

NIXON IN CHINA

A Turning Point in World History

WARREN I. COHEN



President Richard M. Nixon, right, strolls across a bridge in a typical Chinese setting at Hangchow, February 26, 1972, with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai and Mrs. Pat Nixon, center rear.

“It is to the advantage, and not to the disadvantage of other nations when any nation becomes stable and prosperous, able to keep the peace within its own borders, and strong enough not to invite aggression from without. We heartily hope for the progress of China, and so far as by peaceable and legitimate means we are able we will do our part toward furthering that progress.”

U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt to Chinese representative Tong Shaoyi, December 1908

Warren I. Cohen is Distinguished University Professor of History and Presidential Research Professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is also Senior Scholar with the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. He is a historian of American foreign relations and U.S. relations with East Asia as well as the history of China and its region.

The 1949 victory of the Chinese communists in the Chinese civil war had a shattering impact upon the United States. In the first half of the 20th century, American policymakers, from President Theodore Roosevelt on, had favored the emergence of a strong and prosperous China. They assumed that China would be friendly to the United States. Americans looked back to a century of good works they had performed in China, such as the building of the Christian colleges that were the forerunners of China’s modern educational system, and the Rockefeller Foundation’s funding of rural reconstruction programs and the Peking Union Medical College, where China’s leading doctors were trained. Many Americans believed their country had championed China’s cause against Japanese and European imperialists, beginning with the “Open Door Notes” sent from Washington to the Great Powers when China’s very survival as a nation was threatened in 1899 and 1900. And, most obviously, the United States had led the fight to liberate China from Japanese aggression during World War II.



President Richard M. Nixon, center, and first lady Pat Nixon pose with a group of Chinese citizens on the Great Wall of China after a tour of the monument near Beijing, February 24, 1972. At far right is Secretary of State William P. Rogers.

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and refused to discuss any issue but an end to U.S. aid to Chiang and its protection of Taiwan.

In the United States, a combination of China's hostility, domestic anticommunism intensified by the Cold War, and lobbying by Chiang's American friends prevented policymakers in the 1950s and 1960s from reaching out to Beijing. Indeed, Washington used its influence to keep the People's Republic out of the United Nations, even though President Dwight Eisenhower contended that isolating China was a mistake.

In the mid-1960s, however, awareness of the Sino-Soviet split and a reduced intensity of anticommunism as a result of disillusionment with the war in Vietnam, led to a shift in American opinion toward relations with China. Important academic and governmental leaders argued in favor of what they insisted was the more realistic policy of accepting the Beijing regime as the legitimate government of China and finding ways to work with it. They spoke of "containment without isolation." The administration of President Lyndon Johnson was mired too deeply in Vietnam, however, and the Chinese were caught up in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. No new relationship developed.

TENSIONS EASE

Richard Nixon, Eisenhower's vice president and unsuccessful presidential candidate in 1960, was one American leader whose anticommunism and hostility to China were well known. In 1968 he was elected president of the United States and the possibility of easing tensions with China seemed more remote than ever. But Nixon agreed with the estimates of senior State Department officials that China might help the United States end the war in Vietnam and assist American efforts to counter growing Soviet power. He recognized that the changed mood of the American public, plus his own anticommunist credentials, would allow him to seek

U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS BREAK DOWN

But the People's Republic of China (PRC), proclaimed October 1, 1949, was not friendly to the United States, and few Chinese shared the image Americans had of their historic role in China. Their new leader, Mao Zedong, was suspicious of American intentions and had ordered an anti-American campaign in June 1946. His forces harassed Americans in China. An American diplomat was beaten by police in Shanghai. The American consul-general in Mukden was kept under house arrest for a year. Worst of all was the October 1950 intervention of Chinese communist troops into the Korean War against American-led U.N. forces attempting to repel the invasion of South Korea by North Korea. As Chinese and American troops killed each other in battle by the tens of thousands, all thought of establishing normal diplomatic relations between Beijing and Washington disappeared.

For more than 20 years thereafter, the United States and China viewed each other as adversaries. Although their diplomats occasionally crossed paths at international conferences and they held sporadic ambassadorial-level talks, neither country expressed interest in reaching an accommodation. The Americans continued to recognize Chiang Kai-shek's Republic of China, defeated on the mainland and surviving on the island of Taiwan, as the legitimate government of all of China. Mao and his colleagues persisted in denouncing American imperialism

an accommodation with China. Slowly, cautiously, at no risk to the security of the United States, the Nixon administration signaled its desire to improve relations with China.

