A Humbled Trump Meets Putin and Xi | Episode 17

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John Mearsheimer: I think it's quite clear that the Russians benefited the most from what happened in Shenzhen. Let me explain why I think that's the case.

Intro The West is leading Ukraine down the Primrose path. The Israelis are executing a genocide in Gaza. It's not China's fault that it wants to be powerful. So if you get into trouble and you dial 9-1-1, there's nobody at the other end.

Hello viewers, this is John Mearsheimer and I'm here to talk today about the recent meeting in China involving three presidents, President Putin, President Xi, and President Trump. They, of course, met on the sidelines of the annual APEC meeting which took place in Shenzhen, that's in China. And APEC stands for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation. It's a meeting that takes place annually and it involves 21 countries. And, of course, as the name of the organisation implies, this is really a meeting that deals with economic issues, not so much political military issues. But what happened this year is that the three presidents decided that they would have a multilateral meeting among them. In other words, Presidents Putin, Xi, and Trump would all get together and meet. And at the same time, it's very important to emphasise that there were bilateral meetings between each of the presidents. In other words, Putin met with Xi, Putin met with Trump, Trump met with both Putin and Xi, and so forth and so on. So you had a series of bilateral meetings, and then you had the one big trilateral meeting, and this all took place last Wednesday and Thursday, November 18th and November 19th. And what I'd like to do is try to assess what happened there.

Now, if you look at the Western press, the multilateral meeting and the bilateral meetings got a lot of bad press. They were viewed in a very negative light, especially the bilateral meeting between President Trump and President Putin. And there were two reasons for this, and I'll go into some detail on each of the reasons. The first is that many people thought this was a waste of time, this meeting was a negative, so to speak, because there was no substantive agreements. And then also, as I'll talk about, there was much criticism of the fact that Trump met with Putin. That was the second reason there was so much hostility in the Western media to the trilateral and bilateral meetings that took place in Shenzhen. First of all, on substance,

there was some talk beforehand that this might be the equivalent of Yalta II, that some significant agreements might be reached among the three parties, or maybe even just between two of the parties. And that did not happen. You want to remember that at Yalta, which took place in the first half of February of 1945, a series of very consequential agreements were reached between the British, the Americans, and the Soviets. And those agreements concerned the division of Berlin, the division of Germany once the war ended, what would happen in Eastern Europe with regard to countries like Poland, and very importantly, because there were two wars here, a war in Europe and a war in the Pacific, the United States and the Soviet Union reached an important agreement at Yalta regarding how the Soviets would come into the war in the Pacific; this is the war against Japan after the war in the Europe concluded. And of course, the war in Europe concluded on May 8th, 1945. And the war against Japan did not conclude until August 15th, 1945. All of this just tells you that the war in Europe had to be settled first and then arrangements had to be made between the United States and the Soviet Union as to how to coordinate with each other to end the war against Japan. Those sorts of decisions were made at Yalta. So there's no question that the decisions made at Yalta were substantive for sure, and they were usually consequential. There was no way you were going to get substantive agreements of any sort at this meeting in Shenzhen.

Now, why is that the case? Well, the key issues that you might have gotten some agreement on were Iran, the war in Iran, the war in Ukraine, and maybe the subject of arms control. And let me say a few words about why there was no hope of getting any agreement on any three of those issues. First of all, with regard to Iran, it's very important to understand that the United States is an adversary of both China and Russia. The United States is involved in an intense security competition with China and with regard to Ukraine, the United States is effectively at war with Russia in that conflict in Ukraine. That tells you that the Russians and the Chinese have a vested interest in making sure that the United States loses its war against Iran. And of course, the Russians and the Chinese are helping the Iranians. So there's no way that President Trump is going to be able to get any sort of help from the Russians or the Chinese to settle the war in Iran. The Russians and the Chinese are on the opposite side of this conflict from the United States and nothing's going to change that. So there was no hope of a substantive agreement on Iran. With regard to Ukraine, as I said, the Americans are deeply involved in this conflict. They're helping the Ukrainians fight against the Russians in all sorts of ways and there's all sorts of evidence that the CIA and the deep state more generally are interested in weakening Russia and maybe even toppling it from the ranks of the great powers. Given that situation, there's no way the Russians are going to cooperate with the United States to shut down the war in Ukraine. And furthermore, the Chinese have a deep-seated interest in making sure that Russia prevails in its war against Ukraine, which is another way of saying that Russia prevails in its war against the United States.

