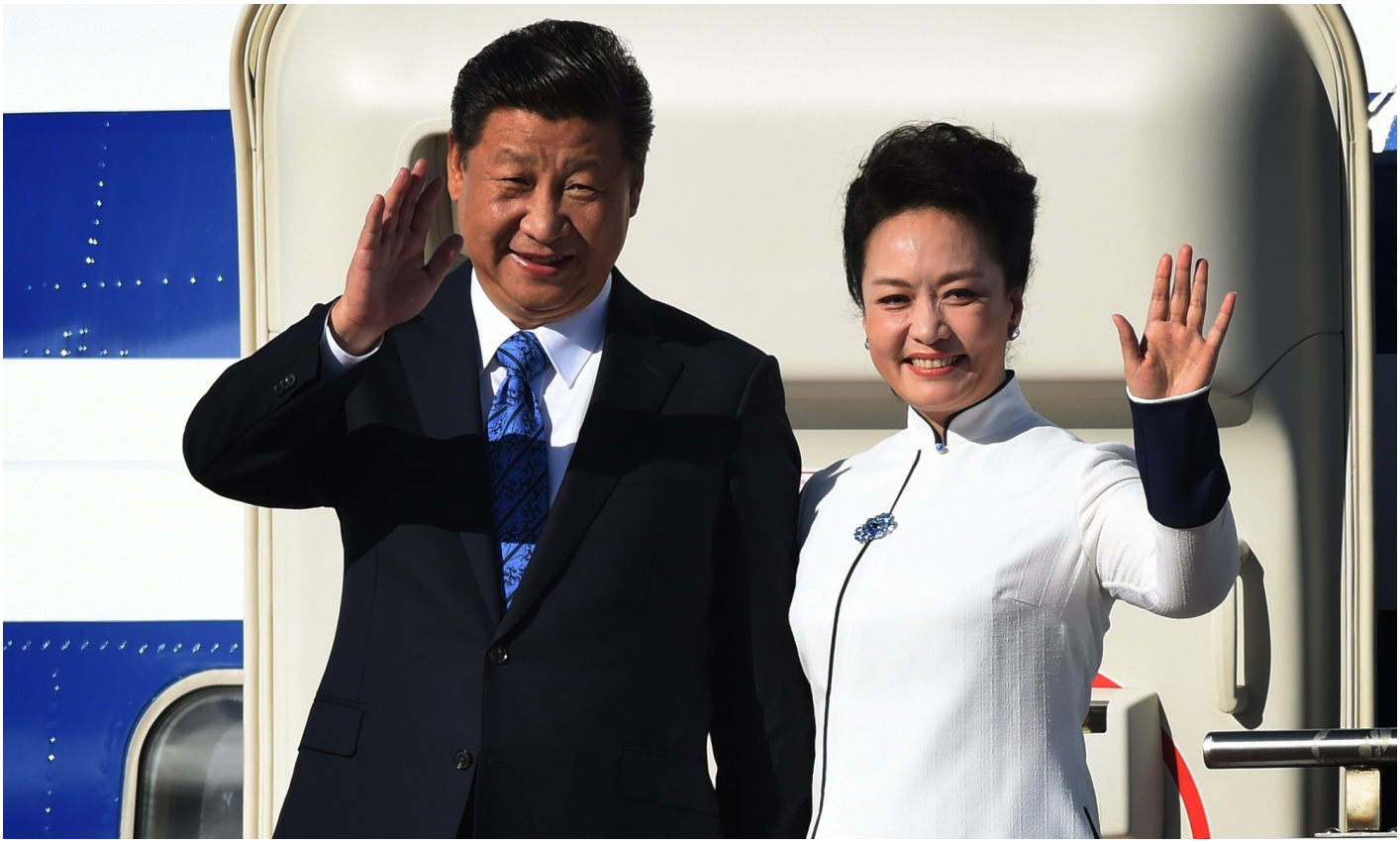
FRUGAL GLOBETROTTER PRESIDENT XI JINPING FLIES AIR CHINA RATHER THAN A SPECIAL "AIR FORCE ONE"

News / Personalities



The U.S. President Barack Obama uses his own plane -- widely known around the world simply by its air traffic control call sign, "Air Force One" -- and so does North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

However, China has no special plane. When President Xi Jinping and his wife, Peng Liyuan flew to the U.S. they took a commercial flight.

Xi and the first lady Peng Liyuan arrived in the city of Seattle on Tuesday, at the start of their state visit, on board a Boeing 747-400 flown by the national carrier, Air China.

"There is no "special plane" for Chinese leaders - the planes are provided by Air China," Lu Peixin, former acting director of the protocol department of China's foreign ministry, was quoted as saying in a China Daily report on Tuesday.

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Prior to any presidential flight, the aircraft's interior was temporarily refitted with sofas and beds, and there was also a month spent carrying out security checks and the careful selection of the flight crew, Lu said.

The interior of the presidential cabin featured a living room, a bedroom and an office, which took up one-third of the total space, the report said.

In 2013, in response to a report that revealed Xi was flying abroad in a commercial aircraft, Lu said concerns over safety and the need to avoid wasting money had led to the president flying on an Air China aircraft.

"The plane has hundreds of components and it won't be safe if it's not used regularly," Lu said at the time.

Xi introduced an austerity drive soon after coming to power in 2013, including banning extravagance by free-spending officials, as well as a crackdown on corruption

Although there are no specifically designed planes for Chinese presidents, the Boeing planes with the serial number B-2447 and B-2472 were the two commonly used planes to have carried China's leaders, according to state media.

The planes are converted back to become normal passenger airlines when not being used by Chinese leaders.

However, there was a time when China almost introduced a presidential plane that had been specifically modified to be similar to "Air Force One".

In 2001, a customised aircraft, refitted at San Antonio International Airport, in the U.S. had been prepared for the use of then-president Jiang Zemin.

However, after being delivered to Beijing, it was apparently found to have been fitted with 27 listening devices hidden inside, The Wall Street Journal reported.

China did not confirm or deny the incident at the time, but a foreign ministry spokesman said in a press briefing a few months later that it was "completely unnecessary to eavesdrop on China".

Since then, there have been no further plans for China to buy a similar "Air Force One" aircraft.
Obama has the use of two U.S. Air Force Boeing VC-25 aircraft - both highly modified military versions of the Boeing 747-200B airline.

The planes carry "state of the art" navigation, electronic and military communications equipment, according to the U.S. Air Force website, and are also known to carry defensive features that can help the aircraft evade missile attacks.

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