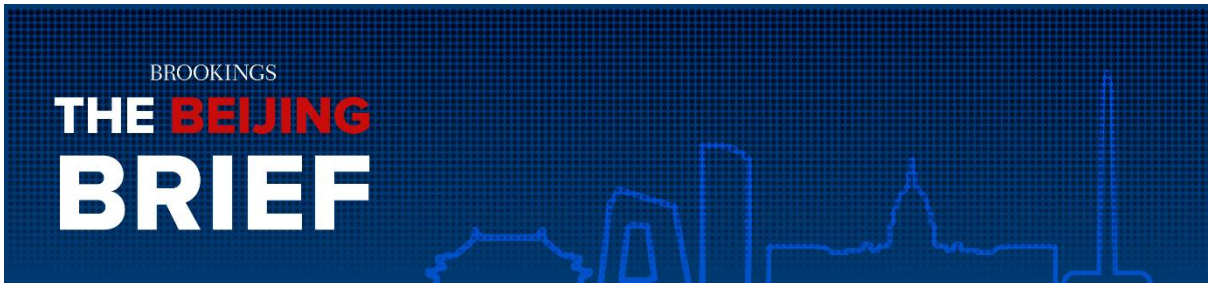

***The Beijing Brief* podcast**
The Brookings Institution

"The delayed Trump-Xi summit, Iran, and the US-China relationship"

Tuesday, March 31, 2026

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Episode Summary:

President Trump's planned visit to Beijing has been postponed to May 14 to 15 because of the ongoing U.S. war with Iran. What does the delay signal about the state of U.S.-China relations, how does Chinese leadership read this moment? On the inaugural episode of *The Beijing Brief*, Ryan Hass, Jon Czin, Pattie Kim, and Kyle Chan unpack what the postponement reveals about the trajectory of U.S.-China relations during the second Trump administration. They discuss China's strategic calculus amid the Iran conflict, the Taiwan issues likely to dominate when the two leaders finally meet, and the deeper question of whether time is really on America's side in its competition with China.

[music]

HASS: Hello, you're listening to *The Beijing Brief* from the Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution. This is part of the Brookings Podcast Network. My name's Ryan Hass, I'm the director of the China Center.

CZIN: And I'm Jon Czin, a fellow in the China Center. And this is our first episode of a new podcast. We're talking to our colleagues about the U.S.-China relationship on the heels of President Trump's postponed visit to Beijing.

KIM: And hi, I am Pattie Kim. I'm a fellow with the China Center where I work on Chinese foreign policy, U.S.-China relations, and the politics and security of East Asia.

CHAN: And I'm Kyle Chan, also a fellow with the China Center. I focus on China's technology and industrial policy from AI and robotics to biotech and manufacturing.

CZIN: And this podcast is part of our effort to try to bring some of our work here at the China Center and across Brookings to a wider audience. We have a lot of great work going on within our China Center. We have a strong roster of experts across our nonresident senior fellows and across the Brookings Institution. And we recognize, as much as it may pain us sometimes, not everybody has the time to read all our finely crafted prose, but you do have time, we hope, to listen to us and dial into a conversation that really goes beyond the headlines to understand some of the deeper issues that are in play, both in the U.S.-China relationship and within China.

HASS: Thank you, Jon. President Trump was scheduled to travel to Beijing from March 31st to April 2nd for a summit with Xi Jinping, which would've been the first presidential visit in nearly a decade to China. But on March 16th, President Trump announced that he was asking to delay the visit by roughly a month because of the war in Iran. The announcement came just as the United States and Chinese trade negotiators were finishing two days of intensive talks in Paris to help set up the summit.

Just a brief note, at the time of this episode's taping, the summit had not been rescheduled, it had just been postponed. We've just learned that the summit will be rescheduled for May 14th and 15th. Now back to the episode.

And so to get us into this conversation, I'd like to ask the team to situate what is happening in the United States-China relationship today, and where is the relationship heading?

