Trump’s 'farce' on full display as 'big win' flops on world stage



Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.S. President Donald Trump arrive for a trilateral meeting at Kylin Villa on November 19, 2026 in Shenzhen, China. Win McNamee/Pool via REUTERS

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On Thursday, as President Donald Trump’s high-stakes trilateral summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin came to a close, one of the world’s top experts on authoritarianism pointed out a looming irony: that the very thing Trump came away bragging about achieved little more than handing “useful propaganda” to the United States’ main adversaries. According to renowned historian and Atlantic contributor Anne Applebaum, while the media has suggested lofty goals for the summit, it was mostly an opportunity for the three attending leaders to “mask their political failures.”

The meeting between Trump, Putin, and Xi has been repeatedly compared to the Yalta summit of 1945, in which President Franklin Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin met to decide the fate of post-war Europe and how its zones of influence would be divided. According to Applebaum, the summit is mostly remembered not for building peace, but for forcing Eastern Europeans – whose leaders were not even in the room – into Soviet occupation and repression for decades to come. Now as Trump’s “inconsequential” summit has ended, argues Applebaum, in which “no serious agreement was signed,” it’s become clear what was actually accomplished: political theater.

“The meeting was brief, almost substance-free and carefully choreographed for the maximum benefit of the Chinese hosts,” writes Applebaum, “Its true purpose was not to end any wars — and certainly not to end Russia’s bloody invasion of Ukraine — but to produce propaganda photographs and video clips that each of the three leaders will now use to mask their political failures.”

According to Applebaum, that was “certainly Trump’s main goal,” who made it clear that his priority was not policy, but pageantry. As he told Fox News, the most significant moment was “the greeting yesterday, which in the history of China has never happened.” As Applebaum explains, Xi Jinping, aware of how easy it is to manipulate the American president, had met Trump at the airport. “This is a highly respected, this is a great president, one of the great presidents of China — and he’s never gone to the airport to meet somebody,” Trump blustered, rambling about “the fanfare, the beauty, the pageantry, the thousands of people, the young children, the soldiers, the whole thing,” adding, “that’s a big win for us. It’s a big win for China too.” Then, writes Applebaum, “The White House published a video clip, seemingly created to promote Chinese communism, showing all of that fanfare and putting Trump at the center of it — a big win for China indeed, and maybe a big win for Trump’s post-midterm ego, although hardly a big win for the United States.”

She explains why “the meeting also created useful propaganda” for Putin. The war he said would last three days has gone on for almost five years, inflicting 1.5 million casualties on Russia so far, while the country’s infrastructure has been devastated. Now, writes Applebaum, “Putin will use the Shenzhen meeting to tell Russians that their country is still a superpower, still allowed to sit in the same room as the Americans and the Chinese, still important on the world stage even as Russian power, influence, and prosperity dramatically shrink.” And for host Xi, the meeting broadcast his authority to the world. “With Trump’s cooperation, he telegraphed American decline, Chinese power, and Russian subservience,” explains Applebaum. “Even as the Chinese economy is experiencing a real-estate slump, manufacturing losses, and chronic unemployment, he made China look like the only serious country in the room. The American president was babbling about airport greetings. Russia is bankrupt without Chinese support. But Xi, safe in the knowledge that he has successfully obtained the American chip technology his military and industry need, was the master of ceremonies.”

In the end, Applebaum concludes, the so-called “Yalta 2.0” summit proved the old adage: “History does repeat itself — the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.”