News

China's Xi arrives in Washington, kicking off his state visit with rare planeside welcome from Trump

WASHINGTON (AP) — Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Washington on Wednesday, where he was met with a rare planeside greeting from President Donald Trump, who was there to welcome his counterpart instead of waiting for him to drive up to the White House.

Trump's decision to greet Xi at Joint Base Andrews just outside Washington rather than receiving him at the executive residence shows how far the U.S. president is going to honor China's leader as he made his first state visit to the U.S. capital in more than a decade.

A 100-foot (30 meter) long red carpet was unfurled at the bottom of the staircase placed at the door of Xi's plane. A 21-person honor guard was arrayed on the sides of the carpet and Trump and first lady Melania Trump stood near a staircase on the side of the plane, where they greeted Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan, with handshakes.

Two American children presented bouquets of yellow-colored flowers to Xi and his wife. The welcome ceremony also included a flyover by two B-1 bombers, platoons from each military service, and a presentation of the flags and anthems of both countries. Trump and his wife spoke to their counterparts, but their words could not be heard. Trump, who wore gloves and an overcoat though it was a relatively warm 63 degrees Fahrenheit (17 degrees Celsius) outside, removed one of his gloves to shake hands with Xi. At one point, he slapped Xi on the back and said something to him that was inaudible.

"I think they appreciate it, tremendous people," Trump said to reporters after he returned to the White House Wednesday evening.

In a statement marking his arrival in the U.S., China's leader wrote that his country and the U.S. "should be partners, not rivals. Achieving the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and making America great again can go hand in hand and the two countries can contribute to each other's success, thereby benefiting the wider world."

The salutation kicks off a three-day visit that's expected to be saturated with pomp, even by White House standards. The state visit, complete with a formal state dinner at the White House on Thursday, is supposed to reciprocate the ceremonial grandeur that marked Trump's May visit to China.

But it also is a showy patina at a time when tensions between the two geopolitical rivals are high over trade, artificial intelligence, Trump's war with Iran and China's designs on Taiwan.

The visit comes after Trump's trip to China in May

Beyond using the visit to try to keep "strategic stability" between the two countries, Trump seems to be pulling out all the diplomatic stops to show off for Xi. Trump has lavished praise on Xi as a "great leader" and described a warm relationship with the man he has called a friend. That is all while he has given Xi a pass on many issues.

Sen. Roger Wicker, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, criticized the "lavish welcome." Wicker, R-Miss., said during a speech Tuesday in the Senate that Trump should not have invited the Chinese leader "based on all of the troubling issues we have with President Xi and the Chinese Communist Party."

Wicker archly suggested a list of topics that Trump could discuss with Xi at the state dinner, such as "the purposes of China's massive military buildup, or about China's clear support for Iran," saying that "during every minute of dialogue" Trump should keep in mind that "his guest is a brutal, unelected and oppressive dictator who seeks to dominate his neighbors and whose massive military arsenal is aimed directly at the United States of America."



President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump walk with China's President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan at Joint Base Andrews, Md., Wednesday, Sept. 23, 2026.

AP PHOTO/ALEX BRANDON





Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the U.S. and China must interact at the highest levels because the countries are "the two largest economies in the world" and "probably the two most powerful militaries in the world."

"The idea that we would not interact with them at the highest levels is irresponsible. It's outrageous. We have to," Rubio told reporters Wednesday while he was in New York.

Danny Russel, a former U.S. diplomat under former President Barack Obama's administration, said the airport pomp delivered a propaganda win for Beijing.

"Such extreme deference is valuable evidence that China's leader is now held in extraordinarily high esteem by the President of the United States. Beijing uses this at home and internationally to show China's—and Xi's—growing stature," said Russel, now a distinguished fellow at Asia Society Policy Institute.

Trump to welcome Xi with 'the most respect'

Trump has made it clear he wants to wow Xi, telling reporters in recent weeks that he was delighted his new "work of art" helicopter landing pad would be ready for the visit while bemoaning that his massive White House ballroom would not.

"I wish we had it for tomorrow night," Trump said again Wednesday. "We have a packed house tomorrow night for President Xi."

Trump on Wednesday was looking to match the pageantry he was met with in China earlier this year. Xi was not at the airport to meet Trump — Chinese Vice President Han Zheng was there instead. But a red carpet was rolled out to meet Air Force One in Beijing. A military honor guard, a military band and about 300 Chinese youths waving Chinese and American flags and chanting, "Welcome, welcome! Warm welcome!" also were present. The children wore white and light blue uniforms that mirrored the traditional paint colors of the presidential plane.

The first lady said earlier Wednesday that her husband decided to personally greet Xi when he arrived in the Washington region because "they have a great relationship."

"He's coming on our soil, and we need to welcome them with the most respect," she said of Xi and his wife during an interview on Fox News Channel's "Fox & Friends."

The long red carpet recalled a similar extra-long one the U.S. laid out for Russian President Vladimir Putin when he touched down at a U.S. Air Force base in Alaska last summer for a summit aimed at trying to find an end to Russia's war in Ukraine.

When Putin arrived in August 2025, he shook hands with Trump while both grinned. They then took the unusual step of climbing into Trump's limo to share a ride to the building where they were holding talks.

On Wednesday at the end of the arrival ceremony, Xi and his wife climbed into their own car, and the Trumps retreated to theirs.

A black-tie dinner and visit to the archives will follow

Trump's airport ceremony for Xi will be followed on Thursday by more formalities, including an arrival ceremony at the White House and a review of troops. Before the black-tie dinner, which will feature tech industry leaders like Nvidia's Jensen Huang and SpaceX's Elon Musk, the two leaders are expected to dive into the weighty issues behind closed doors, even as expectations are low that the trip will produce any major breakthroughs in the relationship.

On Friday, Xi and Peng will be back at the White House for a private tea with the Trumps before joining them on a tour of the National Archives in Washington. The White House has said they will view historic documents underscoring the relationship between the two countries.

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