Pattie, at the most basic level, in your view, why did President Trump decide to delay his meeting with President Xi?

[2:10]

KIM: Well, Ryan, in the president's own words he said that because of the ongoing war in Iran, he felt the need to stay in Washington rather than travel to Beijing. And what's notable is that in an interview with the *Financial Times*, which first broke the news of a potential delay, it seemed like Trump was tying his trip to Beijing to a commitment by China to help out in the Strait of Hormuz, to help stabilize the Strait

of Hormuz. And he specifically said that he'd like to know whether the Chinese would step up. And he implied that they should because they get a majority of their oil from the straits.

Now, since those initial comments the administration has really gone out of the way to walk back those comments. So we heard from Scott Bessent in Paris and others who emphasized that the postponement was purely due to logistics. It was not a pressure tactic on Beijing. And at the same time we've heard U.S. officials emphasize that the trade talks went really well, that they were constructive, that the bilateral relationship is still on track.

And interestingly, the Chinese response has been pretty measured, too. I mean, they've also repeated those words that the bilateral relationship is progressing, that leader-to-leader engagement is important, and that they are in communication about whenever the summit is rescheduled for.

So I think the takeaway here is that Washington and Beijing are both signaling that the postponed summit shouldn't be read as a major setback to the bilateral relationship, and that it's really about logistics.

[3:41]

HASS: Do you all buy that explanation?

[3:43]

CZIN: I mean, I think there's of course some validity to that with a war going on in the background, right, that makes sense that that you would want to postpone. I've heard some people say that Beijing wasn't necessarily interested in hosting President Trump, too, while a major conflict is underway and that that could be potentially awkward.

That's not my sense though from what I've seen in Chinese sources. Right? It seems like that if the trip were going to go ahead, they would've been happy to welcome him.

My sense is probably big picture, this will end up being a blip for the bilateral relationship. But I think for the moment, I would be surprised if, behind closed doors, people in Beijing who were involved in orchestrating this visit were not frustrated, and there was plenty of reporting already that they were frustrated by the lack of detailed staff preparations going into this. And so I suspect that that's probably bubbling just below the surface.

And I think there's also an open question too, if this is just about logistics, where are we going to be in the Iran war — this is a huge separate question — five, six weeks from now, as the president said it? Or do we really think that operations are going to be wrapped up and this will have a bow on it? That seems unlikely as a non-Middle East expert at this point.

Ryan, what are your thoughts having been involved in so many of these kind of engagements before?

[4:47]

HASS: Well, I think that you and Pattie have covered it well. The only thing that I would add to it is that I've heard that the Chinese were deeply frustrated to learn through the media of President Trump's plans to change the timing of his trip, which is very unorthodox and sort of reflects the manner by which the president relates to and approaches President Xi in China.

[5:08]

CZIN: Kyle, did you have thoughts you want to add?

[5:11]

CHAN: Overall, it's very interesting to see that both Washington and Beijing are pulled to each other kind of like magnets right now. They both have strong reasons to want this summit to happen. I think from the U.S. side, President Trump wants a stable relationship with China. Wants to be seen as making progress, especially on the trade front. And most importantly, doesn't want any issues related to China to derail his many other activities, foreign and domestic.

On the Chinese side, I think they would also be keen to signal to the world, to their own domestic audiences that the two, in their view, world superpowers are nearly at the same level and are at least enjoying a moment of stability in the near term.

[5:52]

CZIN: That's really interesting to hear you say that because whenever this meeting does happen, it really puts Beijing in the position of being a relative bright spot in Trump's foreign policy. Right? He's got a lot of metaphorical and actual fires to put out right now, and Beijing doesn't seem like it's one of them at the moment. Right? So there are some ways in which, you know, I think this really ends up playing to Beijing's advantage.

And I think, we were having this conversation beforehand, too, I mean, as frustrated as Beijing might be, I wonder if one of the other advantages that they get is that they do seem like they are playing for time. And pushing this visit off, while they may be annoyed about it right now, it does kind of further build in that backstopping, right, and I think gives the administration real pause to advance any kind of competitive measures over the next five or six weeks or whatever the timeline ends up being in the run up to this meeting whenever it happens.

