

**XI JINPING AND DONALD TRUMP:
INTERACTIONS OF AN
ODD COUPLE**

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Executive Summary

1. The United States and China are two major powers in the world and their relationship has cooled over the past decade despite having over 100 forums to discuss how to improve them. At the root of this decline is not only the contradiction of institutional interests but the personal relations between top leaders.
2. At the personal level there are major contrasts of personality: One is a successful practising capitalist (Donald Trump) and one is a dedicated communist (Xi Jinping); one is impulsive and unpredictable, while the other plans for the long term and tends to adhere to those plans in the face of resistance.
3. There are also interesting similarities. Both were born into privileged elite families, but then suffered personal setbacks only to recover and succeed in their ambitions. These similarities provide a basis for what Trump calls the “great chemistry” established at their meeting in April 2017 at Mar-a-Lago.
4. The foreign policy objectives of the two leaders are mutually contradictory in the long run and aiming for different world orders. Both are very nationalistic in the exclusive pursuit of the national interest of their own nation-state with relatively rigid conceptions of what that comprises.
5. Xi’s foreign policy vector has been outward thrusting however, due to his failure (at least during his first term) in making much headway in domestic political or economic reform. He aims to establish Chinese sovereignty over the “near seas” (East and South China Seas) and promote the the “belt and road initiative”, building infrastructure linking China to potential new markets and sources of growth.
6. Trump’s policy agenda is mostly domestic, even to some extent xenophobic, aiming to “make America great again”. In that sense, while their respective foreign policies have diametrically opposite ultimate goals, they may be complementary in the short term.

7. While there are many policy differences between the two, the “great chemistry” could be a factor leading to the agreement to try to work together in their Mar-a-Lago meeting. Though they may not agree on what their agreement comprises, this personal relationship may, to some extent, insulate this important bilateral relationship from collapse during the storm and stress that are likely to come.