

Xi to Trump: Get Taiwan Wrong and the Whole Relationship Burns

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Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).

1. Reading Passage

When Donald Trump stepped onto the red carpet outside Beijing's Great Hall of the People last week, the choreography was flawless: an honor guard, a 21-gun salute, schoolchildren waving flags, and a handshake with Xi Jinping for the cameras. It was the first visit by a U.S. president to China in nine years. But inside the room, the mood shifted. Xi told Trump that the 'Taiwan question' is the single most important issue between their two countries — and warned that if it were mishandled, the two nations could face 'confrontation or even conflict,' pushing the relationship into what he called a highly dangerous situation.

Taiwan is a self-governing island that China claims as its own territory and has threatened to take by force if Taipei resists indefinitely. Admiral Samuel Paparo, the head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, has warned that Beijing's growing military exercises around the island amount to a 'rehearsal' for actual military action. Taipei, predictably, was unimpressed by Xi's framing: its foreign ministry responded by calling Beijing 'the sole risk to regional peace.'

The summit was not only about Taiwan. The two leaders also discussed trade, where the relationship had been thawing after last year's brutal tariff war — a conflict Trump himself acknowledged had produced 'no winners.' Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told reporters the two sides were exploring a 'Board of Trade' and a 'Board of Investment,' along with roughly \$30 billion in non-sensitive Chinese goods that Washington would earmark for lower tariffs. In return, China might buy more American fuel to diversify its energy sources. Trump praised Xi as 'a great leader,' and Xi said the two had agreed to build a 'constructive China-US relationship of strategic stability.'

But here's the catch. Several U.S. allies and analysts worry that Xi is using the warm trade atmospherics as leverage. Rush Doshi, who served as the Biden administration's China director on the National Security Council, called Xi's language a 'major new formulation' and argued that Beijing is 'offering it from a position of strength.' China won last year's trade war, the thinking goes, engineered a détente that favored its own interests, and now wants to lock in further concessions 'beyond Trump' — meaning past the end of his term. The fear in Washington is concrete: Trump might quietly reduce U.S. arms sales to Taipei, or shift America's official posture from 'oppose' to merely 'not support' Taiwanese independence, in exchange for Chinese help pressuring Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

That trade-off matters because the U.S. position on Taiwan is famously slippery. Washington does not recognize Taiwan as an independent country, but it also refuses to accept Beijing's claim — a deliberate vagueness known as strategic ambiguity, designed to deter Chinese aggression without inviting a formal Taiwanese declaration of independence. Any meaningful shift in that posture would reverberate from Tokyo to Canberra. For now, the optics suggest cooperation: the two leaders agreed that the Strait of Hormuz must remain open, and Xi opposed what he called the 'militarisation' of the waterway. But beneath the pageantry, the structural questions — who controls Taiwan, who guarantees its security, and at what price — remain firmly unresolved.

2. Explanation

Picture two presidents shaking hands on a red carpet – and one of them quietly telling the other that a single 100-mile-wide strait could blow up the world's most important relationship.

What's Going On?

Donald Trump just made the first visit by a U.S. president to China in nine years, meeting Xi Jinping at Beijing's Great Hall of the People. The two-hour bilateral was wrapped in pageantry – honor guards, a 21-gun salute, schoolchildren waving flags – but inside the room, Xi opened with a warning: the 'Taiwan question' is the single most important issue between the two countries, and mishandling it could push the relationship into 'confrontation or even conflict.'

Beijing claims Taiwan as its territory and has refused to rule out taking it by force. Taipei's foreign ministry shot back that China itself is 'the sole risk to regional peace.' Meanwhile the two sides talked trade – a possible 'Board of Trade' and 'Board of Investment,' roughly \$30 billion in lower-tariff Chinese goods, more U.S. fuel sales to China – and agreed the Strait of Hormuz should stay open amid the Iran war.

How To Think About It

This summit is really a negotiation about leverage. Xi isn't just venting about Taiwan – he's pricing it. He's signaling that any cooperation on Iran, oil, or trade comes with an invoice attached.

- It's like a landlord-tenant standoff where the landlord (Xi) keeps mentioning a clause buried in the lease (Taiwan) every time the tenant (Trump) asks for a favor – making clear nothing else gets renegotiated until that clause is respected.
- Or think of a soccer team that just won the league (China, after the 2025 trade war) negotiating the next contract from strength: it's not asking for a raise, it's locking in terms 'beyond Trump,' as one analyst put it – meaning past the end of his term.