[6:38]

HASS: You know, Jon, to put just a finer point on it, and if we were doing this podcast as a drinking game, I think "stability" would be the word that would require a shot of everyone. And I think by the end of, by the end of the podcast, people would be pretty tipsy, which is quite a contrast from where we were a year ago or two years ago at this time where "competition" would've been the watch word or the big word in the the word bubble.

[6:57]

CZIN: Yeah. It's really interesting you say that too, because I mean, I've always had this view that stability is kind of a vacuous term. Right? Especially in the context of the U.S.-China relationship, it's not really a stable relationship. I think, as we all know, and we all appreciate in our day-to-day work, it's one of the most dynamic relationships in the world. There's a lot going on. It's very multifaceted.

And so when you're talking about stability, it always seems very fragile or precarious. There's just a lack of an obvious crisis or irritant in the moment. And I actually think that very much applies right now in this moment. And I've seen some Chinese commentators use this phrase, right, that it's a large building on a flimsy edifice, something along those lines. I'm butchering the translation, but have you guys seen this as well?

HASS: Yeah. Big building on a weak foundation.

CZIN: Yes. Thank you.

[7:37]

KIM: So I want to ask you, Jon and Kyle, going back to sort of how Beijing is reading this moment. You know, clearly, Jon, as you mentioned, even after the war broke out, Beijing was not going to cancel this summit. They realized that in order to manage the U.S.-China relationship, you really need to keep Trump happy. And he was talking about this trip for months and he still is. And so they weren't going to pull it.

But having said that, they did have reservations about giving Trump sort of the grand reception that he was probably looking for at a moment when the United States is at war with one of China's strategic partners, and in a war that the Chinese have opposed.

And second, even before the military strikes, there were a lot of concerns that not enough working level engagement had happened to really set up the logistics or to set up concrete deliverables for this summit.

And so I'm just curious to hear from you both, maybe starting with you, Kyle, on sort of how you think Beijing is reading the postponement or the broader situation, do they see this as a setback, maybe an American power play, or do they see this as a relief for something else?

[8:44]

CHAN: I think it's probably a mix of relief and anxiety. On the one hand I think that they had been hoping that the U.S. would prepare a bit more, that the talks would be more substantive, and they could put some real issues on the table. Maybe that wasn't how the U.S. was going to approach it, but maybe that was the hope from the Chinese side. So to see the timing get pushed back a bit maybe would offer the U.S. some extra time to get ready for these discussions.

At the same time though, there is maybe a tinge of anxiety here where the question is, it got pushed back once, can it get pushed back again? How much further can this slide? And will an issue like the Iran war end up overtaking and kind of pushing out what China sees as its key priority, which is the U.S.-China relationship?

[9:30]

CZIN: It's interesting. I have a slightly different take on it. I think it depends on what you think Beijing wants from these engagements. And my theory of this has been for a while is that they mostly want time. Right? There may be other things that they want or they try to get maybe additional U.S. investment or rollback of some of our competitive measures. But I think mostly they're playing from time.

And I feel like my theory of this has been that Beijing already thinks that it has a lot of leverage over Washington after last year and what they did with the rare earths, and they think that that leverage is actually going to increase as we approach the midterm elections.

And I think we've all heard this even before the current spike in oil prices, there was also kind of a mirror image of many assessments of China's economy in the U.S. They can see the frailties in our own economy. Right? They can see the k-shaped economic growth, the problems in the labor market. Right? And they think that those two dynamics, the political calendar and our economic frailties, they thought they were going to compound anyway in the run up to the midterm elections and that that would give them more leverage.

So if the theory is that Beijing wants more time and they think they're going to have more leverage over time, I could see them getting real benefit from the fact that this is delayed.

And my thought was too, especially because the the administration said that they wanted to do a series of engagements over the course of this year, that could actually diminish Beijing's incentive to have a big deal in this meeting.

