U.S.-China Relations Since 1949

**Containment: 1949-1969**

For twenty years (1949-1969), the United States tried to disrupt, destabilize, and weaken China’s communist government. Washington believed that China was an aggressive, expansionist power that threatened the security of its noncommunist neighbors. The United States constructed an off-shore line of military alliances along China's eastern and southern borders. These included the U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Nationalist government on Taiwan. With its allies, the United States formed the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) that included Thailand, the Philippines, and South Vietnam, and the ANZUS Treaty that linked Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. The United States maintained military bases and in some cases stationed significant numbers of troops in many of these countries, especially Japan and South Korea. During these years, the United States also became involved in the war in Vietnam.

Washington encouraged its allies to refrain entering into diplomatic relations with Beijing. The United States prohibited Americans from visiting China. The United States cut off trade and orchestrated an international embargo of China.

By being even tougher on China than on its main communist rival, the Soviet Union, the United States pursued a so-called "wedge strategy." This strategy aimed to encourage a split between the two communist allies. It was successful, because such a split did occur, becoming evident in around 1960 and worsening thereafter.

**Rapprochement: 1970-1979**

China and the United States began to move closer to one another. The Americans were seeking to bring an end to the war in Vietnam while China wanted to find support for its resistance to pressure from the Soviet Union. President Nixon’s visit to China in February 1972 marked the breakthrough to rapprochement. Nixon and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai signed the Shanghai Communiqué. The Communiqué said that the United States "acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. The United States Government does not challenge that position. It reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan. In the meantime, it will progressively reduce its forces and military installations on Taiwan as the tension in the area diminishes..."

On this basis, U.S.-China unofficial relations began to develop, with trade, educational, and cultural exchanges.

**Full Diplomatic Relations: 1979 to Present**

In 1979 the two governments established full diplomatic relations. To do this, the United States had to break its formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan, although it maintained informal relations with the people of that island. The U.S. Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act. The Act commits the United States to help maintain Taiwan’s self-defense capacity and to consider coming to its defense if it is attacked by mainland China.

The establishment of normal diplomatic relations coincided with the beginning of China’s "reform and opening" policies. The following period saw rapid development of trade and investment ties with the West, including America. China also opened itself to Western tourism, and developed extensive ties in academic and cultural fields.

The two countries cooperated in a number of issues, such as working for peace in Korea. However, many important issues remained unresolved in U.S.-China relations. On the American side, these included dissatisfaction with Chinese human rights policies, with China’s large trade surpluses with the United States, and with China’s sales of missiles and nuclear technology to countries in the Middle East and elsewhere. On the Chinese side, the biggest issue was continued American arms sales to Taiwan. In addition to this, China criticized American global foreign policy as one which tried to enforce American interests and did not pay enough attention to the interests of other countries.

**The Human Rights Issue**

One of the most contentious issues in the U.S.-China relationship is human rights. American N.G.O.’s, media, and the government are critical of Chinese government treatment of dissidents, religious groups, ethnic minorities, workers, accused criminals, prisoners, and married people contemplating having more than one child, among other issues. Many Americans claim that Chinese government policies in these areas violate internationally recognized human rights.

Ironically, this issue did not come to the fore during the Mao era, when China’s human rights situation was at its worst. It took on saliency after China opened to the West, an event which happened more or less to coincide with the rise of the human rights movement and human rights diplomacy in the West. The event that fixed human rights as a core U.S.-China issue was the violent crackdown against student demonstrators in Beijing on June 4, 1989 – the so-called Tiananmen Incident. Since then, the United States has been on the offensive at both the non-governmental and governmental levels in criticizing Chinese human rights violations. Policy instruments included public shaming (e.g., issuing reports), quiet diplomacy (intervention on particular cases at high levels), threats of trade sanctions (such as the threat not to renew the annual tariff privileges known as Most Favored Nation privileges or Normal Trading Relations), and efforts to have China criticized at the annual meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

China has countered energetically, arguing, first of all, that its domestic policies are no concern of other governments and secondly, that its human rights record is admirable because of progress made in feeding, clothing, educating, and giving medical care to its vast and previously poverty-stricken population. In 2000, the U.S. House (expected soon to be followed by the Senate) approved Permanent Normal Trading Relations for China in order to allow China to enter the World Trade Organization. This for all practical purposes removes the option of threatening trade sanctions in connection with human rights abuses. The same year, China administered a strong defeat to American diplomatic efforts at the U.N. Human Rights Commission, so it remains an open question whether the U.S. can use that policy instrument in the future.

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*Empty Fortress: China’s Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).