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Trump's superpower, unpredictability, has given way to unreliability

It is unclear whether commitments made in Beijing will survive the flight home

U.S. President Donald Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping attend a dinner at Mar-a-Lago in West Palm Beach, Florida, on April 6, 2017. Trump informed Xi that night that he had ordered missile strikes on Syria. | REUTERS

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When U.S. President Donald Trump served Chinese leader Xi Jinping chocolate cake at Mar-a-Lago in 2017 while casually informing his guest that the United States had just launched 59 Tomahawk missiles into Syria, it captured something fundamental to his approach to foreign policy: unpredictability.

What kind of leader conducts diplomacy that way? An unpredictable one. For a time, that impulsiveness was arguably Trump's most potent foreign policy asset, a genuine strategic superpower, a wildcard that confounded adversaries and allies alike.

As Trump travels to Beijing this week for what may be the most consequential diplomatic encounter of his second presidency, it is worth asking whether that unpredictability remains operative — and whether it has remained an asset or transformed into something more corrosive.

Answering that question requires holding two ideas in tension. The first is whether Trump's second-term behavior reflects calculated chaos — a deliberate strategic instrument — or the undisciplined instincts of a leader operating without meaningful institutional constraints. The case for calculation is not without merit. His maximalist opening demands, tariff escalations and theatrical reversals have at times produced negotiating leverage that more orthodox approaches might not have generated. There is a coherent argument that Trump understands exactly what he is doing and that the appearance of impulsiveness is itself the strategy, designed to keep counterparts off balance.

But the evidence increasingly cuts the other way. The absence of identifiable strategic endpoints, the opacity around who is shaping core decisions on China, Taiwan and extended deterrence and the lack of any coherent doctrine beneath the transactional surface suggest something closer to improvisation than coordinated strategy. The distinction matters. A calculated disruptor can ultimately be trusted to pursue coherent interests. An undisciplined one cannot.

That brings us to a second and more pressing development. Officials working on trade, China policy and Iran increasingly report that Trump's opening moves are now broadly recognizable:

the maximalist demand, the tariff threat, the withdrawal and partial return. His stylistic playbook is well-thumbed by anyone paying attention. But those same officials are more alarmed by something else: Trump is becoming unreliable.

Commitments made at the table dissolve without explanation. Red lines declared publicly vanish by the next news cycle. Partners and adversaries alike are left calculating not simply what Trump will do next, but whether anything he says can be treated as a bankable commitment at all. This distinction — between recognizable patterns and reliable commitments — is not semantic. It is the fault line on which both alliance management and deterrence rest.

During his first term, Trump's unpredictability operated within a constraining architecture. Figures such as former Defense Secretary James Mattis, former national security adviser H. R. McMaster and former White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly served as institutional guardrails — imperfectly and with friction, but consistently enough to signal to allies and adversaries that core American commitments would hold.

That architecture is now largely dismantled. Senior figures in the second term have been selected more for loyalty than for independent expertise or institutional credibility. Marco Rubio, serving as secretary of state, may represent the last senior official in the administration with recognizable traditional Republican foreign policy credentials. His hawkish instincts on authoritarianism are genuine and his institutional knowledge is real. But his depth on cross-strait dynamics and the architecture of Indo-Pacific security is more limited than this moment demands. The bench is thin, and that thinness carries real consequences when a president boards a plane for Beijing.

There is, to be sure, a strategic case for unpredictability as a foreign policy instrument. China and Russia are practiced at managing orthodox American diplomacy. They understand how to exploit

the deliberative pace of alliance consultations, deploy disinformation to fracture political consensus and leverage their positions at the United Nations to block accountability. An unpredictable counterpart can disrupt those playbooks in ways that sequential, allies-first diplomacy cannot easily replicate.

Trump's transactional pressure has also, however uncomfortably, compelled allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and NATO members to invest more seriously in their own defense after decades of underspending — a structural gap long identified in policy research. Some analysts in Beijing hold a related view: that Trump's transactionalism, however chaotic in appearance, is ultimately comprehensible and manageable. In their reading, a dealmaker seeking visible wins is more navigable than an ideologically driven adversary pursuing long-term containment. That argument deserves engagement.

But unreliability is different in kind — and more damaging. Allies can adapt to erratic behavior by building redundancies, hedging risk and diversifying security relationships. What they cannot sustain is fundamental uncertainty about whether American commitments will be honored at all. Reliability is the foundational currency of alliance politics. Without it, even well-understood patterns lose their strategic utility.

For countries such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan — for whom U.S. security guarantees are existential anchors rather than negotiating chips — erosion of that reliability is not a diplomatic inconvenience; it is a strategic shock.

Xi almost certainly enters this week's summit believing he understands Trump. Beijing's playbook is familiar: envelop him in ceremony, appeal to his desire for historic dealmaking, offer calibrated economic incentives and steer him incrementally toward concessions aligned with long-standing Chinese objectives.

On Taiwan, those objectives are clear: language — formal or informal — suggesting that independence will not be supported by Washington; reductions in arms transfers; and signals that the United States would not intervene militarily in a cross-strait contingency. Most analysts argue Trump will not cross those lines. Perhaps. But this is a president who walked across the Demilitarized Zone into North Korea for a photograph, publicly berated Ukraine's president in the Oval Office and returned to power after electoral defeat. Xi knows this history. Behind the pageantry, there is likely real caution.

There is also a deeper irony. China enters this meeting with structural vulnerabilities. Its economy faces sustained headwinds and its international relationships are narrower and more fragile than official narratives suggest. Beneath the surface of tightly controlled domestic politics, there are signs of social unease — a quiet reckoning with what years of centralized control have cost a population that once experienced rapid material progress.

Official nationalism is louder than ever. The insecurity beneath it may run deeper. In that context, Xi may need a visible and communicable win from this summit more urgently than his composed posture suggests. That need could make him, not Trump, the more constrained — and therefore more predictable — actor in the room.

The clearest assessment going into Beijing is that Trump's unpredictability has not disappeared. It has evolved. His stylistic patterns are now familiar. His strategic endpoint remains opaque. It is unclear who is shaping his thinking on Taiwan or whether that thinking is internally coherent. And it is an open question whether commitments made in the room will survive the flight home.

Former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe understood this dynamic well. He built the most durable bilateral relationship of Trump's first term by layering engagement across business,

political, military and civil society channels — ensuring that the broader architecture of cooperation could withstand any single presidential impulse. That principle remains the most useful guide to constructively engaging with Trump on foreign policy, whether cake is served is not.

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