I mean, this is often the case with Chinese state craft, right, the meeting is the objective. But I think that was going to be especially true for this meeting. So I know there was grumbling and grumpiness about not having more to offer, but I think we all agree that there were going to be pretty low expectations in terms of this meeting. Right?

Pattie, I wanted to ask you one question, especially, because you've written a book on this now about China's partnership with with Iran. I know there's a school of thought in Washington that said that, you know, this is somehow an indirect move to compete with China. This is great great power competition through another vector, and that the moves against Venezuela and Iran in particular are designed to box in China.

As somebody who's really looked at this closely, do you buy that? I mean, what do you think of that argument?

[11:20]

KIM: I think some people could spin it that way, but I don't really see, I don't really see it that way. I don't really know how squeezing Venezuela or Iran is really giving us an upper hand, giving the United States an upper hand vis-à-vis China. And of course there's been interesting conversations in China as well about, you know, how are they going to manage these situations? Because the United States is going, taking out their partners. They're not really doing much beyond sort of rhetorical positioning where they say, you know, we are for sovereignty and territorial integrity. We are against military action. And, you know, the U.S. should return to the negotiating table to hammer out conflicts. But you don't really see the Chinese stepping up to assist their partners. And I'm sure there's questions about should we be doing something more?

But the Chinese way of operating for decades has been, let's just have very flexible strategic partnerships. We're not going to be offering security guarantees or nuclear umbrellas or anything like that. When we are working with partners, we can dial down or dial up the relationship as needed.

And so I think for them it's probably an interesting moment and it'll be interesting to see when Trump goes to Beijing how Xi will talk about these conflicts and whether he'll be asking the U.S. to pay attention to Chinese interests or what conversations might come out on those topics.

[12:42]

HASS: And when the two leaders meet to discuss these issues, it will be a rather fresh conversation because thus far in the preparation for the president's trip, the only channel that has been activated has been the economic channel. The absence of a strategic dialogue on a sustained basis while the rest of the world is literally blowing up has been a somewhat extraordinary event.

Which leads me to ask all three of you, do you find, from China's perspective, the situation in Iran right now, is it net positive, net negative, or neutral for Chinese interests?

[13:11]

CHAN: So I can point out a couple positives and negatives from the Chinese point of view. Some positives are that it distracts the U.S. away from the Indo-Pacific and away from China. It focuses the U.S. back again on the Middle East.

Another potential positive for China is also that, remember, their rare earths card was and still is their most powerful piece of leverage. And right now the U.S. defense industrial base is starting to deplete munitions that rely on these rare earth inputs. So that is something where, in a sense, the U.S. is now kind of strengthening that card that China has.

On the flip side though, there are some risks from Beijing's point of view with this conflict dragging on. One is that even though it has taken many steps to build up a stockpile of oil, other goods that would pass through the Strait of Hormuz, there are concerns about what would happen to those supplies should this drag on.

And then more broadly, there could be knock on consequences in terms of disruptions in global trade and the global economy, which China depends on quite a lot.

[14:17]

KIM: I completely agree. I think there are definitely risks for China, but I think the war essentially puts the United States on weaker footing vis-à-vis China. I mean, right now Washington is looking really strategically distracted, internally strained. The Trump administration has launched a war of choice against Iran with very unclear objectives and unclear end games. The U.S. is looking isolated. All of our allies have basically said, no, we're not going to help out in the Strait of Hormuz.

At the same time, as you mentioned, the oil markets are under pressure. Gas prices are rising. There's risks to the broader global economy. Domestically, the war is extremely unpopular. And Trump's polling is weak with the midterm elections coming.

And so this doesn't put the U.S. in a strong negotiating position vis-à-vis Beijing. And I think this gives them leverage, because they understand that President Trump, when he goes to China, will need some wins. He'll want the trip to yield big numbers, whether it's on Chinese purchase agreements, on agricultural goods, or Boeing planes, U.S. chips, or what have you. And so the question is, what is Beijing going to ask for in return?

