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A HISTORY OF U.S. RELATIONS WITH CHINA

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THIS NSI BACKGROUND

1

REVIEWS key developments in the historic U.S. relationship with China.

2

HIGHLIGHTS the extent to which U.S.-China tensions have waxed and waned.

3

DESCRIBES recent changes in U.S. perceptions of China which have sparked competing policy responses.

THE EARLY YEARS

- **Opening China.** When Russia, Great Britain, Japan, Germany, and France sought to establish exclusive trading zones in China, the United States proposed in 1898 that these powers instead recognize the Chinese government's sovereignty and agree to equal access to Chinese markets. Although this "Open Door" proposal was never formally implemented, it signaled U.S. interest in China.
- **An Early Partnership.** The Republic of China (ROC) was established in 1912. Within fifteen years it was riven with infighting between the ruling Nationalist Party (the Guomindang or GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of Mao Zedong. During World War II, the U.S. provided the GMD with substantial equipment, money, and military guidance.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA & LASTING TENSIONS

- **The PRC-ROC Split.** After an uneasy wartime alliance, the GMD and CCP renewed their fight. Despite U.S. assistance, the GMD was repeatedly routed on the battlefield. In 1949, Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC).
 - GMD supporters fled to the island of Taiwan, and the United States continued to recognize the ROC as the government of China. However, the establishment of the PRC sparked a debate in the U.S. about the putative "loss" of mainland China to Communist control. This question engaged the "China Lobby," a group of inter-war American missionaries in China who remained influential in the U.S. in subsequent years.
- **Direct Conflict & Heightened Tensions.** After North Korea invaded the U.S.-allied South Korea in 1950, the PRC military intervened, initially to help the North halt a U.S. counterattack. By the Korean War's 1953 armistice, the PRC had lost as many as 400,000 troops. More than 33,000 Americans were killed. The U.S. and PRC later came close to conflict again, including in connection with islands in the Taiwan Strait. In 1964, the PRC developed nuclear weapons, and eventually deployed nuclear-armed missiles which could target the United States.

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U.S. RECOGNITION OF THE PRC

- **Sino-Soviet Division.** Although the Soviet Union and PRC formally allied in 1950, they increasingly developed ideological disagreements, including about the means and trajectory of competition with the United States.
- **Triangulation.** In 1971, the Nixon Administration, sensing an opportunity to triangulate relations with two U.S. foes and further encourage the Sino-Soviet split, broached with the PRC the possibility of establishing diplomatic relations. This culminated in 1979 with the U.S. diplomatic recognition of the PRC, and a downgrading of U.S. ties with the ROC.

RECENT DECADES

- **Reform & Opening.** Between the mid-1970s and 1980s, following the humanitarian and economic catastrophe caused by Mao's "Great Leap Forward" and "Cultural Revolution," the PRC underwent significant economic and political liberalization. This included Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening-up," and his initiative to develop "socialism with Chinese Characteristics." The limits of change were demonstrated in 1989 when the PRC brutally suppressed pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.
 - If and how the U.S. should react to this and other objectionable PRC actions became a recurring question. While some suggested economic and political ties with the PRC should be circumscribed in such instances, others believed broader strategic considerations required the contours of the relationship to remain the same.
- **Economic Integration.** The PRC enjoyed tremendous economic growth in the 1990s. In 2001, the U.S. extended normal trade relations to the PRC and later worked to help bring the PRC into the World Trade Organization.
 - By 2010, U.S.-PRC economic ties had deepened, positioning the PRC to become the world's largest exporter and second largest importer.
 - The PRC's economic rise was accompanied by widespread cyberespionage, intellectual property theft, systemic violations of trade norms, and an inept (or maleficent) handling of the Coronavirus.
- **Growing Assertiveness.** Upon Xi Jinping's 2013 ascent to office, the PRC dramatically improved the capabilities and reach of its armed forces, including by constructing militarized enclaves in the South China Sea. It also increasingly clamped down on internal dissent and began concerted campaigns to curb international criticism and promote the PRC's political and economic model.
 - The PRC began the "Belt and Road Initiative," an ambitious effort to improve its economic and political relationships by encouraging infrastructure construction elsewhere. Critics highlight the frequently opaque or usurious financial terms and argue the PRC primarily seeks to obtain physical access to geostrategically vital regions.
 - More recently, the PRC acted in apparent contravention of the "one country, two systems" arrangement agreed to upon Hong Kong's 1997 independence from the United Kingdom. Consequently, the U.S. is considering revoking or amending the special status it extends to Hong Kong.

KEY ITEMS TO WATCH

A BIPARTISAN SHIFT

- Opinions in the U.S. about the PRC have undergone a broad, bipartisan shift. Many policymakers no longer assume that the PRC's integration into the global trading system will readily induce its economic and political liberalization.

COMPETING SOLUTIONS

- This new consensus has nevertheless resulted in several competing policy prescriptions, including:
 - a reinvigorated approach which places greater emphasis on securing the PRC's economic reciprocity, coupled with the belief that the PRC is too entwined with the U.S. and global economy to risk a rupture in ties, especially considering the potentially grave security consequences of doing so.
 - more dramatic changes to the U.S. approach in order to temper the PRC's global ambitions, including reduced economic relationship in critical areas, more forcefully confronting undesirable behavior, and further considering the possibility that the PRC is becoming a potential military adversary.
 - adopting more modest global goals that recognize the PRC's rising power and greater sway in the region and elsewhere.



» SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL READING

Daniel Blumenthal and Nicholas Eberstadt, “China Unquarantined,” *National Review*, June 22, 2020.

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