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When Two Elephants Meet: What Happens When America and China Sit Down?

Dr. Tughral Yamin ¹

When two elephants fight, it is said, the grass suffers. But when two elephants meet, the jungle waits to see whether they will fight, mate, or simply negotiate who gets to drink from the same watering hole.

The meeting between US President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Washington on September 24, 2026, is best understood through that old metaphor. These are not two ordinary powers meeting across a negotiating table. They are the world's two largest economic powers, permanent members of the UN Security Council, leading military powers, technological competitors and central actors in virtually every major geopolitical calculation.

The question, therefore, is not simply what Trump and Xi agreed upon. The more important question is what happens when two elephants decide that fighting is too costly but sharing the jungle is unavoidable? The initial answer from Washington is cautiously encouraging: the elephants have met without trampling the grass. But neither has surrendered its tusks.

A Meeting Heavy on Ceremony

Xi's September visit is his first state visit to Washington in more than a decade. Trump personally greeted him at Joint Base Andrews—a highly unusual gesture—and the

visit was accompanied by military honours, a lavish White House state dinner and an impressive gathering of American business and technology leaders.

The symbolism was unmistakable. Trump spoke of friendship. Xi said that China and the United States should be partners rather than adversaries. The atmosphere was deliberately warmer than the underlying relationship. China also announced the return of giant pandas to an American zoo, reviving an old instrument of Chinese “panda diplomacy.”²

The guest list at the state dinner was itself revealing. Leaders from America's technology and business establishment, including Elon Musk, Jensen Huang, Sam Altman, Jeff Bezos, Tim Cook and Mark Zuckerberg, were present. Their presence underscored an important reality: US-China relations are no longer merely about diplomacy and military power. They are increasingly about technology, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, data, supply chains and the future of the global economy. Yet behind the smiles lies an intensely competitive relationship.

The First Elephant: America

The United States remains the established superpower, with a global network of alliances, the world's most capable military and enormous financial and technological

¹ Brig (r) Dr. Tughral Yamin is a Senior IPS Associate. He can be reached at tughral@ips.net.pk

² Trevor Hunnicutt and David Brunnstrom, “Trump Welcomes Xi to Washington Looking for a Trade Win,” Reuters, September 24, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/trump-welcomes-xi-washington-looking-trade-win-2026-09-24/>

influence. But Washington also faces a strategic dilemma.

It wants to constrain China's technological and military rise while simultaneously benefiting from Chinese trade and investment. It wants secure supply chains without completely severing economic relations. It wants China to moderate its support for Iran, while also trying to manage the Taiwan issue and China's growing influence across the Global South.

That is a difficult balancing act. The summit therefore produced an important but limited result: the existing US-China trade truce was extended, reportedly to January 10. Reuters described the meeting as rich in symbolism but without major breakthroughs on the hardest questions.³

The extension matters because a trade war between these two economies would have consequences far beyond Washington and Beijing.

The Second Elephant: China

China approaches the relationship from a different position. Beijing does not have America's network of formal alliances, but it possesses enormous economic weight, manufacturing capacity, a formidable technological base and an increasingly sophisticated military. It is also deeply integrated into the world's commercial supply chains.

China's message appears to be that competition is acceptable but confrontation is not. Xi's invocation of the "Thucydides Trap" is significant. The concept describes the danger that an established power and a rising power can become trapped in a cycle of suspicion and confrontation. Xi has argued for managing competition rather than allowing rivalry to become inevitable conflict. That does not mean Beijing is abandoning its strategic objectives. Taiwan remains a fundamental Chinese interest,

while Washington continues to strengthen its security relationships with Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.⁴

Thus, the two elephants have not stopped competing. They have apparently decided that they must find rules for competition.

Trade: The Grass Gets a Temporary Reprieve

Trade may be the area where both sides have the strongest incentive to compromise. The extension of the trade truce provides breathing space. It does not resolve the underlying dispute over tariffs, market access, rare earths, industrial policy, technology restrictions and the enormous imbalance in bilateral trade.

But breathing space is valuable. For the United States, an uncontrolled trade war can raise costs for consumers and businesses and disrupt supply chains. For China, prolonged confrontation with its largest market creates uncertainty at a time when Beijing is seeking continued economic growth.

The lesson is simple: Neither elephant wants to destroy the watering hole from which both drink. That may be the foundation for a more durable economic accommodation.

Artificial Intelligence: The New Nuclear Question?

Perhaps the most consequential long-term issue is artificial intelligence. The Cold War was defined by nuclear weapons. The emerging US-China competition may increasingly be defined by AI, semiconductors, quantum computing, autonomous systems and space technology.

The United States possesses enormous advantages in advanced computing, software and leading technology companies. China possesses scale, manufacturing capacity, vast data resources and a rapidly expanding technology ecosystem.

³ Simon Lewis, Trevor Hunnicutt, and David Brunnstrom, "Five Takeaways from Trump's Summit with Xi in Washington," Reuters, September 24, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/four-takeaways-trumps-summit-with-xi-washington-2026-09-24/>

⁴ Simon Lewis and David Brunnstrom, "US Stresses Backing for Japan, South Korea and Taiwan Ahead of Trump-Xi Summit," Reuters, September 21, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/rubio-meets-japanese-korean-allies-ahead-trump-china-summit-2026-09-21/>

Both understand that technological superiority can translate into economic and military power. This makes AI simultaneously an area for cooperation and competition. Trump has resisted heavy-handed restrictions on AI development, while China has stressed the need for human control over the technology.⁵

The danger is that AI could become another arena of an uncontrolled arms' race. The opportunity is that Washington and Beijing could eventually develop rules for responsible competition, particularly regarding autonomous weapons, cyber operations and the use of AI in strategic decision-making. That would be considerably more valuable than another tariff agreement.

