

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

No. 2026-17(S)

The Beijing U.S.-China Summit and China's Strategic Calculus

Lee Dong Gyu

Senior Research Fellow

2026-06-30

Assessment of the Beijing U.S.-China Summit

On May 14, 2026, a U.S.-China summit was held in Beijing. Facing mounting diplomatic and political burdens—including the prolonged U.S.-Iran war, skyrocketing oil prices due to the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, and domestic controversies over war powers—the Trump administration sought to secure tangible economic achievements. Recognizing these U.S. political needs, China offered limited concessions in sectors such as aircraft, agricultural products, and market access to define U.S.-China relations as a “constructive strategic stability relationship.” Also, Beijing presented the Taiwan issue and respect for its core interests as guiding principles for managing bilateral relations, thereby laying the foundation for long-term U.S.-China relations.

This summit can be evaluated as a success for China, which capitalized on America's political vulnerabilities to gain a strategic advantage in bilateral relations and the Taiwan issue. However, it is crucial to note that this advantage was not achieved because China's national power or strategy overwhelmed the United States. Rather, it was a relative gain from the Trump administration's weakened domestic and international standing, under pressure from the prolonged U.S.-Iran war and the upcoming midterm elections. Consequently, given the conditions created by the U.S. midterm elections and the protracted U.S.-Iran conflict, U.S.-China relations are highly likely to remain relatively stable this year.

China's Strategic Calculus Reflected in the Summit

1. Buying Strategic Time Through the Stabilization of U.S.-China Relations

Through its National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS), the Trump administration has identified China as a strategic competitor, signaling its intent to pressure China across various domains—including energy, advanced technology, and supply chains—beyond

traditional alliance frameworks. Given China's pressing domestic and external challenges—such as an economic slowdown, real estate crisis, local government debt, youth unemployment, technological self-reliance, and military modernization—an unstable relationship sliding into conflict would expose Beijing to multi-dimensional American pressure. This risks triggering and manifesting public discontent against Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), potentially destabilizing Chinese society and politics.

For Xi Jinping, who must secure a fourth term at the 21st CCP National Congress in 2027, minimizing these risks and stabilizing domestic politics are top priorities. If U.S.-China relations are managed within the framework of “constructive strategic stability,” the Xi administration can promote the domestic narrative that China, under the rule of Xi and the CCP, stands as an equal “G2” power alongside the United States. Furthermore, this secures critical time to pursue technological self-reliance and military modernization while expanding Beijing's influence as a leading global actor. Emphasizing stability in U.S.-China ties can also deter U.S. allies and partners from actively joining Washington's containment efforts against China. In this regard, China's push to stabilize bilateral relations and steer them toward cooperation is a calculated strategy to secure the strategic time needed to stabilize domestic politics and prepare countermeasures against U.S. pressure.

2. Securing Advantage in Sino-Japanese and Cross-Strait Relations by Placing the Taiwan Issue Front and Center

During this summit, China placed the Taiwan issue at the forefront of U.S.-China relations and publicly demanded a cautious stance from the United States. This move reflects Beijing's intent to create a favorable environment regarding Taiwan in the following ways

(1) Building Diplomatic Justification to Check U.S. Taiwan Policy

Should the U.S. expand military aid to Taiwan or pursue high-level exchanges in the future, China can frame these actions not merely as a matter of U.S.-Taiwan relations, but as a direct violation of the consensus reached between the U.S. and Chinese leaders. By positioning Taiwan at the center of bilateral ties, China aims to deter U.S. involvement by linking the Taiwan issue directly to the stability of U.S.-China relations.

(2) Blocking U.S. Allies from Intervening in Taiwan

Given the rising tensions between China and Japan over Taiwan, a cautious U.S. stance would allow China to frame any future Japanese involvement as an isolated, rogue action that escalates regional military tensions, thereby weakening Japan's standing. This would also restrict the room for maneuver available to other regional allies, such as South Korea, to intervene in the Taiwan issue.

(3) Isolating Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to Gain Dominance in Cross-Strait Relations

In a post-summit interview, Trump stated that arms sales to Taiwan had been discussed “in great detail.” This sparked deep concern in Taiwan, as it was perceived as a violation of one of the “Six Assurances”—specifically, the pledge not to consult with Beijing on arms sales

to Taiwan. China likely believes that expanding its public opinion and psychological warfare based on this development will sour Taiwanese public opinion toward the Lai Ching-te administration, thereby shaping Taiwanese politics in a direction favorable to Beijing.