If you look back in history, really, Chinese leaders tend to press the hardest when they sense an advantage. So if you look back to the 1970s, when Beijing engaged with the Nixon administration, they saw an administration that had campaigned on sort of winding down the the conflict in Vietnam, and it was looking for an exit. The administration saw Beijing, engagement with Beijing, as a strategic card to press the Vietnamese.

And so the the Chinese realized, Hey, we have some leverage here. And it was at this point that they tried to push the United States to basically recognize their position on Taiwan. They didn't achieve all of their objectives, but they were able to push the United States in that direction so that within that decade, the U.S. had recognized Beijing as the official government of China, and we had abrogated our official ties with Taiwan and wound down the defense relationship that we have.

And so, you can imagine this is the sort of opportunity that Beijing may see on the table. Now, I don't know if this is necessarily what the Chinese are going to be pushing for exactly in April or May, whenever the summit happens, but they're going to certainly be laying the groundwork for this. And some of the clues we've heard is that the Chinese want the United States to embrace principles principles that Xi Jinping has long championed for the bilateral relationships. So these are win-win cooperation, peaceful coexistence, and mutual respect.

And of course, baked into these principles, at least from the Chinese perspective, is that the U.S. recognize China's core interests, especially when it comes to Taiwan.

And so they're going to want to lay the groundwork so that in future summits, in future engagements with Trump or other presidents, they could say, Hey, you endorsed these principles, and so now you need to live up to it and respect our claims on Taiwan. So that's something to be watching for, I think.

HASS: That's why I think getting drawn into a negotiation over principles is a trap that the United States has to avoid.

[17:23]

CZIN: What do you think about Pattie's point on the Taiwan issue? I get asked this question a lot. Right? Is Taiwan going to be on the menu if they're not at the table in the summit? And is there going to be some kind of grand bargain or is there going to be a push for a rhetorical change in U.S. policy? Ryan, I know this is something you've thought a lot about in particular.

[17:40]

HASS: Well, at a minimum, I expect that President Xi will make a great effort to impress upon President Trump how sensitive of an issue this is and where his concerns lie as it relates to Taiwan.

When the two leaders meet, when they meet in the United States, the United States sort of controls the atmosphere, the environment, and to a certain extent the agenda. When they meet on the margins of multilateral events like the G20 or APEC, it's usually a fairly quick meeting with consecutive interpretation. Each side can only get through a few issues at a time.

When they meet in China, China controls the environment and that's when you get the full extended version of explanation of China's concerns and interests as it relates to Taiwan. And so I expect that, at a minimum, President Xi will go through in intricate detail what he wants to see and not see as it comes to Taiwan.

The question that is unresolved is whether President Xi will push aggressively for President Trump to say that he "opposes" Taiwan independence as opposed to "does not support" Taiwan independence, which would align more closely with China's preferences and goals. Or whether China pushes for President Trump to say that he supports eventual peaceful unification of the Taiwan Strait, which again would align more closely with China's goals and preferences.

The countervailing force on this is that President Trump changes his mind very often. His words are very fluid. And the Chinese recognize this. And so it would have, I think, less currency coming from President Trump than it would a more traditional president. And it also could invite a certain degree of backlash, making Taiwan a more prominent issue in the runup to midterm elections in the United States and eventually presidential elections in 2028.

And so the Chinese will have to sort of weigh that against their long held desire to get a U.S. president on Chinese soil to parrot their preferences as it relates to Taiwan.

[19:24]

CZIN: Yeah, and I think it's a very fair point. I mean, that distinction between opposing Taiwan independence and not supporting, I mean, it's pretty subtle stuff for most people. Right? And you can imagine how it would be hard to explain that to your average principal, or just about anybody. Like, what is the real difference and what's really at stake here? I think we appreciate, right, that this would have a broader significance and a broader impact across the region if there were a shift in U.S. rhetorical policy. But I think for most people, seems like pretty abstract.

