

Opinion Chinese politics & policy**Trump, Xi, Putin and the strongman race**

The Chinese leader is ending the year in a better position than his American and Russian counterparts

GIDEON RACHMAN

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Gideon Rachman

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“I’ve never seen men so scared.” That was Donald Trump’s amused verdict after observing Xi Jinping’s intimidating effect on the Chinese leader’s entourage, at a recent meeting. “I want my cabinet to behave like that,” joked the US president.

Trump's return to the Oval Office has signalled a revival of the strongman style in global politics. Bilateral meetings between powerful, headstrong leaders increasingly shape the international agenda. Multilateral summits such as the UN General Assembly, the G20 or the COP climate summit are dwindling in significance.

Both Trump and Xi skipped the recent G20 summit in South Africa. It was an international conference that would have forced them to share the spotlight with leaders of smaller nations. Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia also gave the G20 summit a miss, as did Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Putin finds it hard to travel these days. But that has not stopped him from enjoying a few set-piece summits this year, which allowed him to present himself as the honoured leader of a great power. He will be in New Delhi this week to meet Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister. He strolled through Beijing with Xi and Kim Jong Un of North Korea in September. The previous month, he met Trump in Alaska.

Nonetheless, while Putin is doing his best to keep up appearances, it is clear that he can no longer claim to lead one of the world's most powerful nations. After almost four years of war, Russia's army is still struggling to break out of eastern Ukraine and its economy is dependent on the kindness of China.

Trump and Xi, by contrast, lead nations with the economic might to back up their strongman swagger. Despite his relentless campaign to win a Nobel Peace Prize, the US leader has also shown himself willing to use military force. He took the decision to bomb Iran in June and is currently threatening Venezuela.

But Trump's efforts to end the year as the strongest of the strongmen are increasingly hamstrung by evidence that his domestic support is crumbling. The Republican party suffered bad electoral defeats recently in New York, New Jersey and Virginia. His protestations that the US economy is doing marvellously and that inflation has been beaten are disbelieved by American voters. Recent [polls](#) have shown the Democrats leading the Republicans by an average of five points ahead of next year's congressional elections.

The sense that the country is turning against Trump may have encouraged Republicans in Congress to revolt against the president by forcing the release of the files in the Jeffrey Epstein case. Trump's inability to stop that happening, despite many months of effort, was a rare sign of weakness. Depending on what is in the files, Epstein may continue to haunt the president in the coming months.

Xi, by contrast, is ending 2025 looking stronger than for some time. The Chinese leader has survived a perilous five years. A pandemic that originated in China created a global disaster — although Xi and his government somehow managed to forestall any efforts to hold China accountable. Xi's mishandling of the pandemic at home led to rare displays of public dissent. American tariffs threatened China's access to global markets.

Nonetheless, in contrast to the EU and Japan, China has been unusually tough in its response to Trump's trade war and used its grip over rare earths and critical minerals to force the US to reduce tariffs. The rare earths weapon could also change American calculations on a possible conflict over Taiwan. This renewed sense of Chinese strength may be reflected in the aggressive [stance](#) that Beijing has adopted towards Sanae Takaichi, the new Japanese prime minister, after she made some comments on Taiwan that went down badly in Beijing.

Xi benefits from a presentational advantage in the battle of the strongmen, where a lot depends on an ability to project an image of unchallenged power. In a way that Trump can only envy, he has almost complete control over his country's legislature, legal system and media. That means signs of dissent or turmoil are rare in China.

Nonetheless, those signs are there for those who look for them. Xi has been in power for more than a decade, but he continues to purge political and military leaders at an extraordinary rate. This could be a signal of his own paranoia or the persistence of corruption. Either way, it is a jarring contrast with the official image of serenity and strength that the Chinese leader seeks to project.

The ministers and aides who surrounded Xi at his meeting with Trump in South Korea in October had reason to look terrified. Many of their predecessors had recently been purged — including a foreign minister, two defence ministers, nine senior generals and the head of the international affairs department of the Communist party.

By contrast, Trump's latest effort to imprison one of his political enemies — James Comey, the former head of the FBI — was thrown out by the courts. That was doubtless frustrating for the president. But it was an encouraging sign for America, suggesting that the political system is still stronger than a single charismatic leader.

Whatever Trump may think, a president surrounded by terrified subordinates is not a healthy sign for any country.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

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