

United States– China Relations

Měi-Zhōng wàijiāo guānxì 美中外交关系

China and the United States have recently forged close economic ties, but relations between the two nations have often been marred by political tension. Beginning in the eighteenth century when the U.S. emerged as a nation during China’s Qing dynasty, through the Nationalist period, and for much of Chinese Communist Party rule, the two nations often clashed.

In February 1784 the *Empress of China* left New York harbor on its historic voyage to China’s southeastern port of Guangzhou (Canton). In August it became the first U.S. ship to trade in China at a time when Europe had already dominated the China trade for decades. By the turn of the nineteenth century an average of twenty-five U.S. vessels arrived in Guangzhou annually, and continued to grow even during the periods of upheaval which typified the twentieth century. At the beginning of the twenty-first century China became the United States’ number one trading partner, surpassing European Union nations and powerful neighbors such as Japan. The development of U.S.-China relations, however, has not always been smooth, and political entanglements continue to complicate relations. Both economic and political conflicts have been the source of controversy for the governments of both nations, but throughout much of the comparatively brief history of the United States, commercial relations have played a paramount role in U.S.-China relations.

Competition with the British for Opium Trade

U.S. traders arrived in China in the late eighteenth century as relative newcomers who benefited from inroads made by their European counterparts. Like the Europeans, U.S. traders had few commodities to sell to the self-sufficient Chinese, so they had to use silver, primarily Spanish silver dollars, to pay for Chinese tea and silk until they, like the British earlier, turned to selling opium. Before 1820 U.S. traders had a profitable monopoly in Turkish opium that allowed them to take a small share of Guangzhou’s market from the British East India Company, which sold opium originating in India, a British colony. However, when British “free” or private traders began competing for Turkish opium sources, the U.S. traders found themselves at a competitive disadvantage because U.S. ships were prohibited from carrying opium directly from British India to China. Nevertheless, U.S. dealers became adept at procuring opium stocks from a variety of sources, and in the years leading up to the First Opium War one U.S. company, Russell & Company, was ranked third among foreign firms dealing in Indian opium in Guangzhou.

Attempts by the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) at halting opium sales led to war and consequently the “unequal treaties” that permitted foreign merchants and missionaries in China’s coastal cities. Still in the shadow of the Europeans, U.S. traders gained advantages from the terms of the treaties. The “most favored nation” clause in the Treaty of Nanjing ending the First Opium War granted foreign powers in China a share in whatever concessions



were granted to any one of them. Extraterritoriality, a legal provision that allowed foreigners to ignore China's laws, made trade in opium possible without fear of prosecution. U.S. citizens and Europeans in China during the decades after the opium wars engaged in commercial and missionary activities, but, unlike the Europeans, the U.S. government did not seek territory in China. That difference in policy would influence U.S.-China relations into the twentieth century.

Burlingame Mission and Its Consequences

The Second Opium War concluded with China's defeat by the British and French, who then demanded that the Qing rulers establish permanent foreign embassies in Beijing. The Treaties of Tianjin, signed with several European states and the United States, forced the opening of Beijing to foreign residence. In response the Chinese government created the Foreign Office (Zongli Yamen) to handle diplomatic matters. The first U.S. minister sent to Beijing was Anson Burlingame, appointed in 1861 by President Abraham Lincoln, who expected Burlingame to ensure U.S. interests by defending China's territorial integrity in the face of European colonial expansion. In 1867, in an unusual move, Burlingame was recruited by the Foreign Office to head China's first delegation abroad, serving as an official representative of the Qing throne. The three-year-long Burlingame mission featured visits to foreign capitals and other points of interest. One accomplishment included the negotiation of an amendment to the Treaty of Tianjin, called the Seward-Burlingame Treaty (1868), asserting that the United States did not have territorial designs on China and providing freedom

for citizens of both nations to emigrate and trade without discrimination.