Zhou Enlai, China's premier diplomatist, had been working toward the same end, as evidenced by his invitation to the U.S. ping-pong team to visit China and communications through Pakistan's leader. Gradually he persuaded a skeptical Mao that the United States was no longer a threat to China and might be useful in Beijing's efforts to stand up to Soviet pressure. The great breakthrough came in 1971.

In his State of the Union address to Congress in February 1971, Nixon spoke of the need to establish a dialogue with the PRC. He called for a place for the Beijing government in the United Nations—without sacrificing the position of the Republic of China on Taiwan. Previously, American recognition of and support for Chiang's regime had been a major obstacle to rapprochement between Mao's China and the United States. Both Mao and Chiang insisted there could be but one China and neither would acquiesce to Washington's efforts to have two, one on the mainland and one on Taiwan. In 1971, however, Nixon and Mao were eager to use each other and agreed to a compromise formula of "one China, but not now." In fact, given their perception of the strategic value of improved relations with Beijing, Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, were prepared to meet Mao more than half way on the issue. Finding a partner in the struggle against the Soviet Union was far more important.

In July 1971, the world discovered that Kissinger had just returned from a secret mission to China. Nixon announced that he, the president of the United States, had accepted an invitation to visit China. In August and September the United States, for the first time, supported the seating of Beijing's representative in the United Nations Security Council while giving nominal support to Taipei's effort to retain a seat for itself. An American motion to seat both delegations failed, undermined by Kissinger's decision to choose that time to fly to Beijing. An Albanian motion to substitute Beijing's representative for Taipei's won easily. It was one of the least painful diplomatic defeats the United States had ever suffered. Washington had taken a step closer to a one-China policy.

A PRESIDENTIAL VISIT

In February 1972, Nixon flew to China, where he enjoyed a personal audience with Mao Zedong. An astonished worldwide television audience watched Nixon sit through and warmly applaud a Chinese ballet heavily laden with communist propaganda. It was indeed a new Nixon and a new relationship with China.

In the Chinese-American joint communiqué issued at the end of Nixon's week in China, it was clear that shared resistance to the Soviets was what brought the two sides together. Their stated opposition to "hegemony" in Asia and the Pacific was a thinly veiled reference to diminishing Moscow's influence in the region. Taiwan, on the other hand, remained the principal obstacle to regular diplomatic relations, to "normalization." The Americans acknowledged the Chinese claim that Taiwan was part of China, but restated their interest in the peaceful settlement of the issue. Nixon responded to the Chinese demands for the removal of American forces from Taiwan by committing the United States to their ultimate withdrawal and promising to do so gradually as tension in the area (Vietnam) diminished. At the same time, he and Kissinger sought to alleviate Beijing's apprehension that Japanese power would replace that of the Americans on the island. He further assured Chinese leaders that the United States would not support independence for Taiwan and promised to take the steps desired by the Chinese after his anticipated reelection in 1972.

The United States was bound by a 1954 treaty to defend Taiwan. American businesses had a multibillion-dollar stake on the island. Public opinion polls indicated that the American people were unwilling to abandon the people of Taiwan, friends and allies, to the communists. Nonetheless, the Nixon administration was prepared to abrogate its defense treaty with Taiwan, gambling that in the short run the people of the island could defend themselves and that in the long run a peaceful solution could be found.

NORMALIZATION

In 1973, China and the United States opened "liaison offices," embassies in all but name, in each other's capitals. Normalization was delayed, however, by the Watergate crisis that ultimately forced Nixon to resign in disgrace from the presidency. Nonetheless, his successors also were committed to normalization of relations with China, achieved early in 1979. The secret exchange of

military intelligence on Soviet movements, begun by Kissinger in 1971, was never interrupted.

Nixon's opening to China brought about an enormously important shift in the Cold War balance of power. The tacit alliance between the United States and the People's Republic, directed against the apparently burgeoning power of the Soviet Union, relieved Chinese anxieties about a potential Soviet attack and enabled the Americans to concentrate their military power in Europe—while the Soviets continued to be confronted by adversaries East and West, now working together against Moscow. It was a major turning point in world history and contributed ultimately to the collapse of

the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. And in 1979, American Vice President Walter Mondale traveled to Beijing where he repeated Theodore Roosevelt's words of 1908 to demonstrate anew the conviction that a strong—and presumably friendly—China was in America's interest. ■

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