

# The United States and China during the Cold War

by Warren I. Cohen

## THE COLD WAR COMES TO ASIA

In the closing years of World War II, American military and diplomatic representatives in China recognized that civil war was likely to erupt between the Nationalist-controlled government headed by Chiang Kai-shek and the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong. The two armed parties had put aside their antagonism, at least nominally, as they confronted Japanese invaders, but after the defeat of Japan it was apparent that they were preparing to resume the struggle for control of the country. Initially, Washington attempted to avert civil war, mediating between the two sides and hoping to create a coalition government. When that effort faltered, President Harry Truman sent General George C. Marshall, the architect of victory in the war against Germany and Japan, to China to try to broker a peace agreement—and to determine the intentions of the Soviet Union in Manchuria and North China.

Marshall failed in his efforts to prevent full-scale war in China, but concluded Moscow had no plan to annex Manchuria or to keep its troops in North China.

Although American leaders preferred a Nationalist victory, they did not consider China sufficiently important to intervene in its civil war. Moreover, Marshall, who became secretary of state in 1947, believed the United States, having finite resources, could not afford to invest large sums of money or use millions of American soldiers in an area of secondary concern in the emerging confrontation with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the limited financial and material support Washington provided the Nationalists sufficed to intensify anti-Americanism among the Communists. In 1949, the Communists won the battle and Chiang fled to Taiwan. On October 1, Mao declared the existence of the People's Republic of China and left little doubt that he would align his country with the Soviets.

Traditionally, at least after Woodrow Wilson's experiment with "watchful waiting," the US government recognized governments, attractive or not, if they demonstrated control of their countries. The Truman administration intended to recognize the People's Republic in due course, but Chiang's American friends and others hostile to communism argued against recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing while Chiang's regime on Taiwan survived and claimed to be the true government of China. Democratic Party congressional leaders feared a backlash in the 1950 mid-term elections if the United States abandoned Chiang and could be accused of responsibility for his defeat. With CIA estimates that the Communists would invade Taiwan in the summer of 1950 and prevail easily over Chiang's forces, Truman chose to wait. Once Chiang was defeated and the elections were past, the administration could move toward recognition before the end of 1950. Unfortunately, war broke out in Korea in June 1950 and recognition was delayed for nearly thirty years. In addition, the United States prevented the People's Republic from gaining China's seat in the United Nations.



*President and Mrs. Nixon at the Great Wall of China in February 1972. (National Archives and Records Administration)*

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## WAR IN KOREA

The principal gainer from the war in Korea was Chiang Kai-shek. Truman and Dean Acheson, his secretary of state, had intended to abandon Chiang, but they were maneuvered into protecting him and providing substantial aid. Uncertain of the meaning of the invasion of the South by the North Korean Communists assisted by the Soviets, American leaders announced that they were sending ships to the Taiwan Strait to prevent the war from spreading. Truman, hoping to avoid a wider war, refused Chiang's offer of troops to assist the American-led UN force that came to South Korea's rescue. But the success of UN troops in rolling back the North Korean advance, and their march through North Korea that threatened to eliminate the communist regime there and pose a threat to China, provoked massive Chinese intervention in October 1950. Surprised by the Chinese attack, UN forces were hurt badly and were close to being driven off the Korean peninsula when they were able to hold the perimeter at the southern port city of Pusan. From there they succeeded in driving the overextended Chinese back to the 38th parallel, the original boundary between the two Korean states.

From spring 1951 to spring 1953, the two sides jockeyed for position close to the 38th parallel. Before a truce was declared, the Chinese suffered 800,000 casualties and more than 50,000 Americans lost their lives in Korea—as did millions of Koreans, North and South, and thousands of UN troops who fought alongside the Americans. Once Chinese Communists were killing Americans, anger toward the Chinese mounted in the United States, and recognition would have been political suicide for Democrats already suffering from Republican charges that they were “soft on communism.” The war hysteria provided the context in which Senator Joe McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) attained influence that he used to assault the civil liberties of his countrymen. In this atmosphere, America's WWII ally, Chiang Kai-shek, sought and ultimately won a new treaty of alliance that committed the United States to defend Taiwan. In the 1950s and early 1960s, massive American economic aid poured into the island while the continuing US naval presence in the Taiwan Strait precluded an invasion by the People's Republic.