The Seward-Burlingame Treaty was denounced by members of the U.S. Congress from western states who, responding to intense nativism, worked to curtail Chinese immigration into the United States. In 1880 the treaty was revised when both Beijing and Washington agreed that the U.S. government could suspend but not prohibit Chinese immigration. Congress responded in 1882 by passing the first of the Chinese "exclusion laws" that suspended Chinese immigration for a decade. In 1892 California congressman Thomas Geary proposed an extension of the law for another ten years in the Act to Prohibit the Coming of Chinese Persons into the United States, also known as the "Geary Act." Despite protests by the Qing throne and Chinese-Americans, the Geary Act passed and was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1893. In 1902 Congress renewed the exclusion act with no terminal date and included the requirement that all Chinese in the United States possess a certificate of residence or face deportation. (The exclusion laws were not repealed until the passage of the Magnuson Act in 1943.) The restrictions placed on Chinese by the United States were in stark contrast to simultaneous attempts by the U.S. government to protect U.S. interests in China.

Open Door Policy

By the close of the nineteenth century the Qing dynasty faced increasing pressure from imperialist powers, especially after China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). The years from 1895 to 1900 have been referred to as the time of the "Slicing of the Melon" when China was carved into spheres of influence by Europe and

Japan. In 1899 the U.S. government responded to China's situation with the concept of an "open door" aimed at protecting U.S. trade by promoting equality of economic opportunity in China. In 1899 U.S. Secretary of State John Hay sent the Open Door Notes to governments with interests in China, including Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Japan. Hay was successful in securing tacit acceptance of the principles of free and open markets throughout China, but within a year the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion (Yi Ho Tuan Movement) threatened to negate the agreements. As foreign armies fought their way inland to rescue their citizens in Beijing, Hay feared that the creation of colonies throughout China would follow the defeat of the Boxers and their supporters in the Qing royal family. In the Open Door Circular (1900) Hay reiterated the need to maintain open access to markets and emphasized that all nations should respect the "territorial and administrative integrity" of China. The Open Door agreements were not binding but were upheld by the United States over the next several decades.

When the Open Door policy was initiated, the United States had just begun to expand into the Pacific with the annexation of Hawaii (1898) and the acquisition of the Philippines and Guam from Spain (1899). Access to China's markets served U.S. interests at a time when other powers, such as Russia and Japan, threatened to close their territories in China to foreign trade. After the Qing

dynasty collapsed in 1911, the Open Door policy expanded to include the goal of preserving China's independence. In 1915 Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan announced the Non-Recognition Doctrine after Japan attempted to colonize China with the Twenty-One Demands presented to President Yuan Shikai. Because of its commitment to the Open Door policy, the U.S. government refused to recognize any Sino-Japanese treaty that violated its principles.

The conclusion of World War I in 1918 brought new challenges to U.S.-China relations. Because China was an ally of the United States, many Chinese assumed that their country would benefit from having contributed to the victorious side. In particular, Chinese intellectuals counted on an international commitment to President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, one of which guaranteed "national self-determination." But the terms of the Treaty of Versailles were disappointing; Japan won former German possessions in Shandong. The failure of the United States to uphold China's territorial integrity reflected the complexity of the international situation, including Japan's secret treaties with European powers, Wilson's focus on Japan's joining the League of Nations, and the timing of a joint British-U.S.-Japanese invasion of Siberia. The Chinese, however, responded to the rebuff with the widespread, violent antiforeign demonstrations of the May Fourth Movement (1919). Some of China's



Chinese meet with American congressman and diplomats in the American Embassy, Beijing. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

intellectuals then rejected U.S.-style democracy and turned to Bolshevism for a new model.

Ties to the Guomindang

The absence of political unity characteristic of the warlord decade (1916–1927) was relieved to some extent with the defeat by the Guomindang (Chinese Nationalist Party) of southern warlords and the establishment of the Republic of China's (ROC) new capital at Nanjing in 1927. China's new government, headed by the Guomindang's Chiang Kai-shek, immediately sought to improve relations with Western nations. The close ties that Chiang forged with the United States produced an alliance that lasted for decades.