[19:48]

HASS: Yeah. I don't envy the person who has to explain the President Trump why he can't say that he "opposes" as opposed to "does not support" Taiwan independence. But in the most basic terms, I think why it matters so much is that "does not support" is a principled position; "oppose" implies an active effort to challenge something. And does the United States want to put itself in a oppositional position to a potential outcome for Taiwan in the future?

[20:10]

KIM: And one thing I would just note is that, you know, the region is going to be watching this very closely. Is there a change in U.S. declaratory policy or even off the cuff remarks by President Trump? And it could, you know, have ripple effects especially given sort of the tensions that are existing in the U.S. alliance network in the Indo-Pacific region. And I think if allies start to think that they could be on the negotiating table between the United States and China, that is a bad place to be for the U.S.

And so that there are going to be reverberations even though these seem like rhetorical, nuanced discussions that have little relevance.

[20:47]

HASS: Does anyone want to make a case that the awesome military capacity on display around Iran will have a deterring effect upon Chinese adventurism?

[20:56]

CZIN: So my theory about it is that, in some ways they are deterred. Right? This is part of why they have not made a move on Taiwan. But in terms of building up their own military capacity, I think they seem very focused on it. And the the purges in the PLA, which is something I've been following very closely, get a lot of questions about this, I think, from my view, I think this shows how serious Xi is about getting the PLA oriented and prepared for this mission. The fact that he's willing to get rid of, you know, people that have ties to his father, people like Zhang Youxia, the PLA's top officer, I think it shows that he's willing to make deep incisions into his own political network to make sure they get this right, and that he is actually very focused on this.

I actually worry about this, that, you know, as remarkable operationally and tactically as the U.S. operations have been this year, both in Venezuela and in the early phases of the operations in Iran, that it's actually going to have an invigorating effect

on the PLA over the longer term. Right? Like, they've already gone back to the gym and gotten pretty bulked up and I think this has given them some new, interesting exercises to contemplate.

And it's kind of analogous to what happened to to the PLA after the first Persian Gulf War. They saw what the U.S. was able to do with precision guided munitions, and I think that really fed into a lot of their thinking about how to build out this already quite dramatic military modernization program.

So I worry that, you know, again, this goes back to the conversation we were having before, there's the school of thought that this is going to get inside Beijing's head. And I think the question is well, yes, it's going to get inside their head, but what is the outcome going to be? And I could see it being one that leaves the U.S. in a weaker position over the medium to longer term rather than a stronger one.

Especially because yes, they're seeing the upsides, but as you were saying, Kyle, there's also the depletion of our munitions. Right? Like, we're actively moving forces out of the Indo-Pacific Theater. Right? So there are potentially medium to long term upsides for them, and even short term upsides for them.

[22:41]

CHAN: Yeah. And I would also just add the sort of reaction on the military side might mirror that of China's reaction on the economic and technology side. Where feeling exposed to, say, U.S. export controls and sanctions has really spurred China's own efforts to shore up its vulnerabilities to, you know, zero in on some of the areas where it feels that it needs to patch up its weaknesses and double down on this industrial policy to become more resilient to U.S. pressure and to become a more powerful actor on the global stage.

[23:15]

CZIN: So, I think one of the really interesting things that's going on in this moment is that both sides see this as a tactical reprieve, maybe a strategic one. Right? They recognize that they need to to shore up their vulnerabilities, both the Chinese side and the U.S. side after what happened with China's export controls on rare earths last year.

And I think one of the interesting things that I've noticed is that both sides seem to really think that time is on their side. You see that reflected in Beijing's rollout of the Five Year Plan just a couple weeks ago, that they think time is on their side and this next five-year period is going to be really crucial for them.

But I think there's a little bit of that in the zeitgeist in Washington here too, especially in the administration, that time is on our side. We understand that we have this vulnerability and we just need to play it out.

I think this raises then the really interesting analytic question of, okay, objectively who has time on their side? Kyle, as somebody who follows a lot of these issues closely, what's your thought on that?

