

China's Summit Diplomacy: Insights From BRICS, APEC and the G20

Xi Jinping and his government have been remarkably vague regarding the international agenda China publicly promotes.

By **R. Evan Ellis**

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China's President Xi Jinping upon his arrival in Kazan, Russia, for the 14th BRICS Summit, Oct. 22, 2024.

Credit: [Press Service of the Head of Tatarstan](#)

From late October through mid-November, China's President Xi Jinping held high-profile engagements in three very different major international forums: the [BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia](#); the [APEC Leadership Forum in Lima, Peru](#); and the [G-20 summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil](#). Beyond the dominant role of Xi and China in each summit, the three distinct performances by Xi also provide important insight into how Beijing is positioning itself on the international stage in pursuit of its own benefit and strategic advantage. These engagements also suggest what to expect as China under Xi responds to the challenges and opportunities presented by the incoming U.S. administration of Donald Trump.

China's global engagement, manifested in its activities at the three forums, is not a bid for "leadership" in the sense traditionally understood in the West. Rather, China is pursuing its national self-interest in its engagement with a range of different global actors, while seeking to influence and reshape the international system to its advantage.

On one hand, China under Xi is consistently firm and clear in [opposing any questioning of](#)

[its behaviors](#) on what it regards as “internal matters” – such as its claim to Taiwan and right to use its military and other techniques to threaten the island with impunity, its internment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, the repression of democracy in Hong Kong, or other violations of the rights of China’s people to democratic choice, freedom of expression, and basic protections.

Beyond such “off-limits” topics, however, in the three most recent summits, as usual, Xi and China have been remarkably vague regarding the international agenda China’s government publicly promotes. This allows Beijing to court a range of different actors, simultaneously pursuing business and political relationships with [archrivals Iran and Saudi Arabia](#), as well as selling arms to Russia to support its invasion of Ukraine, even as Beijing assures European states of China’s “[shared interest](#)” in an enduring peace there.

The approach, which may be termed “strategic ambiguity,” generally avoids detailed public positions that could divide or highlight contradictions in China’s postures toward each partner. Instead, China’s diplomacy concentrates on “[win-win](#)” [business dealings](#), though the terms of its [contracts](#) and



cooperation agreements are rarely made public.

BRICS: Strengthening an Amorphous Coalition of Illiberal States

At the BRICS summit in Kazan, China worked to strengthen a diverse coalition of illiberal states, united principally by a [common interest in weakening accountability](#) to the Western system of institutional and contractual constraints, although without uncontrollably destabilizing the institutional architectures that have served as the foundation for global commerce and security since World War II.

In this endeavor, Xi demonstrated China's style of leadership from behind, providing important financial support to BRICS through the [New Development Bank](#), [shaping the group's agenda](#) through bureaucratic maneuvering, and speaking in ambiguous platitudes about stability and "[high-quality development](#)," but without publicly pursuing a specific leadership agenda. The 9-member group added 13 new "partner countries" at the Kazan summit, which increased the group's economic and political weight while preserving its identity as a club united by skepticism toward the liberal rules-based international order.





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Consistent with the non-judgmental strategic posture expressed by China in its Global Civilization Initiative, the BRICS summit avoided concrete public discussions of principles, which would have exposed the [profound differences](#), and in some cases, enmity, between its members. Rather, the summit made concrete, albeit limited, progress toward mechanisms such as BRICS Clear and [bilateral trade clearing mechanisms](#). These advance Beijing's strategic interests in reducing vulnerabilities to, and undermining, the dollar-dominated international financial system. It also creates opportunities for China to commercially benefit from the new arrangement while deepening the dependency of its illiberal partners on it, just as Beijing has done

through its commercial dealings with [Russia](#), [Iran](#), [North Korea](#), and others.

APEC: China's Dominance of the Trans-Pacific Agenda

In the APEC summit in Lima, Xi showed a different face of Chinese leadership, leveraging global circumstances to extend China's [economic dominance and political leverage](#) across nations of the Pacific Rim. The symbolically defining moment was the [inauguration of the port of Chancay](#) by the Chinese logistics giant COSCO. COSCO's [exclusive control](#) of the port also positions it to [dominate the feeder routes](#) that will connect to Chancay from across the Americas, and with it, the value added from – and Latin America's access to – transpacific shipping.

APEC also highlighted Xi's use of multilateral events for important bilateral meetings. In addition to Xi's meeting with [outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden](#), Xi brought a delegation of some [400 people](#), and conducted a state visit with Peruvian host Dina Boluarte including the signing of an [upgraded free trade agreement](#) and [30 MOUs](#).

The Chinese leader also held important bilateral meetings with [Gabriel Boric](#) of Chile, where the Chilean leader reportedly expressed a desire to deepen the commercial

relationship with China, support greater coordination with it in multilateral forums, and [back its entry into important organizations](#) forums including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA).

G-20: Navigating Between the Developed and Developing World

During the G-20 summit in Rio de Janeiro, just days after the APEC leadership summit, Xi demonstrated China's use of strategic ambiguity to deepen [common cause with developing nations](#), while simultaneously positioning China as a non-threatening, constructive partner among leaders of developed democracies, who are [unsettled over](#) the incoming Trump administration in the United States.

At the G-20, Xi highlighted China's desire to [lower or eliminate tariffs](#) for developing nations, continuing China's approach of seeking common cause with the Global South, as expressed in its [Global Development Initiative](#).

Xi held a [state visit](#) with the summit host, Brazilian President Luis Ignacio "Lula" de Silva. Although Brazil did not sign on to

China's Belt and Road Initiative, one of Beijing's major goals for the visit, Xi still conferred on Brazil an [upgraded diplomatic status](#) and [signed 37 commitments](#) across a range of areas from agriculture to digital technologies.

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As during APEC, Xi made effective use of bilateral engagements on the sidelines of the G-20 summit to woo the heads of European democracies, including the [United Kingdom](#), [Germany](#), and [France](#) on matters of trade and managing global security. He met with Argentine leader [Javier Milei](#), supporting the more pragmatic approach the latter has taken toward working with China in recent months. He also met with Mexican President [Claudia Sheinbaum](#), whose disposition to continue [wooing Chinese investment](#) and other policies



at [odds with the United States](#) make Mexico of particular strategic value for China.

Conclusion

In the BRICS, APEC, and G-20 summits, Xi Jinping effectively used China's posture of strategic ambiguity to simultaneously strengthen a diverse coalition of illiberal actors, reinforce China's economic dominance, and political influence across the Pacific, and effectively maneuver between common cause with developing countries while minimizing hostilities with developed democracies.

When U.S. President-elect Donald Trump begins his new term on January 20, 2025 with his "[America First](#)" orientation, his team must calibrate their China policy not only with respect to the bilateral relationship, but with an eye toward multilateral dynamics. The new U.S. government must anticipate the perils of Beijing's use of strategic ambiguity and perceptions of the Trump administration to undermine and isolate the United States on the world stage.

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