitical contest. Cooperation survives only where mutual necessity makes it unavoidable.

No issue better illustrates the fragility of this balance than Taiwan. For Xi Jinping, reunification is tied directly to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and to the broader narrative of national rejuvenation. Taiwan is not simply a territorial question; it has become a central symbol of China's historical ambitions and national identity.

For the United States, however, Taiwan represents a cornerstone of the Indo-Pacific strategic order. American credibility among regional allies — from Japan to South Korea and Australia — depends heavily on Washington's ability to deter any forced change of the status quo across the Taiwan Strait.

This explains why maintaining communication channels between the two powers has become essential. The danger today is not necessarily deliberate war, but escalation through miscalculation, military incidents or strategic misunderstanding. The Beijing summit therefore serves another crucial purpose: rebuilding minimal mechanisms of strategic dialogue capable of reducing the risk of uncontrolled escalation.

Yet Asia is no longer the only theatre shaping Sino-American relations. The war involving Iran has expanded the rivalry into a truly global competition. The Middle East crisis has intensified instability in energy markets, increased financial volatility and revived concerns over maritime security, especially around the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical energy chokepoints.

For Washington, the Iranian crisis represents a double challenge. On one side lies the risk of regional escalation involving multiple actors; on the other, the economic consequences of rising energy prices and prolonged market uncertainty. At a time when inflation and domestic economic pressures remain politically sensitive, instability in the Gulf directly affects American strategic calculations.

China observes the situation from a more ambiguous — and in some respects advantageous — position. Beijing has strengthened its economic and strategic ties with Tehran over recent years and remains one of the principal buyers of Iranian oil. At the same time, China has no interest in seeing a broader regional conflict undermine global economic stability, on which its own growth still depends.

This is why Xi Jinping increasingly seeks to portray China as a responsible stabilizing power and potential mediator. Beijing aims to contrast its image with that of a United States often perceived internationally as militarily interventionist. Whether this Chinese narrative is fully convincing is another matter, but it clearly forms part of Beijing's long-term diplomatic strategy.

The Iranian conflict also demonstrates how the competition between China and the United States has evolved into a worldwide contest extending far beyond the Indo-Pacific. Africa, the Middle East, maritime routes, infrastructure corridors and energy networks have all become arenas of strategic rivalry.

Economic interdependence, however, continues to complicate this confrontation. Despite mounting tensions, the two economies remain deeply connected. The United States still relies heavily on Asian manufacturing capacity and global supply chains in which China plays a dominant role. China, meanwhile, continues to depend on Western markets, foreign investment and the broader stability of the international financial system.

This mutual dependence creates a paradoxical situation: the two powers increasingly distrust each other, yet neither can fully disengage without severe economic costs. Globalization is not disappearing entirely, but it is being transformed. The dominant logic is shifting from efficiency to resilience, from open integration to economic security.

In Beijing, Trump arrives in a weaker position than during his earlier presidency. Tariffs did not fundamentally rebalance economic relations, nor did they significantly slow China's technological ambitions. Moreover, Washington's ability to isolate China economically appears more limited than many American strategists anticipated.

China has spent recent years diversifying its commercial partnerships through Asian regional agreements and through platforms such as the BRICS framework. While Beijing faces significant internal challenges — including slower growth, demographic decline, a troubled real-estate sector and persistent capital outflows — it has nevertheless built greater strategic resilience than during the first phase of the trade war.

This does not mean that China is overtaking the United States in every domain. American military, technological and financial power remain unmatched in several critical areas. But it does mean that the age of uncontested American predominance has ended.

The Beijing summit therefore reflects the emergence of what could be described as "managed confrontation": structural rivalry combined with the shared need to prevent a complete fragmentation of the global economy.

The most sensitive negotiations concern advanced semiconductors, export controls, rare earths, artificial intelligence, industrial investment and supply-chain security. These are no longer purely economic matters. They are strategic assets tied directly to national power and geopolitical influence.

This transition marks one of the defining characteristics of the emerging international order: economics and security are becoming inseparable. Trade policy is now increasingly shaped by geopolitical calculations. Technological dependence is treated as a vulnerability. Industrial policy has returned as a central instrument of state power.

Amid this transformation, the European Union risks remaining strategically marginal.

Europe shares many American concerns regarding Chinese technological influence and industrial dependency. At the same time, however, European governments fear the consequences of a rigid bipolar division between Washington and Beijing. Such polarization could damage European exports, increase production costs, weaken competitiveness and accelerate the fragmentation of global trade.

The Iranian crisis further deepens European vulnerability. Europe remains heavily exposed to energy instability in the Middle East and dependent on secure global maritime routes. Yet the European Union still struggles to convert its enormous economic weight into autonomous geopolitical capacity.

This is perhaps Europe's central dilemma in the emerging post-unipolar world. Economically, the EU remains one of the world's largest powers. Strategically, however, it often appears reactive rather than decisive. Its internal divisions, slow decision-making mechanisms and dependence on external security guarantees continue to limit its geopolitical effectiveness.

The danger for Europe is not immediate irrelevance but progressive subordination to decisions increasingly shaped elsewhere — primarily in Washington and Beijing.

The Beijing summit ultimately confirms that the international system is entering a new historical phase. The United States remains the leading global power, but no longer enjoys the uncontested dominance of the

1990s. China, while not replacing America entirely, now possesses sufficient economic, technological and geopolitical influence to challenge Washington on a global scale.

The result is a more fragmented and competitive international landscape, characterized by regional conflicts, strategic uncertainty and growing militarization of international relations.

Under these conditions, the true purpose of the Trump-Xi meeting is not to build a genuine strategic partnership — politically unrealistic under current circumstances — but to define minimal rules and boundaries for coexistence within an era of systemic rivalry.

In an increasingly unstable world, both Washington and Beijing seem to recognize one fundamental reality: competition between great powers may be unavoidable, but allowing it to spiral into open conflict would carry consequences too catastrophic for either side to control.

About the Author: Giovanni Pittella is an Italian politician and former Member of the European Parliament who served as First Vice-President of the European Parliament and later as leader of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). He has held senior roles in both European and Italian politics, including as a member of the Italian Senate.