Key Things To Know

- The bilateral lasted roughly two hours; it was Trump's first China trip since 2017 and followed an October meeting in South Korea that paused the trade war.
- Admiral Samuel Paparo, head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, has called China's military exercises around Taiwan a 'rehearsal' for actual military action.
- The U.S. practices 'strategic ambiguity' – it sells arms to Taiwan (an \$11 billion package is approved but not yet delivered) without explicitly promising to defend it.
- Concession watch: analysts worry Xi could trade help on Iran and the Strait of Hormuz for reduced U.S. arms sales to Taipei, or a softer official U.S. posture on Taiwan's independence.
- Common misconception: the U.S. does NOT recognize Taiwan as independent – but it also doesn't recognize Beijing's claim to it. That deliberate fuzziness is the whole policy.

Why It Matters

Taiwan makes the advanced chips inside your phone, your laptop, and almost every AI system in the

news. A conflict — or even a serious blockade — would crater global tech supply chains, spike prices on everything electronic, and force the U.S. into the hardest foreign-policy decision since the Cold War. The college majors, jobs, and even the price of a new gaming console you'll see in the next decade are quietly downstream of how this standoff plays out.

The Bigger Picture

Mick Mulvaney, Trump's former acting chief of staff, noted that Beijing's use of words like 'clash' and 'conflict' is sharper than past language — a possible escalation. The pattern to watch: does Washington quietly slow-walk that \$11 billion arms package in exchange for Chinese pressure on Iran? If yes, allies from Tokyo to Canberra will read it as a signal that U.S. security guarantees in Asia are now tradeable — and they'll start hedging accordingly.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Strategic ambiguity

The deliberately vague U.S. policy of not stating whether it would militarily defend Taiwan if China attacked. The vagueness is meant to deter China (it might fight) while not encouraging Taiwan to formally declare independence (it might not).

Bilateral meeting

A formal meeting between exactly two countries' leaders or delegations, as opposed to a multilateral summit involving many.

Strait of Hormuz

A narrow shipping lane between Iran and Oman through which a huge share of the world's oil and gas tankers must pass. Closing it spikes global energy prices.

Détente

A French word, used in diplomacy to mean an easing of tension between rival powers — famously used during the 1970s U.S.-Soviet thaw.

Tariff

A tax a government places on imported goods. Tariffs raise prices for consumers but can shield domestic producers from foreign competition.

Readout

An official summary that a government releases after a closed-door meeting, telling the public what its side says happened.

Strategic stability

Diplomatic shorthand for a relationship where two rival powers manage their disagreements predictably enough that neither fears a sudden military shock.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. The passage most directly argues that the Beijing summit was:

- A) A genuine breakthrough that resolved the Taiwan dispute between the two powers
- B) Mostly ceremonial pageantry that papered over deep, unresolved strategic disagreements
- C) A diplomatic failure that ended with both leaders walking out in open hostility
- D) A routine working meeting with no significant geopolitical or economic stakes attached

Q2. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

- A) China's economy has overtaken America's and now dictates global trade rules
- B) Trump and Xi have agreed to a permanent peace treaty covering Taiwan and Iran
- C) Xi is leveraging cooperation on trade and Iran to press the U.S. on Taiwan
- D) Taiwan has formally requested annexation by China to avoid future conflict

Q3. According to the passage, Taiwan's foreign ministry responded to Xi's comments by:

- A) Calling Beijing 'the sole risk to regional peace'
- B) Announcing immediate negotiations toward eventual reunification with China
- C) Withdrawing its request for U.S. arms sales to focus on diplomacy
- D) Praising Xi's restraint and offering to host the next bilateral summit

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'engineered' most nearly means:

- A) Designed mechanical equipment for industrial use
- B) Deliberately brought about through skillful planning
- C) Constructed a physical building or piece of infrastructure
- D) Studied advanced mathematics and applied physics

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'rehearsal' most nearly means:

- A) A practice run that prepares for a real future performance
- B) A musical performance in front of a live paying audience
- C) A written script reviewed silently by a single reader
- D) A scheduled appointment for a routine medical examination

Q6. Which statement about the U.S. position on Taiwan can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

- A) The U.S. formally recognizes Taiwan as a fully independent sovereign nation
- B) The U.S. has agreed to abandon Taiwan in exchange for Chinese trade concessions
- C) The U.S. neither endorses Taiwan's independence nor accepts China's claim to it
- D) The U.S. plans to station permanent ground troops on the island of Taiwan

Q7. The passage suggests that Xi's warnings on Taiwan were intended primarily to:

- A) Personally insult Trump in front of the visiting U.S. delegation
- B) Pressure Washington into concessions before further cooperation
- C) Announce an imminent military invasion of Taipei within the year
- D) Withdraw China from all ongoing trade discussions with the United States

Q8. The author's tone in describing the summit's atmosphere is best characterized as:

- A)** Openly celebratory about the friendly diplomatic breakthrough achieved
- B)** Skeptical of the surface warmth and attentive to underlying tensions
- C)** Outraged at the U.S. president for visiting an authoritarian rival
- D)** Indifferent to the political stakes of the high-level diplomatic encounter

Q9. Which inference about the trade discussions can most reasonably be drawn?