In 1927 Chiang embarked on a quest to alter China's image from that of hapless victim of imperialism to that of a united and modern nation. He undertook a personal image change when he divorced his wives and married U.S.-educated Meiling Soong in a Christian ceremony in December 1927. Known as "Madame Chiang," Soong was a political asset and a passionate advocate for an independent, Guomindang-controlled China. Beginning in the 1930s she raised money and lobbied for support from wealthy U.S. citizens and the U.S. Congress. Fluent in English, Christian, modern and attractive, Soong

President Richard Nixon meets with China's Communist Party leader, Mao Zedong, 29 February 1972. NATIONAL ARCHIVES.



symbolized what many in the United States hoped would be China's future. In 1937 Chiang and Soong were named *Time* magazine's "Man and Woman of the Year."

Despite U.S. support, Chiang's government faced insurmountable challenges during the 1930s as Japan colonized Chinese territory, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) became the Guomindang's primary enemy. Although the U.S. government approved of the Guomindang's anti-Communist posture, concern over Japanese aggression in Asia took precedence for U.S.-China policy. The 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria and subsequent creation of the puppet state of Manchouguo led the United States to reemphasize the Doctrine of Non-Recognition. When Japan's large-scale military operations in China began in 1937, U.S. secretary of state Cordell Hull offered that the United States serve as a neutral ground for representatives from Nanjing and Tokyo to address the conflict. After Tokyo ignored the gesture, Hull announced the Doctrine of Non-Intervention aimed at keeping U.S. forces out of international conflicts while heaping condemnation on Japan for its aggression in China.

Japan's attack on Hawaii's Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and subsequent U.S. entrance into World War II caused President Franklin D. Roosevelt to strengthen ties to the Guomindang. In 1943 the United States negotiated a treaty on equal terms with the ROC that relinquished U.S. extraterritorial privileges and provided the United States with bases in China to facilitate the fight against Japan. Roosevelt pushed to elevate China's international standing, making Chiang one of the "Big Five" Allies. Nevertheless, U.S.-China cooperation during World War II was troubled.

In March 1942 U.S. Army Lieutenant General Joseph W. Stilwell, Roosevelt's choice to command the China-Burma-India theater of war, arrived in Chongqing, China's wartime capital. Stilwell was initially welcomed by Chiang and appointed chief of staff, but their relationship soon became strained. For Stilwell conditions in the Guomindang army were cause for dismay. Civil conflict, tentative control over warlord forces, corruption, erratic supply lines, and overwhelming Japanese strength made the outlook bleak. Despite assistance from the American Volunteer Group, the Flying Tigers, who flew supplies to Chinese forces, the United States could not provide the logistical support needed to make the Guomindang army effective. As the war wore on, Stilwell opposed Chiang's

tactics that he deemed defensive and criticized deployment of forces against Communist strongholds. In September 1944 Roosevelt urged Chiang to put Stilwell in command of Chinese ground units. When Chiang refused, Stilwell was replaced with Major General Albert C. Wedemeyer, but relations between Roosevelt and Chiang cooled.

Japan's defeat was followed by the repatriation of more than 1 million Japanese troops and the airlift of a half-million Guomindang forces to cities throughout China by the U.S. military. Then the United States stepped in to avert civil war by sending General George Marshall to mediate between Chiang and the CCP. The Marshall mission attempted to create a coalition Guomindang-CCP government with Chiang as head, but after talks broke down in 1946 civil war began. The United States sent to the Guomindang aid worth more than \$2 billion, not including the nearly \$2 billion in aid delivered during World War II. In 1948 the defeated Chiang and his government fled to the island of Taiwan.