3. Seeking a China-Centric International Order via “Global Multipolarity” Rhetoric

In attempting to reset U.S.-China relations during the summit, China emphasized that bilateral ties are not merely a bilateral issue, but a relationship that affects global peace, stability, and prosperity. This rhetoric can be interpreted as an attempt to foster the perception that China is an equal, G2-level superpower capable of addressing global issues alongside the United States. Once the perception takes root that U.S.-China relations have entered a stable phase, the political burden for third countries to cooperate with China will decrease. This creates a favorable environment for China to expand its ties with the Middle East, the Global South, Europe, and Russia, thereby broadening its diplomatic influence outside the U.S. alliance system. This aligns with China’s ongoing efforts to elevate its voice and influence by introducing various global discourses, such as the Global Governance Initiative, and emphasizing multilateralism, safeguarding the UN Charter, mutual respect, common development, and Global South cooperation.

Policy Implications for South Korea

China perceives that U.S. pressure will persist. Beijing is highly likely to exploit the Trump administration’s political needs and transactional characteristics by offering limited economic concessions to ease U.S. pressure and prevent relations from deteriorating into open conflict. At the same time, China is expected to take a tougher stance on its core interests, such as the Taiwan issue. Moreover, by shaping and disseminating the narrative that U.S.-China relations are stabilizing, China will likely seek to weaken cohesion of U.S. alliances. It may argue to South Korea, Japan, Europe, and Global South countries that they no longer need to bandwagon with the United States to contain China, and that doing so could undermine their own economic interests and diplomatic autonomy. Consequently, the South Korean government must establish the following proactive response strategies.

1. Strengthening the ROK-U.S. Alliance to Secure Leverage Against China

To deter regional U.S. allies from joining Washington’s anti-China front, Beijing may use the narrative of stabilizing U.S.-China relations to increase both incentives and pressure on South Korea. In this environment, Seoul must strengthen the cohesion of the ROK-U.S. alliance to secure its diplomatic autonomy. A robust ROK-U.S. alliance enhances South Korea’s strategic value to China and strengthens Seoul’s bargaining power. Therefore, rather than showing impatience regarding the improvement of inter-Korean relations—which risks causing unnecessary friction with Washington—the South Korean government should enhance communication with the United States and actively discuss South Korea’s role and scope in resolving the North Korean nuclear issue, stabilizing the Korean Peninsula, and ensuring regional peace. Vis-à-vis China, Seoul should consistently assert the necessity of the ROK-U.S. alliance for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and ensuring security on the Korean Peninsula, thereby deflecting Chinese pressure.

2. Enhancing Coordination with Like-Minded Countries on the Taiwan Issue

As China has elevated the Taiwan issue into a critical agenda item in its relations with the United States, future developments directly or indirectly related to Taiwan could impose unexpected diplomatic and security costs on South Korea. China may not only demand that South Korea limit its involvement in the Taiwan issue, but also pressure Seoul to guard against Japan's involvement and expanded role. This could increase the political burden on South Korea as it pursues ROK-Japan and ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation.

Because the Taiwan Strait is directly linked to South Korea's security and economy, Seoul must consistently voice its principles: preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, opposing any unilateral change to the status quo, and adhering to international law and norms. However, rather than advancing these principles alone, South Korea should diffuse pressure from Beijing by utilizing multilateral cooperation frameworks or issuing joint statements with like-minded countries.

3. Strengthening International Coordination Against China's Alignment with North Korea

To weaken U.S. influence in the region and disrupt the U.S. alliance system, China is expected to strengthen its ties with Russia and North Korea under the banner of "global multipolarity." Consequently, China is highly likely to back North Korea's positions rather than South Korea's regarding inter-Korean relations and the nuclear issue, which could erode Seoul's strategic advantage. Therefore, South Korea must continuously hold China accountable for its role in the North Korean nuclear issue to prevent Beijing from using Pyongyang and Moscow as leverage against the United States. Simultaneously, South Korea must reinforce its solidarity with the United States and the broader international community.

About the Author

Dr. LEE Dong-gyu is a senior research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Lee received his B.A. and M.A. from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, and Ph.D. in politics from Tsinghua University in China. His research focuses on Chinese politics and foreign policy, South Korea-China relations, and Northeast Asia security. His recent publications include "The Belt and Road Initiative after COVID-19: Implications of Expanding Health and Digital Silkroads," "Is Political Reform of the Chinese Communist Party Going Back: Changes and Durability of Intra-democracy in the Xi Jinping Era," "Xi Jinping Thought from the Perspective of the Chinese Communist Party's Ideological Strategy," "Development Factors and Specificity of Korea-China Relations in the Cold War Era: 1972-1992," "A Study on the Sinicization of Marxism after Reform and Opening Up," etc.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2026-19).

(‘베이징 미중 정상회담과 중국의 전략적 계산’)