Public Alignment & Closed-Door Diplomacy:

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Brian Kastelijn and Tobias Knaack

Introduction

The year 2026 is about to become a strategic year for the Communist Party of China. It is not only the last year prior to the new five-year plan 2027–2031, but also the last year of Xi's third term as Chairman of the Communist Party of China. Setting the right diplomatic environment is therefore the most important task for Xi Jinping. It will determine whether the next five-year plan will bring China closer to technological and military self-reliance. It will also shape how the end of Xi's third term will be remembered and whether Xi can present himself as indispensable for China's further development, thereby strengthening his position and party control over China. Those ambitions are overshadowed by China's relations with the US and Russia. Both countries are strategically important, with Russia, for example, providing energy supplies and raw materials, and the US, for instance, serving as a trading partner and key actor in security conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, relations between Russia and the West have hardened even more ever since the conflict in Ukraine. The challenge for China will be to maintain its ties with Russia without damaging relations with the US and vice versa. At the same time, demonstrating diplomatic flexibility and presenting China as an independent actor on the international stage is expected to be a high priority for the CPC.

In this context, China has taken an important diplomatic step:

From April to May, the Chinese leadership scheduled high-level meetings with both countries. Beginning with an invitation to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov from 14 to 15 April on the one hand, and ending with the Xi-Trump summit from 14 to 15 May, the Chinese government coordinated important meetings with both countries in a relatively short timeframe. The objective of this briefing will be to analyse how the Chinese leadership uses close coordination of both meetings, how they are intertwined in their subjects and in which way China tries to find common ground in its relations with both rival superpowers.

Lavrov–China Visit (14–15 April 2026)

Sergey Lavrov's visit to China on 14–15 April 2026 unfolded in two stages that together illustrate deepening strategic coordination between Beijing and Moscow. On 14 April, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Lavrov held over four hours of talks covering the US–Iran conflict, the Ukraine crisis, and key Asia-Pacific flashpoints, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula. These discussions signalled deliberate alignment across multiple geopolitical theatres, with both sides agreeing to coordinate positions on sovereignty, non-interference, and multilateralism, while opposing what they characterised as Western-led containment and exclusionary "small cliques".

The following day, Lavrov met Xi at the Great Hall of the People. The meeting publicly framed China–Russia relations as a stable and durable partnership in an increasingly "fluid and turbulent world" marked by armed conflicts, unilateralism, power politics, and renewed instability in the Middle East. References to the 30th anniversary of the strategic partnership of coordination and the 25th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation reinforced this message of continuity and historical legitimacy. At the institutional level, the meeting underscored cooperation through multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations, BRICS, and the SCO, reflecting a shared effort to advance a more multipolar international order and counterbalance Western influence.

Yet the broader context surrounding the visit shows that China–Russia alignment remains calibrated rather than absolute. On the US–Iran conflict, Beijing shares Moscow's opposition to US unilateralism and the use of force without UN authorisation, but adopts more cautious rhetoric than Russia, emphasising de-escalation, regional stability, and secure Gulf shipping routes. This reflects China's dependence on Middle Eastern energy flows and its need to balance relations with both Iran and Gulf partners. A similar pattern is visible in Ukraine, where China acknowledges Russia's "legitimate security concerns" while avoiding explicit endorsement of its actions, thereby preserving diplomatic flexibility towards the United States. Together, these positions suggest that Beijing prioritises pragmatic risk management over full strategic convergence.

In practical terms, Lavrov's visit centred on implementing prior Xi–Putin agreements on trade and investment cooperation in the context of Western sanctions, alongside cooperation in technology, space, nuclear energy, AI, and education. Energy emerged as the most substantive area of cooperation. Lavrov suggested that Moscow could help offset Chinese resource shortages linked to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz, while discussions on Power of Siberia 2 reflected broader efforts to diversify Eurasian energy routes. However, the only publicly announced formal agreement was a 2026 consultation plan between the two foreign ministries, suggesting that the visit was more significant for agenda-setting than for immediate policy

breakthroughs. It nevertheless set the stage for a Xi–Putin summit later in 2026.

The visit provides an important reference point for analysing China's subsequent engagement with the United States in May 2026.

Xi-Trump Summit (14–15 May 2026)

Already, Trump's welcome ceremony in Beijing was filled with symbolic acts. At the same time, Trump was accompanied by a strong delegation of high-ranking government officials as well as a delegation of 16 CEOs of highly influential US companies such as Tesla, Boeing, and Micron.

Before the summit, there were high expectations surrounding the summit agenda. The CPC clarified that Taiwan will be its top priority during the summit. Trump, on the other hand, expressed that opening the Chinese market was his most important objective. In addition, expectations centred on topics such as AI, semiconductors, the Iran war and more.

Nevertheless, the substance of the summit did not meet its symbolic appearance. This outcome was largely expected. For example, expectations around the Iran war were limited, as Trump had already signalled beforehand that he was not planning to discuss it at length as he deemed Iran "under control".

Still, the symbolic weight of the summit is important for both leaders: Trump needs positive results for his voters, as the midterm election will be held this year. For Xi, the situation is similar, as he also strives to present himself as the core leader of the Communist Party, especially regarding the end of his third term as general secretary of the CPC this year.

What also overshadowed the results of their summit was the goal of building a "constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability". For now, there is no clear definition of that concept. But the CPC expressed that they want to see the summit as a framework for guiding US-China relations in the next few years. Therefore, the concept may gain greater significance in the future.

