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Trump and Xi: Is This ‘Reagan-Gorbachev No. 2’?

by Gordon G. Chang | June 2026

“We were already in Cold War 2.0 with China,” Charles Payne, the Fox Business anchor, told Jesse Watters, immediately after President Donald Trump’s Beijing summit in May. “I think it’s thawing out tremendously. I don’t think a lot of people understand just how powerful this visit is or was, and how much the next one will be as well.”¹

Payne was not the only one making historic comparisons. “It’s a stunning victory,” the Heritage Foundation’s Michael Pillsbury said in a similar vein to Elizabeth MacDonald of Fox Business. “Goes back to Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972, which a lot of conservatives opposed at the time. Then it goes to Ronald Reagan’s visit to China in 1984.”²

On the 40th president, Payne also suggested that the Trump-Xi summit in May was an echo of an earlier dialogue: “This has a chance to become a Reagan-Gorbachev No. 2.”³

So are Trump’s dealings with China on the order of President Reagan’s with the Soviet Union?

Unfortunately not.

American presidents prior to Reagan tried to engage the Soviet Union, but as Strobe Talbott of the Brookings Institution noted, Soviet leaders were absolutely determined to preserve their system. “Sooner or later, each caused a setback or a showdown with the United States through some act of barbarity or recklessness,” he wrote in 2004. “Breakthroughs in the United States-Soviet relations were inherently subject to breakdowns.”⁴

Reagan, for all his powers of persuasion, got nowhere at first, but it was not for lack of trying. While recovering from the 1981 assassination attempt, he sent a handwritten note to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, but there was no progress either then or during the short tenures of Brezhnev’s

two successors, Yuri Andropov and Constantin Chernenko.

In 1985, however, history happened. Mikhail Gorbachev was named general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, giving Reagan a long-awaited opportunity. Reagan and Gorbachev met in five summits—and in less than a half decade they changed the world.

By the 1980s, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was ailing, yet behind the walls erected by the Soviet Party it could survive. The USSR failed when it did because Gorbachev, who started out as a true believer in the Soviet system, tried to reform the unreformable with *perestroika*, economic restructuring, and *glasnost*, openness.

During their fourth meeting, in Moscow in 1988, Reagan famously said his Soviet counterpart “deserves most of the credit, as the leader of this country.” As Talbott wrote, “This quotation was much cited at the time as an example of Reagan’s graciousness, tact, and self-deprecation,”⁵ yet Reagan also spoke the truth. At the end, Gorbachev had both the good sense to realize that he could not control the destabilizing forces he had unintentionally unleashed with *perestroika* and *glasnost* and, as important, the humanity not to kill to preserve Soviet power.

Trump, on the other hand, does not have it so easy.

Xi Jinping abhors Gorbachev’s legacy. “Why did the Soviet Union disintegrate? Why did the Soviet Communist Party collapse?” the Chinese leader asked in a secret speech to Guangdong province cadres in December 2012, one month after being named general secretary of China’s ruling

organization. “An important reason was that their ideals and convictions wavered.”

“Finally, all it took was one quiet word from Gorbachev to declare the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party, and a great party was gone,” Xi declared then. “In the end, nobody was a real man, nobody came out to resist.”⁶

Xi’s grasp of late Soviet history is faulty—Gorbachev started out as an ardent communist and there was a failed hardliner coup attempt against him in August 1991, for instance—but the bigger problem for Trump is that Xi is far more ideological, ruthless, and ambitious than the last Soviet leader.

Xi, for instance, evidently believes in the imperial-era notion that China is the world’s only sovereign state. Chinese emperors thought they not only had the Mandate of Heaven to rule *tianxia*—“all under Heaven”—but also that Heaven compelled them to do so.

Xi has often used *tianxia* language in official pronouncements. “The Chinese have always held that the world is united and all under heaven are one family,” he declared in his 2017 New Year’s Message.⁷

Moreover, Xi’s subordinates have continually propagated *tianxia* themes. Foreign Minister Wang Yi, for instance, in 2017 wrote a landmark article in *Study Times*, the influential Central Party School newspaper, essentially arguing that Xi was building an international system that had “transcended” the concept of sovereignty, the basis of the system that has been in place since the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. Wang was therefore suggesting that China is

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the world's only legitimate state.⁸ In 2017, Chinese officials publicly talked about the moon and Mars as sovereign Chinese territory. Xi, consequently, is the most ambitious aggressor in history.⁹

“Xi views himself as the modern heir of China's lineage of great emperors, so the concept of fair and reciprocal relations with any foreign country is simply absent from his worldview,” Charles Burton of the Prague-based Sinopsis think tank told me after the May summit.¹⁰ How can any nation, even one as powerful as the United States, cooperate with a China that believes others have no sovereignty?

Xi Jinping, as time has progressed, has become even more open about his designs on the world. On July 1, 2021, the day the Communist Party celebrated the centennial of its founding, he promised “to crack skulls and spill blood” of those standing in the way of China's ambitions.

More chilling, although far less dramatic, is another statement he made that day: “The Communist Party of China and the Chinese people, with their bravery and tenacity, solemnly proclaim to the world that the Chinese people are not only good at taking down the old world, but also good at building a new one.”¹¹

Xi's arrogance was, not surprisingly, on full display at the May summit with Trump. On the first day of the event, the Chinese leader publicly mentioned the “Thucydides Trap,” a reference to a declining hegemon dangerously challenging a rising power. The insult to Trump—and America itself—was unmistakable. After all, Xi's words come straight from America, Graham Allison's much-discussed

2014 work, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*

More insultingly, the Chinese leader on the summit's first day also talked about the “new era,” Xi's phrase for the period in which the U.S. has been pushed to the sidelines and China dominates the world. “Change is coming that hasn't happened in 100 years,” Xi in March 2023 told Vladimir Putin in Moscow after their 40th in-person meeting. “And we are driving this change together.”¹² To drive home the “new era” point, Putin visited Beijing just days after Trump left town.