Recognition for the Republic of China

The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949 was a blow to those in the United States who expected victory for their wartime ally, but the administration of President Harry Truman, aware of Chinese conditions, had predicted a CCP victory. In the State Department's white paper on China released in August 1949, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote: "The unfortunate but inescapable fact is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the government of the United States." In the months after the CCP victory, Truman adopted a "wait and see" policy, assessing whether the United States would recognize Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong's government and establish commercial ties, as it had in 1948 with the Communist head of Yugoslavia, Josip Broz Tito. Many factors, however, worked against possible conciliation. An intense "Red scare" had reemerged in the United States. Provoked by Senator Joseph McCarthy's allegations of Communists within the State Department, conservatives in Congress vehemently denounced the Truman administration for being "soft" on Communism. When



Henry Kissinger meets 11-year-old Li Lianjie (Jet Li) at the 1974 Wushu Delegation, while National Committee on United States–China Relations representative Jan Berris looks on.
COURTESY OF NCUSCR.

the CCP signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in February 1950, Truman's critics rushed to exaggerate his failures.

For Truman China's entrance into the Korean War (1950–1953) ruined any chance for normal relations with Beijing and assured continued recognition of the ROC. The Korean War caused Truman to declare a national state of emergency, increase draft calls, urge the United Nations (U.N.) to condemn China as an aggressor nation, and station the U.S. Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait. Premier Zhou Enlai denounced the action as "armed aggression against the territory of China." Meanwhile, Moscow's efforts to seat the PRC in the U.N. were blocked by the United States. In December 1950 the United States announced a total trade embargo on the PRC that would last for twenty-one years.

For two decades the United States recognized the ROC while adhering to the official position that "the

regime in Peiping” (Beijing) was not China’s government. Beginning in April 1951 the United States resumed direct military aid to the Guomindang. In 1954 the United States signed a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, followed by the passage of the Formosa [Taiwan] Resolution (1955), which guaranteed protection against armed attack. U.S.-China relations became inextricably tied to the intensification of the Cold War. U.S. policies were aimed at stopping the spread of Communism, while China policies focused on supporting the “revolutionary struggles” of former colonial peoples. In 1965 People’s Liberation Army commander Lin Biao described the United States as “the most rabid aggressor in human history” in his essay “On People’s War.”

Ping-Pong Diplomacy

The unlikely champion of opening ties with the PRC was President Richard M. Nixon, once a hard-line anti-Communist associate of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Nixon’s historic journey to Beijing in 1972 opened a dialogue when both sides saw advantages to ending the decades-long feud. China’s aging leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, in the years after the violent and divisive Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the failed coup attempt by Lin Biao (1971), began to moderate their views, even reappointing to government positions once-jailed associates such as Deng Xiaoping. Moreover, hostilities with Moscow made China increasingly isolated and vulnerable. On the U.S. side Nixon began sending positive signals to Beijing as early as 1969 when he sought to reevaluate U.S. policy in Asia and end the conflict with China’s ally Vietnam. The first break came in 1971 with the start of “people’s diplomacy” after the Chinese invited the U.S. table tennis team to Beijing. U.S. national security advisor Henry Kissinger followed up with a secret trip to China, arranging Nixon’s future visit and announcing that the United States would no longer block Beijing’s entrance into the U.N. In February 1972 Nixon and Zhou Enlai issued a joint statement, the Shanghai Communiqué, outlining the provisions for establishing diplomatic and commercial ties. Because no agreement could be reached on the future of Taiwan, separate statements summarized each government’s position. Full diplomatic relations between the United States and China

were officially restored in January 1979, but Congress responded by passing the Taiwan Relations Act (April 1979), which encouraged continued economic, cultural, and military ties with Taiwan.