## ALLIANCE AND CRISES IN THE STRAIT

In 1953 Dwight Eisenhower became President of the United States and he named John Foster Dulles as his secretary of state. In the presidential election campaign, Eisenhower's supporters demanded the roll-back of communism in Asia as well as Europe. Once in office, the Eisenhower administration generally proved to be quite prudent in foreign affairs. It was unwilling to take actions in Europe that might precipitate a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Although hostile to the Chinese Communists, Eisenhower and Dulles were mistrustful of Chiang, fearful that he would try to involve the United States in a war against the People's Republic that would enable him to regain control of the mainland. They stalled in response to his effort to seek a mutual defense agreement, looking for a way to pacify Chiang's supporters in the United States without giving him what he wanted.

In Beijing, Mao and his colleagues were aware of the alliance negotiations but unaware of the reluctance of the Eisenhower administration to reach an agreement. Hoping to prevent the alliance, in 1954 Mao ordered the bombardment of Jinmen and Mazu (Quemoy and Matsu), islands in the Taiwan Strait close to the mainland but controlled by Chiang's forces. He wanted to intensify American awareness of the danger of an alliance with Chiang, but the crisis he precipitated backfired. Eisenhower and Dulles did not want to appear to retreat under pressure and they accepted a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, hoping to deter an invasion by the Chinese Communists.

The crisis led to international pressure on the administration to talk to representatives of the People's Republic. Ambassadorial-level conversations began in 1955, but after an initial agreement on repatriation of Americans and Chinese trapped in enemy territory at the outbreak of Chinese-American hostilities during the Korean War, the talks broke down over the issue of Taiwan. The American sides demanded the Chinese renounce the use of force in the Taiwan Strait. The Chinese side insisted that the "liberation" of Taiwan was a domestic issue, to be resolved by whatever means necessary.

Unhappy about the disinclination of the Americans to continue the ambassadorial-level talks, Mao precipitated another crisis in the Strait in 1958. Dulles immediately warned that the United States would intervene if Taiwan was threatened. A few weeks later, however, he publically criticized Chiang's policy of keeping the offshore islands heavily garrisoned, expressed doubt that Chiang's force could ever regain control of the mainland, and insisted the United States was not committed to aiding Chiang to invade the mainland even if the people there revolted against Mao's rule. When polls indicated the American people were outraged at the idea of going to war to protect Jinmen and Mazu, Dulles stressed American flexibility and willingness to seek rapprochement with Beijing. Secretly, he began to explore the possibility of recognizing Mao's regime on the mainland while simultaneously continuing to recognize Chiang's government on Taiwan. This was called the "two Chinas policy," anathema to both Mao and Chiang. Soon afterward, Dulles flew to Taiwan and forced Chiang to announce that he would not use force to reclaim the mainland. There was much unhappiness on Taiwan and among Chiang's American friends.

Eisenhower contended that it was in the interest of the United States to have relations of some sort, at least commercial, with the People's Republic of China. He thought it was a mistake to force the Chinese to be dependent on the Soviet Union and that an American trade relationship with China would serve American interests, as would greater trade between America's allies and China. Dulles, however, was inclined to believe that China's dependence on the Soviets would strain their relationship and create tensions between Moscow and Beijing. Eisenhower recognized that the domestic political context of the 1950s precluded any rapprochement with China. His only significant success in furthering his vision came with Washington's acceptance of increased trade between Japan and China and between Great Britain and China. Rapprochement would have to wait until the American political climate changed.