So you see that China is incentivized to help the Russians against the United States in Ukraine and China is incentivized to help the Iranians defeat the United States in its war against Iran. So there was not going to be any substantive agreement between the three parties at Shenzhen on these two conflicts. Then there's the whole question of arms control. And I would note, by the way, it is possible that in future meetings of this sort, in the years

ahead, you may get arms control agreements among the three party's, similar to the kinds of arms control agreements that you got during the Cold War. But this is not the time for an arms control agreement, in large part because of the Chinese – just to take the nuclear issue, the Russians and the Americans have about 1,800 nuclear warheads. The Chinese have only about 600 nuclear warheads. And in a world where Russia and the United States have roughly three times as many nuclear warheads as the Chinese, you can rest assured the Chinese are interested in catching up, at least somewhat, with the Russians and the Americans. They are bent on increasing the size of their arsenal of strategic nuclear weapons; from a Chinese point of view, that makes sense. So at this point in time, the last thing the Chinese want to do is enter into an arms control agreement that would limit their ability to arms race at the strategic nuclear level, because that would leave them at a disadvantage. So the Chinese are, it may be too strong, but probably not to say that they're completely opposed to an arms-control agreement involving nuclear weapons at this juncture. Again, that may change down the road. So there was no way you could get any progress on the arms control front. And again, as I said, there was no way that you were going to get any progress with regard to Iran and Ukraine.

So there were no substantive agreements here. This does not come close to being Yalta II. I wanted to give you the second reason that this meeting got such bad press, and that had to do with the fact that President Trump met with President Putin. That's the second reason. The first reason was no substance. The second reason is Trump met with Putin. The fact is that President Trump has met with President Xi four times now since coming back into office on January 20th, 2025. He met with him last year in October, this is in October 2025 at the APEC meeting in South Korea. The APEC meeting was last year in South Korea and Trump and Xi met on the sidelines in South Korea and then in May and again in September of this year President Trump met with President Xi; so there's three meetings. And this meeting at Shenzhen or in Shenzhen was the fourth meeting between those two leaders. And Trump has hardly been criticised at all for meeting with Xi. And in contrast, you have a very different situation when it comes to Putin. Every time President Trump meets with President Putin, he comes in for severe criticism. This case was no exception in that regard.

Now what exactly is going on here? The fact is that since Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022 there has been intense Russophobia in the West, and there has been intense antipathy towards Vladimir Putin in particular, unsurprisingly since he is the head of Russia. And what's happening these days, as the war goes south against Ukraine, the antipity towards Putin, if anything, has increased. So here's a case where Trump meets with Putin, describes Putin as his friend, he uses exactly that word, and in effect embraces Putin, and says that Putin is interested in peace in Ukraine. He portrays, he, meaning Donald Trump, portrays Putin as someone who is interested in being a peacemaker. When Trump behaves like this in China, it's guaranteed to infuriate the mainstream media in the West, which is intensely Russophobic and deeply opposed to anything that Vladimir Putin does. So there's no way that Trump can avoid getting bad press in the Western media when he not only has a trilateral meeting involving himself and Putin and Xi, of course, but also has a bilateral meeting where the two

of them, Putin and Trump, get together. But my view is that this is a remarkably foolish way of thinking about how Trump should deal with Putin.

If you think about the past, US presidents have met with Soviet leaders even when there was deep-seated hostility between the United States on one side and the Soviet Union on the other side. By my count, President Eisenhower met with Nikita Khrushchev on three separate occasions. JFK met with Khrushchev. Richard Nixon met with Leonid Brezhnev and President Reagan met with Gorbachev. All of these Cold War American leaders met with their opponent on the other side. We did not have good relations with the Soviet Union during those years. The Cold War involved an intense security competition, and in the case of the Cuban missile crisis, the two sides almost ended up in a shooting match, which surely would have involved nuclear weapons. So if those past presidents met with Soviet leaders, why wouldn't Trump want to meet with Vladimir Putin? Even if we view him as a mortal adversary, it would make eminently good sense still for the two sides to get together. The precedent here that the media rivets on which is very different than all of the cases I just described, involves Joe Biden. Joe Biden refused to meet with Vladimir Putin after the Russians invaded Ukraine. And indeed, he refused to even speak to Putin. And many people in the media, in the West, think that was the appropriate response to dealing with Putin. Putin is an adversary, according to this discourse, and therefore it is imperative that Trump not meet with Putin just the way Biden did meet with Putin. But again, I think this is a foolish way of thinking about how to do business. I think that what Trump did and should have done was follow in the footsteps of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, and Reagan, and meet with Putin as he did.