[24:03]

CHAN: Yeah, so from the Chinese side, they've not only identified their areas of weaknesses and have long known about them, but they are moving very fast to try to make progress in areas like semiconductors, aircraft engines, a lot of the key inputs that go into the broader semiconductor industry. China's trying to do what I don't think any other country has done before, which is to build a fully domestic semiconductor industry, including all the equipment that goes into it. This is very difficult. It takes years, maybe even decades. But I think China is playing the long game here when it comes to technology, when it comes to building up its industrial strength over time.

And you can ask the question about who will get there faster? Will we fix our rare earths vulnerabilities faster? And to some extent we can harness certain advantages that we have that China just doesn't have. Most notably, working with our allies and working with a broader network of countries who also share many of the same concerns and worries.

But then it does come down to the political question, that of political will. Can the U.S. stay focused in the way that China has on our issues and trying to make progress on something like rare earths? Or is this something where we're going to go back and forth, and not really address the problem, and it will still be hanging over our heads?

CZIN: Yeah. It's important to note that's kind of been the default setting. Right? Like, we've known about this vulnerability for now 16 years.

CHAN: Yes.

[25:22]

CZIN: Right? Since they did this to the Japanese in 2010. And I'm very struck by a piece *the New York Times* did on this a few months ago where they said, after 15 years of diligently focusing on this, the Japanese were able to reduce their dependency, I think, from 90% to 70%. And so Beijing has the advantage from my perspective of time.

And the other thing that's on my mind, too, is that, you know, when you look at the Japanese system and especially the Chinese system, they are built to conduct industrial policy. And we are by definition not. So I do think when you're thinking about the competition and who has time on their side in terms of remediating these vulnerabilities that the other side has, just institutionally they they are built for this in a way that our Commerce Department, despite the good work that they do, or others in the U.S. government, it's not even clear to me who would be the locus for that in the U.S. government. Like, how would we manage that? Like the the Defense Department part of it is kind of the most obvious part because they have such a close lash up with industry.

But if you're talking about some of these civilian supply chain vulnerabilities, it's not clear to me who owns that. You need appropriations from Congress, which don't seem to be necessarily materializing at this point.

So, many people in the U.S. seem to think that time is on our side, but I worry that if you look at it objectively that it's not. And I find that very worrisome going forward.

[26:33]

HASS: Well, guys, we've put a lot on the table. I think that this conversation has helped situate how Iran plays into the U.S.-China relationship, as well as what we should be thinking about as the United States-China relationship goes forward.

But before we close, I do want to ask each of you, what are a few of the signposts that you will be watching in the coming weeks and months to have a indication of the direction of travel of the U.S.-China relationship going forward?

Pattie, maybe we'll start with you and then work over to Kyle and Jon.

[26:56]

KIM: Sure. So what I would say is that while there's a lot of attention on this delayed summit, when is it going to happen, what's going to happen there? I'm going to be personally watching for what happens afterwards. And so less so on sort of the concrete deliverables that I think many of us could predict, like purchasing agreements, maybe investment — that would be sort of a new area that would be interesting. There's been talk about a potential board of investment and board of trade that the Trump administration has floated. So it'll be interesting to watch those deliverables.

But what I will be looking at is how does the Chinese side articulate their demands? How do they describe the trajectory of the bilateral relationship? How do they frame the outcomes from the summit? Because this is going to tell us how Beijing is laying the steps to shape the terms of engagement going forward from this spring summit, as the two sides look toward additional meetings, whether it's this year or beyond.

[27:52]

CHAN: Yeah, just building off of what Pattie said, I think Beijing usually does not surprise people. They usually telegraph things pretty far in advance. And I think some of the asks that they might put on the table, they might signal pretty clearly from early on. And some things to look out for are what we've talked about so far. Taiwan, trade and investment, potentially export controls might be another topic. So, we'll see how the messaging is done by Beijing leading up to the summit.

