# US-China trade talks in Madrid reveal shifting strategic priorities amid TikTok tensions



US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent is scheduled to meet with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Madrid next week, with the discussions centred on a range of pressing national security, economic, and trade issues. This visit, part of Bessent’s broader trip to Europe that includes Spain and the United Kingdom, signifies a continuation of high-level dialogue amid the ongoing trade tensions between the world’s two largest economies. The Treasury Department confirmed that topics such as the regulation of TikTok and cooperation on combating money laundering networks, which pose threats to both countries, will be among the key agenda items.

The talks in Madrid represent the fourth round of such negotiations this year, following meetings in London, Geneva, and Stockholm, where both sides agreed on extended 90-day pauses on reciprocal tariffs aimed at averting a full-scale trade war. The discussions will also address strategic industry concerns including rare earth elements, semiconductors, and medicines, reflecting broader economic interdependencies that have complicated the bilateral relationship. TikTok’s future remains a particularly contentious issue; the US Congress has mandated restrictions on the platform’s Chinese parent company ByteDance, with a looming deadline for divestiture that President Trump has extended multiple times. Public opinion in the US remains divided on the ban, with recent surveys indicating only about one-third of Americans support it.

China’s Ministry of Commerce has confirmed Vice Premier He Lifeng will lead a delegation to Spain from September 14 to 17, with an official statement highlighting the agenda of unilateral US tariff measures, export control abuses, and TikTok as focal points for the talks. Beijing’s position emphasises a pushback against what it views as protectionist US policies, especially in agriculture, where China has not met agreed targets for American farm imports, instead turning to alternative suppliers in South America. Meanwhile, the US accuses China of undermining fair trade practices despite the 2020 agreement aimed at boosting those imports.

The timing of these talks is notable against the backdrop of slowly improving relations since April, when both nations imposed escalating tariffs on each other's exports in an escalating trade conflict. Recent diplomatic engagements, including back-to-back meetings between top diplomats and defense chiefs, have fuelled speculation about a possible summit between US President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Trump has expressed optimism about visiting China later this year or shortly thereafter, pointing to signs of improving economic ties. The US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has also called for open, constructive dialogue with China, while China’s Defence Minister Dong Jun has warned against efforts to contain or interfere with China, advocating for mutual respect and peaceful military-to-military relations.

Spain’s hosting of the talks is viewed as a diplomatic opportunity amid its somewhat strained relations with the US, especially under the Trump administration. Prior disagreements over Spain’s restrictions on the use of its ports and airspace for arms shipments to Israel and its failure to meet NATO’s defence spending targets have cooled ties, prompting tariff threats from Washington. Nevertheless, the US has continued to utilise Spanish military bases, reflecting ongoing cooperation. Spain has simultaneously deepened its engagement with China, exemplified by Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez’s multiple visits to China in recent years and a neutral stance on the EU’s tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. Hosting these US-China negotiations in Madrid is perceived as a strategic move by Spain to balance its transatlantic alliance with growing ties to China, potentially gaining leverage in future diplomatic engagements.