Now, why do I think this is the case? First of all, I think it's just very important for leaders of great powers to get to know each other, to get a sense of how each leader thinks about particular issues. It's very important to understand that these leaders face common problems. Nuclear proliferation is a really good example of this phenomenon. The fact is that the Russians, the Chinese, and the American leaders all have a vested interest in making sure that there is as little nuclear proliferation as possible. They also have a deep-seated interest in making sure that we don't get into a war with each other. You want to remember that what we have here are three countries that are armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons, as I just described, have huge military establishments, have significant differences among them, and that's especially true when you talk about the United States and China and the United States and Russia. And it is easy to imagine a crisis breaking out between two of those great powers. And if a crisis were to break out, we would wanna go to enormous lengths to make sure that we avoid a major war. We don't want World War III. And all that's to say, it's very important that we manage any crisis that breaks out. In fact, it is very important that we manage relations among those three great powers in ways that avoid a major crisis. But if a major crisis does break out, we want to go to great lengths to make sure that that crisis doesn't turn into a war. Just think about the Cuban Missile Crisis again. Aren't we all thankful that JFK and Nikita Khrushchev did what I think is an outstanding job of managing that crisis and avoiding a shooting conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union? Kennedy and Khrushchev managed that crisis. And we may have, in fact, we're likely to have crises down

the road between countries like China and the United States and maybe even the United States and Russia. And if one of those crises breaks out, we want to make sure that the people who are in charge are fully capable of managing it and preventing escalation. And I think a meeting like this, and I don't want to overstate the case, but I think a meeting like that took place in Shenzhen and hopefully future meetings among these leaders will help them get to know each other, help them to get to how they think about the different hotspots around the world and the different problems they face, so that should a crisis break out, they are in a good position to manage it successfully.

I would also note that it is likely that you will get some agreements among the great powers in the future, some substantive agreements. As I said before, there's no question that you did not get any substantive agreements at the meeting in Shenzhen. But there will be more meetings down the road for sure. And I think it is possible that you will have some agreements of some consequence. I think it's likely that somewhere over the next two decades, you'll have an arms control agreement involving two or three of the different sides in this competition among these three great powers. So, I think, again the meeting was a net positive. It was a net positive because talking matters, diplomacy matters, even if you don't get a substantive agreement. Now, let me switch gears and say a few words about the question of who benefited the most from these various meetings. And again, we're talking about one multilateral meeting involving all three of the leaders and then three bilateral meetings involving each of the two leaders together. I think it's quite clear that the Russians benefited the most from what happened in Shenzhen. Let me explain why I think that's the case.

First of all, after Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022 the United States and its Western allies went to enormous lengths to isolate the Russians and to isolate Putin on the world stage. And for a while they were actually quite successful, not completely successful, but there's no question that the Russians were somewhat isolated for a little while after February of 2022. But what happened in China on November 18th and November 19th, demonstrated very clearly to the world that Russia is not isolated, that Vladimir Putin is not isolating. And the way President Trump dealt with President Putin is manifest evidence of the fact that Putin and the Russians are no longer isolated. So I think the multilateral meeting in Shenzhen was very important for demonstrating the fact that Russia is no longer isolated. Furthermore, it was also important for showing that Russia remains a great power, that Russia has come back from the dead and is now, once again, a great power as it was for a long time over the course of its history. Many people like to say that today we live in a G2 world where the two most powerful countries on the planet are the United States and China; and if anything, we live in a bipolar world, not a multipolar world. In other words, the world today looks like the Cold War. And the Cold War, you had the United States and the Soviet Union, today you have the United States and China. And in a bipolar world, obviously, Russia is not a great power. But it's quite clear, in my opinion, that we live in a multipolar world, not a bipolar world. This is not to say that Russia is as powerful as China and the United States. I think China and the United States are the two most powerful states in the system. They are the two most powerful great powers. I think Russia is the weakest of the three great powers,

but it still is a great power. And I think that was made clear at the meeting in China on November 18th-19th.