Two Superpowers Cooperate and Compete

Beginning in 1978 economic reforms by Premier Deng Xiaoping opened China’s markets to the world. Soon China’s economy boomed from exports and foreign investment. U.S. citizens were quick to take advantage of opportunities once denied them and embraced new possibilities while ignoring, for the most part, the reality of the CCP’s strict authoritarianism. U.S.-China commercial ties, including joint ventures and buyouts of U.S. firms, rapidly expanded, and by 2005 China became the United States’ number one trading partner. But with closer economic ties came conflict. Citing complaints of closed markets, rampant infringement of copyright laws, and government crackdowns on dissidents, the United States blocked China’s initial bid to join the World Trade Organization in 1997. Eventually China’s entrance in 2001 gave Chinese greater access to member states’ markets and contributed to a trade surplus with the United States of nearly \$300 billion in 2007.

With the Cold War’s conclusion the United States became the sole superpower, but China’s ascendance as a potential rival in east Asia is apparent. As China reaches superpower status, it will challenge U.S. hegemony (influence) in the Pacific. U.S.-China relations can be described as both cooperative and competitive. On the one hand, for example, Beijing was successful in curtailing North Korean nuclear proliferation after Chinese president Hu Jintao led six-nation talks that proved more effective at reining in North Korea than had earlier U.S. threats. On the other hand, unresolved issues, such as Taiwan’s future, continue to loom. The United States remains committed to defend Taiwan from military attack. The outlook for the twenty-first century appears to be characterized by close commercial ties, political disagreements, and strategic rivalry for the United States and China.

Recent events that continue to influence public opinion in China include the accidental 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by the United States and



China's women's basketball team visited the United States in 1974 and was photographed with President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the White House.

PHOTO BY THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON UNITED STATES–CHINA RELATIONS.

the forced landing of a U.S. spy plane on Hainan Island on 1 April 2001, as well as U.S. and other Western protests during the Beijing Olympic torch relay, all of which provoked a nationalist backlash both in China and from Chinese people living overseas. The U.S. plan to sell \$6.5 billion of advanced weaponry to Taiwan announced in October 2008 also caused negative reactions in China, even though tension over Taiwan, the most important challenge to U.S.-China relations since 1949, had eased after PRC-Taiwan relations began a new phase with the election of Taiwanese president Ma Ying-jeou in March 2008.

During the U.S. elections of 2008, the trade deficit and job outsourcing were prominent in the public discussion, and product and food safety were much commented on in the press along with extensive coverage of human rights and Tibet-related protests before the Olympic Games.

These issues and differences of perspective continue to affect U.S.-China discussions.

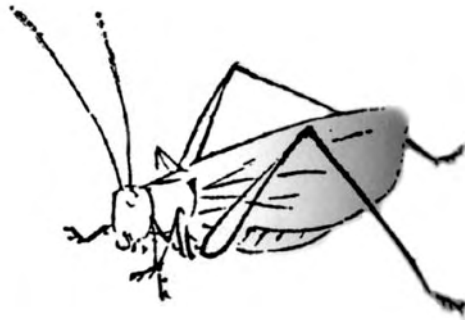
The thirtieth anniversary of the “normalization” of U.S.-China relations was on 1 January 2009, and 1 March 2009 marked thirty years since the U.S. Embassy reopened in Beijing. Many celebratory events were held in the United States and in China to bring together those who were involved in the events leading to normalization with younger leaders in the diplomatic, academic, and business communities. Initiatives such as the Strategic Economy Dialogue started under President George W. Bush draw support from a broad spectrum because both countries and leaders around the globe recognize that in spite of differences the cooperation of the United States and China on the global economic crisis, climate change, and terrorism is essential to future global stability.

But tensions between the two countries escalated again just one week after the celebratory events on 1 March. An American surveillance ship, the USNS *Impeccable*, and five Chinese ships were involved in a military confrontation 60 miles off the coast of Hainan Island in the South China Sea on 8 March 2009. Director of Naval Intelligence Donald Blair called it the “most serious” dispute since the April 2001 EP-3 incident. Both sides have insisted their actions were justified; U.S. military leaders and policymakers met soon after the incident to discuss its ramifications on U.S.-China relations.

June GRASSO

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