[28:21]

CZIN: Yeah, I think from my perspective, I'm going to be more focused in the coming months on what Beijing does rather than what it says. I have very low expectations for what Beijing wants out of this, and I think this is a dynamic across administrations where the U.S. often wants a number of things from China, whether it's on the economic front or on the foreign policy front. And I think, you know, not to be glib about it, I think Beijing a lot of times just wants us to stay out of their way for the most part. So I don't expect too many surprises from it.

Part of the puzzle here is given where we're at in the bilateral relationship, what does Beijing do with that, right, given that you have this this surprisingly resilient stability. What I'm looking for is how they treat our allies and partners in the region in this moment since Trump has put such an emphasis on the bilateral relationship and the relationship with Xi Jinping.

Because I think we could start to see even over the course of last year as the administration was focused on mollifying Xi after the post-Liberation Day walk down, they were pushing pretty hard on some of our allies across the Indo-Pacific. And I think we kind of hit the high watermark for that with what the Chinese did to Japan right after the meeting between the two leaders in Busan where they rolled out export controls, again, against the Japanese. And again, without much pushback from the Trump administration.

So I wonder if even if this meeting is delayed, if Beijing sees the kind of good vibes that we have in the relationship now as signaling that they have an opportunity to push our allies and partners in the region even harder in the coming year, especially if the U.S. is distracted and primarily focused on the Middle East.

[29:44]

HASS: Are there any domestic or elite political issues in China that you think we all should be following closely in the coming period?

[29:52]

CZIN: So big picture for domestic politics right now, I think the key motif so far in Xi's third term has been policy continuity. We've gotten a giant dose of that in the Five Year Plan, and then this kind of operatic turmoil in the personnel ranks. And you can see this most conspicuously in the PLA, but it's playing out across the broader party state apparatus. Right? But for the PLA alone, we did a paper a few weeks ago with CSIS where we think that it could be as many as over a hundred generals who've been dismissed from their position during this most recent round of purges.

And this is one of the things I've been really wondering about, how long is that tenable for? And in the Leninist system to have policy and politics operating on parallel tracks? At some point, the politics is going to start infecting the policymaking process. We haven't seen that yet under Xi Jinping. He's been able to divide the two. But that strikes me as challenging. Right? So I think we'll continue to see the fallout from the purges in the coming year.

And then the political story is really going to become much more salient next year, right, as we go into 2027 and Xi really in earnest begins laying the groundwork for what will in all likelihood be his fourth term.

[30:56]

HASS: You know, from my perspective, I think that everything that you've said makes perfect sense. The Chinese would like relief from American pressure so that they have more space and room to grow. But I think that they also would like the ability to make a subtle but significant signal to the rest of the region that the United

States cares more about its relationship with China than it does with its allies and partners, and that President Trump recognizes that Xi Jinping is his peer and that China is a peer of the United States in the international system. That is, I think, what the Chinese are aiming for. And that's why I think they will remain very interested in hosting President Trump in the coming period.

The one asterisk I would add to the great list that you've put together of signposts is the possibility of President Putin traveling to Beijing. We know that he wants to travel on the first half of the year to China. We know that the Chinese are ready to host him. And there is some room that has opened up on China's diplomatic calendar.

And and so if President Putin does go to to China, what signal will that send? How will that trigger or not President Trump? And so that's a space that we should watch going forward as well.

[music]

Thank you guys for a tremendous conversation. I learned a lot, and I enjoyed it as much. And thank you to everyone listening to us today to help unpack these complex issues.

CZIN: On behalf of the team at the John L. Thornton China Center, thank you for listening to *The Beijing Brief*.

This podcast is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. Our thanks to the production team, including supervising producer Ike Blake; senior producer Fred Dews; producers Allie Matthias and Virginia Schaus; audio engineer Gastón Reboredo; and video producers Daniel Morales and Teddy Wansink. Rachel Slattery designed the show's artwork.

Also, thank you to our colleagues in the John L. Thornton China Center, Foreign Policy, and Office of Communications at Brookings for their support.

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