Iran and the Strait of Hormuz

The Middle East casts another long shadow over the summit. Trump reportedly sought Chinese cooperation in putting economic pressure on Tehran and helping reopen the Strait of Hormuz. Beijing, however, has favoured diplomacy and a return to an earlier interim peace arrangement rather than simply joining Washington's pressure campaign.⁶

This is an important demonstration of the limits of the relationship. Washington may want Beijing to act as a partner in resolving the Iran crisis. Beijing does not necessarily see the crisis through an American lens. China has its own energy interests, its own relationship with Iran and its own vision of a multipolar international order. This is where the meeting of the two elephants becomes particularly interesting: they can cooperate without becoming allies.

What Could Happen Next?

The Trump-Xi encounter could produce several possible outcomes:

1. Managed Competition

This may be the most sustainable model: the two powers accept that they are

strategic competitors but establish boundaries to prevent competition becoming war.

Trade continues. Diplomatic channels remain open. Military-to-military communication prevents accidents. Technology competition continues, but both sides establish some red lines. This would not be friendship. It would be competitive coexistence.

2. A Larger Economic Bargain

The trade truce could evolve into a broader economic understanding covering tariffs, rare earths, agricultural purchases, technology restrictions and supply chains. Such an agreement would benefit not only America and China but also countries whose economies are tied to both. Pakistan, for example, would have a direct interest in such stability because it maintains important economic and strategic relationships with both Washington and Beijing.

3. A Technology Cold War

Even if trade improves, technology competition could intensify. Semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, 5G/6G, satellites and advanced manufacturing could become the new strategic battleground. The irony would be that the two elephants might become more economically cooperative while simultaneously becoming more technologically competitive.

4. A New Bipolarity

The most troubling possibility would be the emergence of two increasingly separate technological and economic ecosystems. Countries could be pressured to choose between American and Chinese technology standards, financial systems, supply chains and security arrangements. That would recreate some characteristics of the Cold War—without necessarily reproducing its exact ideological structure.

⁵ BSS/AFP, "Xi Sets Red Lines on AI, Taiwan, Iran for Trump Despite Lavish White House Welcome," *The Business Standard*, September 25, 2026, <https://www.tbsnews.net/world/trump-xi-summit-washington-begins-great-fanfare-low-expectations-1553151>

⁶ Al Jazeera Staff, "Trump-Xi Summit: Here's What's on the Agenda, and Why It Matters," *Al Jazeera*, September 24, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/9/24/trump-xi-summit-whats-on-the-agenda-why-it-matters>

5. A Multipolar Accommodation

There is another possibility. Instead of the world being divided between Washington and Beijing, the two could gradually accept that the international system has become genuinely multipolar. India, Russia, the European Union, Türkiye, the Gulf states and middle powers such as Pakistan, Indonesia and Brazil would retain room for manoeuvre. This could produce a world in which the two elephants remain dominant but cannot dictate everything that happens in the jungle.

What Does It Mean for the Rest of the World?

This is perhaps the most important part of the story. When two elephants fight, everyone worries about the grass. But when they meet, the rest of the jungle can benefit, provided the meeting produces rules rather than another confrontation.

For developing countries, the consequences are enormous. A stable US-China relationship means more predictable trade, investment and supply chains. It can reduce pressure on countries to take sides. It can give middle powers greater diplomatic space.

For Pakistan, the stakes are particularly significant. Pakistan's relationship with China is strategic and long-standing, while its relationship with the United States remains important in trade, investment, diplomacy and regional security. Islamabad therefore has little interest in a new Cold War that forces countries into rigid camps. A period of US-China accommodation would give Pakistan greater strategic space to pursue its own interests rather than constantly navigating competing blocs.

The Elephants Have Met But the Jungle Is Still Watching

The significance of the Trump-Xi meeting should therefore not be measured by the grandeur of the state dinner or the warmth of the handshakes.

The real test will come afterwards. Will trade tensions remain contained? Can technology competition be managed? Can Taiwan remain a red line without becoming a battlefield? Can Washington and Beijing communicate during crises? Can they cooperate on issues such as climate, global economic stability and perhaps even the Middle East?

And most importantly, can they accept that strategic competition does not have to become strategic conflict?

The answer will determine much of the international order in the years ahead. When two elephants fight, the grass suffers. When two elephants meet, the jungle gets a chance to breathe. But the elephants must keep meeting. The September 2026 summit has created that opportunity. It has not yet created a new world order. The extension of the trade truce is a modest step, while the fundamental disputes over Taiwan, technology, strategic influence and the future balance of power remain unresolved. Reuters similarly assessed the summit as producing limited substantive breakthroughs despite the elaborate diplomacy surrounding it.⁷

The challenge now is to transform managed rivalry into managed coexistence. That would be a far more consequential achievement than any state dinner. And perhaps, in an increasingly dangerous world, it is the most that the jungle can reasonably ask of its two largest elephants.

⁷ Simon Lewis, Trevor Hunnicutt, and David Brunnstrom, "Five Takeaways from Trump's Summit with Xi in Washington," *Reuters*, September 24, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/four-takeaways-trumps-summit-with-xi-washington-2026-09-24/>.