“Xi's urging that China and the U.S. overcome the Thucydides Trap and create a new paradigm of major-country relations signals his expectation that the West will accept the inevitability of being overtaken by China and therefore not challenge it anywhere on earth,” Burton told me.¹³

Trump seemed unperturbed by Xi Jinping's over-the-top belief in his power, and there were good reasons for him to ignore those remarks. “The words of China's leader betray insecurity, not exhibit strength,” Blaine Holt, a retired U.S. Air Force general and now a Newsmax foreign affairs commentator, told me. “Confident leaders do not try to humiliate guests.”¹⁴

“Xi Jinping's suggestion of Chinese supremacy over the United States contradicts ground realities,” Burton added. “Severe domestic debt and economic headwinds and internal military frictions currently highlight a weakening Chinese state. Add in an unhappy populace and a collapsing demography, and China is on the verge of either short-term

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—Charles Burton

failure or long-term irrelevance. In either case, we should be concerned about a decaying Chinese state.”¹⁵

Xi is definitely not Gorbachev, but is Trump Reagan?

In some ways, the 47th president is. Trump, like the 40th, has been giving his big power rival a hard time. The current president has been taking Chinese proxies—Venezuela, Cuba, and Iran—off the board in recent months. Beginning last year, Trump has been relentlessly pushing China out of both the Western Hemisphere and Middle East.

Reagan hounded the USSR around the world, but he gave Gorbachev a way out when it was clear to the Soviet leader that he could not keep up with the West.

The Gipper, for example, stabilized the relationship with a historic arms-control pact. At his third summit with Gorbachev, in Washington in December 1987, the pair signed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, INF, which eliminated all ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500 kilometers. Reagan, in effect, turned down the temperature.

Xi Jinping, on the other hand, is engaged in a fast buildup of nuclear weapons and has rebuffed repeated American attempts to talk about arms control. Xi’s Beijing is not even willing to participate in discussions about banning artificial intelligence from decisions to launch nuclear weapons: In Geneva in May 2024, Chinese officials flatly rejected talks with America on the subject.¹⁶

The 47th president, however, certainly does not sound Reaganesque. So far, Trump has tried to sweet talk his adversary, not only calling China a “superpower” but also referring to China and the U.S. as the “G2.”¹⁷

So far, that approach has not worked, causing heartburn among American allies and riling supporters at home. Also alarming is Trump’s effusive praise for Xi. “You’re a great leader,” he said to the Chinese dictator in Beijing before the start of substantive talks in May. “Sometimes people don’t like me saying it, but I say it anyway, because it’s true.”¹⁸

Whether true or not, Trump should not be saying that to anyone, especially at this time. Reagan publicly complimented Gorbachev, but only when the two had reached understandings and worked well together. At the moment, relations between U.S. and China remain tense, as they should be considering dangerous Chinese conduct around the world.

China now resembles what Reagan called the “evil empire.” Oval Office occupants, however, cannot speak that way about a more evil—and certainly no less dangerous—China. The Chinese regime has been, among other things, killing Americans with fentanyl, maintaining biological weapons facilities on American soil, smuggling modified pathogens into America, operating secret police stations in the U.S., organizing violent riots on American soil, infiltrating institutions of all kinds, and counterfeiting dollars.

Americans, however, are slow to perceive danger, something Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century hinted at in his *Democracy in America*. In the 20th

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century, Halford Mackinder remarked upon this tendency in democratic states when he wrote in *Democratic Ideals and Reality* that “Democracy refuses to think strategically unless and until compelled to do so for purposes of defense.”

Trump does not talk about China as a threat. Reagan, who had become a staunch anti-communist, had the ability to rouse Americans after the evident failures of the détente policies of his predecessors, Nixon, Ford, and Carter. Primarily because of the lack of clarity from their political leaders at this moment, Americans generally do not perceive the Chinese regime as an enemy.

They should. For one thing, the Communist Party of China has not been shy about announcing its hostility to the United States, issuing unfriendly propaganda almost every day. The Party, with its strident anti-Americanism, is establishing a justification to strike America. As James Lilley, Washington’s ambassador to Beijing during the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, said, “The Chinese always telegraph their punches.”

China’s leaders view the United States as an existential threat, afraid of the inspirational impact on the Chinese people of America’s ideals and form of governance. Chinese propaganda continually warns Americans of “zero-sum thinking,” but the Party definitely sees its competition with America in those terms.

Reagan too was always clear as to what he wanted. “My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic,” he famously said in 1977. “It is this: We win, and they lose.”

His vision compelled him to speak plainly. As speechwriter Peter Robinson has detailed, Reagan encountered weeks of “contempt and vehemence”

from the State Department and the National Security Council to his planned address in front of Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate in June 1987.¹⁹ Yet the 40th president was not deterred and in the end uttered the words that were heard around the world and shook the Soviet empire: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!”

At some time, there may be a “Reagan-Gorbachev No. 2.” For that to happen, however, China will have to find a Gorbachev. And America will need its Reagan.

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