In terms of formal agreements, the summit produced few results. There have been concessions made by the Chinese government, for instance in buying agricultural goods and finalising trade in Boeing machine parts. On the other hand, the US promised to loosen its grip on the crisis in Cuba, though probably not without keeping its stance on a regime change for the island nation. Besides that, no major concessions have been made by any side as of now.

Informally, on the other hand, there are indications that more concessions may have been made during the summit. For instance, shortly after the summit, Trump posted that the arms deal sale for Taiwan, which is worth $14 billion, had been paused. While this appears to reflect Trump's attempt to maintain an upper hand during negotiations, a change in his diplomatic wording towards Taiwan occurred as well. Saying that he does not support

a formal declaration of Taiwan, Trump had just met Xi's number one concession. Another coincidence is the expansion of an exception license, allowing trade of Russian oil under special conditions despite Western sanctions against Russia's economy. For this, it is important to note that China benefits the most from it, as their energy supplies have been deeply hit by the war in Iran. But whether or not this is a possible informal concession between the two leaders can only be speculated.

In turn, we must look at the summit as more than a big symbolic act between China's Communist leadership and Trump's delegation of high-ranking officials and CEOs. Its actual impact and possible closed-door concessions definitely require further examination in the future. Possibly, the summit actually included more concessions than were formally disclosed.

Comparing Meetings: China's Hedging Mechanism

As outlined in the introduction, China seeks to preserve its strategic alignment with Russia while simultaneously maintaining stable relations with the United States. The two meetings provide insight into how Beijing attempts to balance these objectives through different diplomatic approaches.

At first, the two meetings differed in diplomatic level and composition. The Lavrov visit centred on foreign-ministerial coordination, with Lavrov meeting both Wang Yi and Xi Jinping as part of a structured diplomatic agenda. By contrast, the Xi–Trump summit was a head-of-state meeting accompanied by a large delegation of senior officials and American CEOs, giving it a broader political, economic, and symbolic profile.

The symbolic messaging of both meetings was also notably different in character. In the Lavrov-China meeting, symbolism centred on continuity, strategic resilience, and shared opposition to what both sides framed as Western dominance and unilateralism. References to the "friendship without boundaries," bilateral anniversaries, strategic cooperation, and the promotion of a multipolar order reinforced this narrative. In contrast, the Xi–Trump summit framed symbolism around managed competition. Rather than emphasising ideological alignment, it introduced the concept of a "constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability," presenting the meeting as an attempt to stabilise rivalry without resolving its underlying tensions.

The most significant distinction between the meetings therefore does not lie in the presence or absence of symbolism, but in the type of symbolism each meeting produced. The Xi–Trump summit carried high symbolic visibility through its dense media coverage, head-of-state format, and high expectations, yet resulted in relatively few publicly announced agreements or consensus. The Lavrov visit, by contrast, was less media-driven but more explicit in its public alignment. Its significance lay in repeated statements

on strategic coordination, energy security, Taiwan, and the promotion of a multipolar international order.

At the same time, the limited formal outcomes of both summits do not necessarily imply limited diplomatic substance. Several developments following the talks suggest that informal and closed-door diplomacy may have played a significant role. These included shifts in Trump's rhetoric on Taiwan, reports of a pause in the proposed $14 billion Taiwan arms package, the expansion of exception licenses for Russian oil trade despite Western sanctions, and China's public calls for stopping hostilities in the Strait of Hormuz.

Taken together, the two meetings suggest that China is pursuing a dual-track diplomatic strategy depending on the counterpart involved. With Russia, Beijing uses public diplomacy to project an image of an unshakable Sino-Russian partnership in contrast to the West. This public alignment also serves the political image of both leaders: it gives Putin visibility as a leader who cannot be completely isolated from the world stage, while Xi can present China as a steadfast partner of the non-Western world while benefiting from Russian energy and economic cooperation.

In relations with the United States, however, China appears to favour a more flexible and ambiguous diplomatic approach, combining public messages of stability with pragmatic behind-the-scenes bargaining. This format also serves Trump's political persona by allowing him to present the summit as a visible diplomatic success without appearing to make major concessions to China. For Beijing, it creates room to pursue practical gains without visibly weakening its alignment with Russia or its broader anti-Western positioning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the two meetings demonstrate that China's foreign policy is not based on exclusive alignment with either Russia or the US, but on preserving strategic flexibility between both powers. The Lavrov visit highlighted visible strategic coordination, ideological alignment, and shared opposition to Western dominance to project continuity in the Sino-Russian partnership. By contrast, the Xi-Trump summit combined public messaging on strategic stability with pragmatic diplomacy behind closed doors to stabilise relations with Washington and prevent open escalation.

This balancing approach gives China diplomatic flexibility in a fragmented international order. It allows Beijing to simultaneously secure economic, energy, and geopolitical interests while avoiding excessive dependence on either side. At the same time, Beijing can preserve its public image as a leading power of the non-Western world by limiting highly visible strategic engagement with the US and conducting sensitive diplomacy largely behind closed doors. This helps Beijing avoid unnecessary diplomatic friction with both Moscow and Washington. Still, this position

may become increasingly difficult to maintain. As US-China competition deepens and Russia's confrontation with the West continues, Beijing may face growing pressure to define the limits and priorities of both relationships more clearly.

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