## KENNEDY, JOHNSON, AND THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

Taiwan's American supporters were initially fearful that President John F. Kennedy might attempt to improve relations with China, but it was the men and women who hoped Washington's policy would change who were to be disappointed. Throughout his political career, Kennedy had been critical of Beijing and of Americans who denigrated Chiang Kai-shek. Many of his aides argued he had modified his position and that he failed to act only because of the exigencies of domestic politics, out of fear of being labeled soft on communism—especially as he moved to improve relations with the communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Some were persuaded he would recognize the People's Republic in his second term, but we will never know. None of his actions in the "thousand days" of his presidency demonstrated interest in reaching out to Beijing, and Kennedy secretly promised Chiang he would use the veto if the UN voted to seat Mao's regime.

Lyndon Johnson entered the White House without strong negative feelings toward China and his administration floated several proposals to ease tensions with Beijing, but nothing came of them. The Chinese were too deeply involved in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and Johnson was soon overwhelmed by the war in Vietnam. Mao, struggling to regain power and revive his revolution, was unresponsive to American overtures. China's successful test of a nuclear bomb in 1964 worried the men and women responsible for American security, especially after Mao's Red Guards ran rampant across

the country and the behavior of the Chinese people and their leaders seemed bizarre and unpredictable.

## NIXON, KISSINGER, AND RAPPROCHEMENT

When Richard Nixon became president in 1969, most analysts assumed that his reputation as a staunch anti-communist precluded any change in policy toward China. Nixon, however, had concluded that policies he had supported in the past no longer made sense: the People's Republic of China was here to stay and some sort of working relationship with Beijing was in the interests of the United States. Such a course might enable him to end the war in Vietnam and, given the Sino-Soviet split, indisputable by the late 1960s, the balance of power in the Cold War might shift decisively in America's favor. In 1971, as the Cultural Revolution wound down, the Chinese agreed to receive Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser.

The Americans knew Taiwan was the central issue for Chinese leaders, and Kissinger quickly indicated that the United States was prepared to abandon the island on a politically expedient timetable. In return they hoped the Chinese would push the North Vietnamese into negotiations for a compromise peace—a peace that would allow Nixon to withdraw American forces from Vietnam without appearing to have surrendered. He and Kissinger were also confident that cooperation between Beijing and Washington would make the Soviets more amenable to easing Cold War tensions. They foresaw a triangular relationship in which Moscow would be forced to back away from confrontations with both China and the United States—and they provided the Chinese with valuable intelligence about Soviet activities.

Nixon flew to Beijing early in 1972, met with Mao and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, and both sides anticipated movement toward diplomatic recognition. In the “Shanghai Communiqué” they issued at the conclusion of the meetings they agreed to open liaison offices in each other's capital, offices that would function like virtual embassies; the Americans “acknowledged” that both Beijing and the authorities on Taiwan insisted there was only one China; and Nixon conceded that China's capital was in Beijing. Unfortunately, Nixon was caught up in the Watergate scandal and ultimately resigned. Recognition was delayed. Chinese leaders were disappointed, but nonetheless increased cooperation directed against the Soviet Union. They were also pleased to be given China's seat in the UN and by the expulsion of Taiwan from the organization.

## RECOGNITION AT LAST

Recognition of the People's Republic of China and the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and the United States finally came in January 1979, during the presidency of Jimmy Carter. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, was eager to increase pressure on the Soviets and outmaneuvered bureaucratic rivals striving for détente with Moscow. He had little concern for the impact recognition of the People's Republic would have on Taiwan. Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader, wanted to use the relationship with the United States to deter Soviet intervention in the war he planned to launch against Vietnam, then aligned with Moscow. To that end, he was willing to defer his complaints about continued American arms sales to Taiwan. In return, the Americans agreed to abrogate their mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, cease to recognize its government as the government of China, and reduce arms sales to the island as conditions in the region permitted.