- A)** Both sides see economic cooperation as entirely separate from security issues
- B)** Economic concessions and security disputes are being negotiated in tandem
- C)** The trade talks have been completely suspended pending Taiwan's resolution
- D)** The U.S. has stopped buying any Chinese-made products as a protest measure

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** 'Trump for the first visit by a US president to China in nine years'
- B)** 'Beijing was the sole risk to regional peace'
- C)** 'extract concessions from Trump on Taiwan during the summit in exchange for help in other areas'
- D)** 'reviewed an honor guard with Chinese President Xi Jinping'

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. The passage most directly argues that the Beijing summit was:

Answer: B

The passage emphasizes warm visuals (red carpet, honor guard) alongside Xi's sharp warnings and analysts' fears of concessions – a portrait of style over substance. A is wrong (TRAP A: right scope, wrong direction – nothing was resolved). SAT Tip: When a passage juxtaposes friendly imagery with serious warnings, the author's central claim is usually that appearances mislead – pick the option that captures that gap, not the one that takes the imagery at face value.

Q2. Which choice best states the central idea of the passage?

Answer: C

The passage repeatedly links Taiwan to other bargaining chips – Iran, Hormuz, arms sales, trade deals – framing the summit as leverage. D is fabricated (TRAP C: not in the passage at all). SAT Tip: For central-idea questions, find the thread that connects the most paragraphs – a true central idea touches the whole passage, not just one section.

Q3. According to the passage, Taiwan's foreign ministry responded to Xi's comments by:

Answer: A

The passage states directly that Taipei called Beijing 'the sole risk to regional peace.' B contradicts everything Taipei has done (TRAP A: opposite of reality). SAT Tip: 'According to the passage' questions reward literal recall – scan for the exact phrase before evaluating any option.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'engineered' most nearly means:

Answer: B

In context – 'engineered a détente that favoured China' – the word means strategically arranged or orchestrated. A is the common-meaning trap (TRAP B: passage vocabulary used in the wrong sense). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option into the sentence; the right one keeps the original meaning intact, while the common definition often produces nonsense in context.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'rehearsal' most nearly means:

Answer: A

Admiral Paparo warns China's exercises are a 'rehearsal' for military action – i.e., a practice run for the real thing. B is the everyday-theater meaning (TRAP B: same word, wrong application). SAT Tip: When a quoted military or political figure uses a metaphor, the passage's meaning is almost always the figurative one – not the literal stage definition.

Q6. Which statement about the U.S. position on Taiwan can most reasonably be inferred from the passage?

Answer: C

The passage describes analysts worrying Trump might shift from 'oppose' to merely 'not support' Taiwan's independence – implying the current stance is somewhere in between recognition and rejection. B is unsupported speculation (TRAP C: true-sounding fear, not a stated policy). SAT Tip: Inference questions reward the smallest reasonable step from the text – pick the option the passage logically requires, not the most dramatic possibility.

Q7. The passage suggests that Xi's warnings on Taiwan were intended primarily to:

Answer: B

The passage frames Xi as 'offering it from a position of strength' and seeking to 'lock all this in beyond Trump' – language of leverage, not insult or invasion. C is unsupported escalation (TRAP C: scary but not in the text). SAT Tip: When asked about intent, look at the verbs the author uses to describe the actor – words like 'offering,' 'extracting,' or 'pressing' all point to negotiation, not breakdown.

Q8. The author's tone in describing the summit's atmosphere is best characterized as:

Answer: B

The author pairs warm details (handshake, red carpet, 'great leader') with hard warnings and analyst worries – a measured skepticism. A misreads the imagery at face value (TRAP A: wrong direction). SAT Tip: Tone questions hinge on the author's adjectives and structural choices, not the topic – a polite-sounding passage can still be quietly critical.

Q9. Which inference about the trade discussions can most reasonably be drawn?

Answer: B

The passage describes a \$30 billion tariff carve-out, fuel sales, and a Board of Trade being discussed alongside – not separately from – Taiwan and Iran. A is the opposite of what the passage implies (TRAP A). SAT Tip: When a passage discusses multiple topics in the same breath, the author is usually arguing they're linked – beware options that artificially separate them.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: C

Option C explicitly links Taiwan concessions to 'help in other areas' – the textual proof that security and economics are bundled. B is true but addresses Taipei's reaction, not the linkage (TRAP B: right vocabulary, wrong question). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, identify the specific claim from the previous answer first, then hunt for the line that proves THAT claim – don't just pick the most quotable-sounding excerpt.