Following the Spain visit, Bessent will proceed to London for meetings with British government and private sector officials, before joining President Trump’s official state visit to the UK, which includes a high-profile event with King Charles at Windsor Castle. This European trip underscores the US administration’s multipronged approach to managing complex international relationships, trade tensions, and security concerns as global geopolitical dynamics evolve.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://hongkongfp.com/2025/09/13/us-treasury-chief-to-meet-chinese-vice-premier-during-europe-trip/), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/bessent-chinese-vice-premier-meet-madrid-next-week-trade-tiktok-2025-09-11/), [[6]](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/us-chinese-trade-negotiators-to-hold-tariff-talks-in-spain/3685996), [[7]](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-china-ties-treasury-chief-bessent-to-meet-he-lifeng-in-spain-tiktok-national-security-and-trade-in-focus/articleshow/123854015.cms)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/e70c554b5d34cd8f8de30093e9126d4f), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/bessent-chinese-vice-premier-meet-madrid-next-week-trade-tiktok-2025-09-11/), [[5]](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202509/1343361.shtml), [[7]](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-china-ties-treasury-chief-bessent-to-meet-he-lifeng-in-spain-tiktok-national-security-and-trade-in-focus/articleshow/123854015.cms)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/bessent-chinese-vice-premier-meet-madrid-next-week-trade-tiktok-2025-09-11/), [[5]](https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202509/1343361.shtml), [[2]](https://apnews.com/article/e70c554b5d34cd8f8de30093e9126d4f)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://hongkongfp.com/2025/09/13/us-treasury-chief-to-meet-chinese-vice-premier-during-europe-trip/), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/world/china/bessent-chinese-vice-premier-meet-madrid-next-week-trade-tiktok-2025-09-11/), [[7]](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-china-ties-treasury-chief-bessent-to-meet-he-lifeng-in-spain-tiktok-national-security-and-trade-in-focus/articleshow/123854015.cms)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/spain-sees-chance-repair-ties-with-us-it-hosts-china-trade-talks-2025-09-12/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://hongkongfp.com/2025/09/13/us-treasury-chief-to-meet-chinese-vice-premier-during-europe-trip/), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/spain-sees-chance-repair-ties-with-us-it-hosts-china-trade-talks-2025-09-12/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://hongkongfp.com/2025/09/13/us-treasury-chief-to-meet-chinese-vice-premier-during-europe-trip/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://apnews.com/article/e70c554b5d34cd8f8de30093e9126d4f> - U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent is scheduled to meet Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Madrid to discuss trade tariffs and national security concerns related to TikTok's ownership. This marks the fourth round of China-U.S. negotiations, following earlier discussions in London, Geneva, and Stockholm. Both countries have agreed to several 90-day pauses on reciprocal tariffs to avoid a trade war. Talks will address strategic industry concerns like rare earths, semiconductors, and medicines. The delegations will also tackle TikTok’s future, as U.S. Congress has mandated a ban unless Chinese parent company ByteDance divests its stake. President Trump has extended the sale deadline three times, with the next one approaching on Wednesday. Public opinion on a TikTok ban remains varied, with only about one-third of Americans currently in support according to a recent Pew survey. Bessent will also meet Spanish officials to discuss bilateral relations, and is expected to join President Trump in the U.K. for a state visit with King Charles at Windsor Castle.
3. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/spain-sees-chance-repair-ties-with-us-it-hosts-china-trade-talks-2025-09-12/> - Spain is leveraging its role as host of upcoming trade talks between the United States and China to improve strained relations with the U.S., particularly under Donald Trump's administration. Tensions arose after Spain restricted access to its ports and airspace for arms shipments to Israel, a move criticized by Washington as potentially supporting terrorism. Additionally, Spain's refusal to meet NATO's defense spending target of 5% of GDP led to Trump threatening tariffs. Despite these tensions, the U.S. continued to use Spanish military bases during operations in Iran, signaling continued cooperation. While U.S.-Spain relations have cooled, Spain's ties with China have strengthened, with Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez visiting China three times in as many years and taking a neutral stance on EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles. Hosting talks in Madrid between U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng is seen as a diplomatic win for Spain, offering an opportunity to engage directly with U.S. officials and potentially gain leverage in future negotiations. Analysts view this engagement as a strategic move to balance Spain’s role between transatlantic and China-EU relations.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/bessent-chinese-vice-premier-meet-madrid-next-week-trade-tiktok-2025-09-11/> - U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent is scheduled to meet with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Madrid next week to discuss trade, economic, and national security matters, including the Chinese-owned app TikTok, and anti-money laundering cooperation. This will mark their fourth major meeting in 2025, following previous talks in Geneva, London, and Stockholm, where they extended a tariff truce for 90 days, now lasting until November 10. These efforts are aimed at preserving trade stability and ensuring the flow of Chinese rare earth exports to the U.S., despite ongoing tensions over agricultural trade and high tariffs—some still at 55% due to unresolved broader agreements. China has criticized U.S. agricultural protectionism, while the U.S. accuses China of failing to honor a 2020 deal to boost American farm imports, instead turning to South America. The TikTok issue has gained urgency with a U.S. ownership mandate set by a September 17 deadline. Bessent’s diplomatic trip to Spain and Britain will also include meetings with local officials and participation in President Trump's state visit to the U.K. The Treasury mentioned continued concerns about illicit finance and China's role in potentially supporting Russia militarily, though no sanctions on Chinese banks have been imposed yet.
5. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202509/1343361.shtml> - China's Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) confirmed that Vice Premier He Lifeng will lead a delegation to Spain from September 14 to 17 to hold talks with U.S. officials. The discussions will focus on U.S. unilateral tariff measures, the abuse of export controls, TikTok, and other economic and trade issues. This meeting is the fourth in a series of high-level talks aimed at de-escalating trade tensions between the two nations. Previous meetings were held in Geneva, London, and Stockholm, where both sides agreed to extend a tariff truce for 90 days. The upcoming Madrid talks are seen as a positive signal, indicating that both countries are committed to maintaining communication and addressing trade disputes through dialogue.
6. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/us-chinese-trade-negotiators-to-hold-tariff-talks-in-spain/3685996> - U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng are scheduled to hold tariff talks in Spain. The Chinese vice premier will visit Madrid from Sunday to Wednesday, according to the Chinese Commerce Ministry. The U.S. Treasury Department also confirmed talks, saying Bessent and He will discuss 'key national security, economic, and trade issues of mutual interest, including TikTok and cooperating on money laundering networks that threaten both the United States and China.' TikTok faces a nationwide ban on national security grounds in the U.S.
7. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/us-china-ties-treasury-chief-bessent-to-meet-he-lifeng-in-spain-tiktok-national-security-and-trade-in-focus/articleshow/123854015.cms> - U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent is set to hold talks with Chinese Vice Premier He Lifeng in Spain next week, with national security, economic, and trade issues high on the agenda, according to the Treasury Department. Bessent will be on a European trip from Friday until September 18 (local time), making stops in Spain and the United Kingdom. In Madrid, he will meet Chinese officials for discussions on 'key national security, economic, and trade issues of mutual interest,' according to a Treasury statement. Among the topics listed are 'TikTok and cooperating on money laundering networks that threaten both the United States and China,' the department noted. China’s Ministry of Commerce confirmed on Friday that Lifeng will lead a delegation to Spain for the talks, taking place from Sunday to September 17. In its own statement, Beijing said the discussions would cover 'unilateral tariff measures, abuse of export controls and TikTok.' The talks come at a time of strained US-China relations, though tensions have eased slightly since April, when both countries imposed escalating tariffs on each other’s exports.