Neither Carter nor Deng anticipated the strong Congressional action on behalf of Taiwan that came in the form of the Taiwan Relations Act authorizing continued commercial, cultural, and other relations between the people of the United States and those of Taiwan—despite derecognition. It also authorized the US government to provide the island's armed forces with whatever military aid they needed to defend

themselves. Although the act did not require the United States to send its own forces to defend the island, Deng was outraged and the issue continued to roil Chinese-American relations long after the Cold War ended.

## THE REAGAN YEARS

Ronald Reagan campaigned for the presidency as a friend of Taiwan who rejected the “one China” formula and would seek to restore normal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Deng and his colleagues were deeply troubled when Reagan was elected in 1980. Although he continued to make remarks offensive to Beijing after his inauguration, testing Deng’s patience, Reagan did not take any steps in violation of agreements entered into by the Nixon and Carter administrations. His successive secretaries of state, Alexander Haig and George Shultz, persuaded him of the value of a good working relationship with the People’s Republic while the United States and China confronted the Soviet Union.

In 1984, Reagan traveled to China, was pleased with the encounter, and returned to Washington suggesting the Chinese leaders were not real communists. For the remainder of his presidency, relations between the United States and China thrived strategically, economically, and culturally. On the other hand, he never surrendered his concern for Taiwan and was determined to continue arms sales to the island.

## THE END OF THE COLD WAR

In 1989, George H.W. Bush succeeded Reagan as President of the United States. He had spent more than a year as American liaison officer in Beijing and believed he was well equipped to manage the relationship with China. The Cold War was rapidly coming to an end as Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev continued to alleviate tensions with the West, as he had in his negotiations with Reagan. Moscow’s retreat from the Soviet empire accelerated, and peaceful change came to Eastern Europe as nation after nation shed its communist leaders.

At a moment when many people around the world could imagine the spread of freedom and democracy across the globe, students led the call for reform in China. In May 1989 they occupied Tiananmen Square, the huge square that was the center of activity in Beijing. Similar demonstrations erupted in other Chinese cities. For several weeks Chinese leaders debated their response. Finally Deng chose to crush the demonstrators. On June 4, in Beijing soldiers drove the demonstrators out of the square, killing hundreds as they chased them into adjacent streets. Comparable massacres occurred in some other cities, such as Chengdu in Sichuan.

In the Soviet Union as well as in the United States and many other nations, the “Tiananmen massacre” shocked millions and generated a demand that Chinese leaders be punished. In Washington, pressure for sanctions was overwhelming. Bush, convinced that good relations with China were essential to America’s national security, agreed only reluctantly to sanctions—and soon sent his national security adviser on a secret mission to Beijing to assure Deng of his good will. When the American media and opinion leaders throughout the United States learned of that mission—and a subsequent one—Bush was accused of coddling the “Butchers of Beijing.” It was a charge that ultimately hurt him in his 1992 campaign for reelection.

By the end of 1989, the Cold War was over. The Berlin Wall, one of the great symbols of Soviet-American confrontation, had fallen. Communism was fast disappearing in Europe and in 1991 the Soviet Union itself ceased to exist. But in China, authoritarian rule by the Communist Party persisted. Deng’s

economic reforms were enormously successful and the country soon emerged as an economic powerhouse. Businessmen in the United States, much like those in Japan and elsewhere, clamored for the opportunity to buy, sell, and invest in China. Beijing recognized that it need not carry out political liberalization to be guaranteed an end to the most onerous sanctions—and it did not.

## AFTER THE COLD WAR

In the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, China's power and influence grew. Many analysts in the United States and other nations wrote of the "China threat." They feared that the rise of China would intimidate its neighbors, damage American interests in Asia, and destabilize the American-led international system. Others argued that as China's prosperity grew, it would inevitably be forced to liberalize politically, to become a middle-class democracy. Still others groped for a means to integrate China peacefully in the existing world system. In 2011, a democratic China seems unlikely, but hope persists that China's rise can be accommodated without conflict.

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