So I think in addition to showing that Russia is not isolated, these meetings also showed that Russia is a great power. It was an equal at the meetings of the United States and China. And then finally, I think in small ways, the meeting was helpful for the Russians in that it worked to in effect move Trump further away from Ukraine and closer to Russia. The fact that Trump was embracing Russia, at the same time he has been trying to divorce the United States from Ukraine, sent a very clear message to those who were watching what was happening in Shenzhen that the United States, at least in the form of Donald Trump, is sympathetic to Russia, not to Ukraine when it comes to thinking about how to settle the conflict in Ukraine. So I think that too was a positive aspect of this meeting for the Russians. So the Russians came out of this meeting in excellent shape. I also think the Chinese did very well at the meeting.

First of all, the meeting was in China. And from a symbolic point of view, what happened here is that both Putin and Trump had to travel to China. And that made Xi Jinping look like he was running things at this meeting, which he effectively was doing because China was the host of the APEC meetings this year. And therefore, these multilateral and bilateral meetings that took place, took place on Chinese terms. So I think that played to China's advantage. But more importantly, the fact that it was in Shenzhen, which is a magnificent city in China, where China's industrial and technological sophistication is clearly on display, added to this image that China has of being a technologically sophisticated country that is fully capable of competing with the United States, if not beating the United States. So for President Trump and President Putin to go to a meeting in Shenzhen really symbolised just how powerful China is. So I think that the Chinese came out of this meeting looking like they were at least as powerful as the United States, which obviously plays to China's advantage. So there was nothing negative that happened at these meetings from a Chinese perspective.

This brings us to the United States and President Trump. There's no question that President Trump was playing a very weak hand at the Shenzhen meetings. First of all, on the domestic front, here in the United States, the Republicans had just suffered a devastating defeat in the midterm elections and you want to remember that President Trump told American voters that they should vote as if he were on the ballot for all of the Republican candidates. And furthermore, President Trump campaigned vigorously for a large number of Republican candidates. The Republicans, nevertheless, were trounced at the polls. I mean, they were trounced. And this is another way of saying President Trump was trounced the polls. Not only was President Trump in trouble on the home front, the fact is that President Trump is involved in two losing wars, the war in Ukraine and the war in Iran. And with regard to the war in Iran, he foolishly started that war. That's his war and he's fully responsible for it. And he has no way of winning that war, so he's playing a very weak hand when it comes to Iran.

With regard to Ukraine, the Biden administration was in charge when that war began and President Trump inherited that war but as all the viewers surely remember, President Trump said that he was going to end the war very quickly. Well, he's failed to do that. And the

United States has remained deeply involved in that war. And it looks like the United States is going to lose that war as well. So if you think about it, the hand that President Trump was playing, he came to Shenzhen badly wounded on the home front. And in a terrible situation on the international front, facing two losing wars that he can't figure out how to end on satisfactory terms. I mean, you want to compare the situation here with what the world looked like during the unipolar moment. The unipolar moment, which ran from roughly 1992 to 2017, the United States was by far the most powerful state on the planet. There was only one great power in the system. It was not a multipolar world like it is today. It was a unipolar world. And the United States was Godzilla. We were really in the driver's seat. That world has gone away. We're in a multipolar world, and moreover, we, and here we're talking about President Trump and he is our leader, is playing remarkably, we can't. So there was no way he could win in any meaningful way at Shenzhen the way the Russians and the Chinese did.

But nevertheless, I think this was a net positive for President Trump in that he got to demonstrate to the world that he is still in charge in the United States. Moreover, the United States remains a very powerful actor on the international stage and it will come to meetings like this trilateral meeting and this set of bilateral meetings and it'll throw its weight around. It will protect what is in the American national interest. And I think that by and large was a net positive. But nevertheless, when you look at what happened at these meetings and how the three great powers, the Russians, the Chinese, and the Americans all fared, it's quite clear that the United States did not do well. Again, I think it was a net positive, but not by much. So, in conclusion, where does this leave us now that the meetings are over? The fact is that we are still facing two huge problems. One is the Iran War and two is the Ukraine War. And the fact is, that President Trump has no way of ending these wars, either one of these wars on terms that are favourable to the United States. It's hard to say exactly how each war is going to end, but it's quite clear that the United States is going to suffer a defeat in both conflicts. All of this is a way of saying that the United States is in serious trouble on the international front, and that this set of meetings in Shenzhen did nothing to help President Trump deal with these substantive issues that matter so much to the United States and the world more generally. That concludes my comments for today. I hope that viewers found my comments beneficial, and I would just like to wish everybody a Happy Thanksgiving.

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