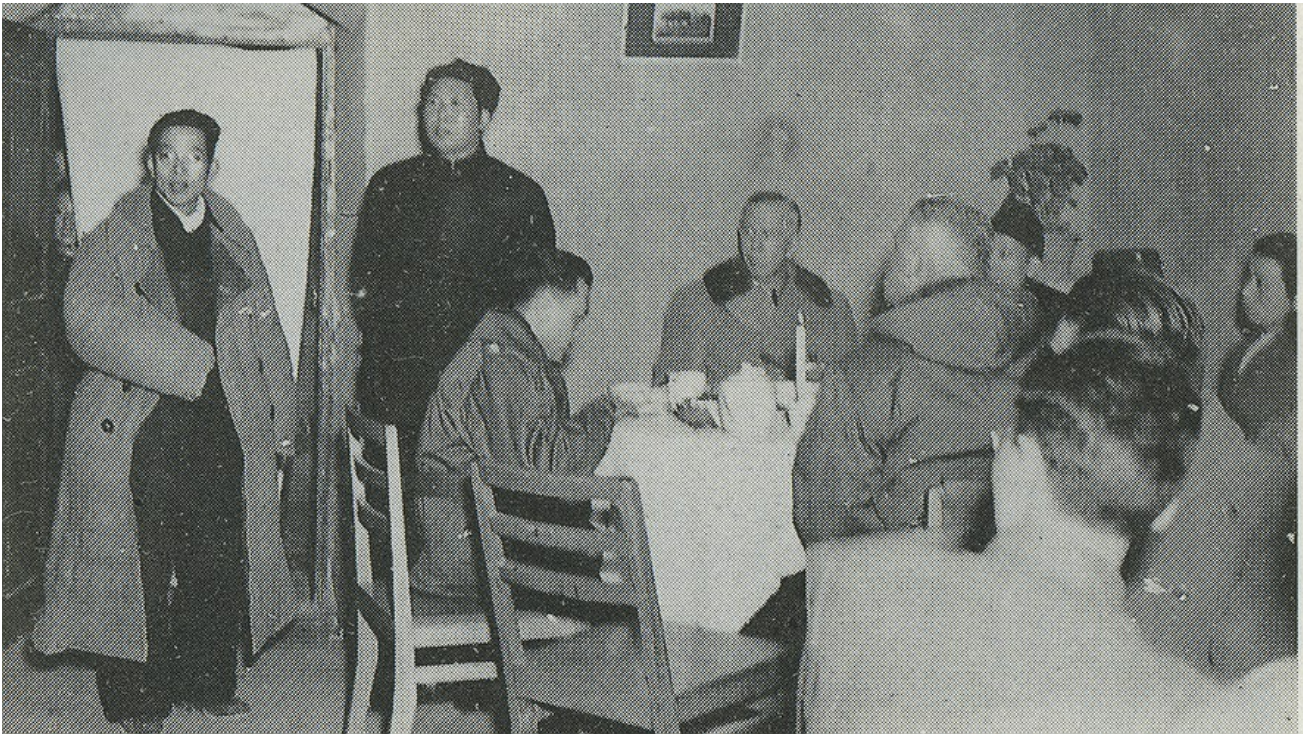


China and U.S. in the 20th Century, Part One: The Cold War Comes to Asia

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Word Count **1,030**

Level **1050L**



Communist leader Mao Zedong (second from left) at a meeting with U.S. General George Marshall in 1946 in China. Photo from Wikimedia Mao Zedong and U.S. General George Marshall meet in China, 1946. U.S. President Harry Truman sent General Marshall to China to try to make a peace agreement, which was unsuccessful. Photo: Wikimedia/Public Domain.

The first in a two-part series.

In the closing years of World War II, American leaders expected civil war to erupt in China. On one side were the nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek, and on the other were the Chinese Communists led by Mao Zedong. The two groups had put aside their disagreements to fight off Japanese invaders. But after the defeat of Japan it was clear that they were ready to battle again for control of China.

Initially, the United States tried to prevent a civil war. American officials mediated between the two sides in hopes of creating a shared government. When that effort failed, President Harry Truman sent General George C. Marshall to China to try to make a peace agreement.

Truman also wanted Marshall to learn about the Soviet Union's intentions in Manchuria and North China. He determined that the Soviet Union was uninterested in taking over Chinese territory.

Marshall failed to prevent war in China. Although American leaders hoped the nationalists would win, they did not believe China was important enough to get involved in its civil war.

People's Republic of China emerges

In 1949, the communists won the war and Chiang fled to Taiwan, a small island off the coast of mainland China. On October 1, Mao declared the existence of the People's Republic of China. He left little doubt that his country would side with the Soviet Union, the enemy of the United States.

Traditionally, the U.S. government recognized other governments, whether or not they liked the government if they showed control of their countries. The Truman administration intended to recognize the People's Republic in due course. Meanwhile, Chiang and the nationalists, still in Taiwan, claimed to be China's true government. Truman did not have a chance to recognize Mao's China because of the war that broke out in Korea in June 1950.

The Korean War began when North Korean communists, assisted by the Soviets, invaded South Korea. Washington decided to send ships to the Taiwan Strait. This was to prevent the war from spreading. In October 1950, the success of United Nations' (U.N.) troops in rolling back the North Korean advance provoked a massive Chinese attack. For a while, the U.N. troops were close to being driven off the Korean peninsula. They finally succeeded in holding back the Chinese at the southern port city of Pusan. From there they drove the Chinese back to the 38th parallel, the original boundary between North and South Korea.

The 38th Parallel divide

From spring 1951 to 1953, the two sides fought along 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. So did millions of Koreans, North and South, and thousands of U.N. troops. Once Chinese Communists were killing Americans, anger toward the Chinese increased in the United States. In this atmosphere, Chiang Kai-shek was able to win a new treaty of alliance that committed the United States to defend Taiwan.

In 1953, Dwight Eisenhower became president of the United States. He named John Foster Dulles as his secretary of state. The Eisenhower administration generally proved to be quite careful in foreign affairs. Although hostile to the Chinese communists, Eisenhower and Dulles were mistrustful of Chiang. They feared he would try to involve the United States in a war against the People's Republic that would enable him to regain control of mainland China. In response to his effort to seek a mutual defense agreement, they stalled, looking for a way to pacify Chiang without giving him what he wanted.

Hoping to prevent an alliance between Chiang and the United States, Mao ordered an attack on Quemoy and Matsu, islands in the Taiwan Strait controlled by Chiang's forces. Mao wanted to convince the Americans that an alliance with Chiang would be dangerous.

However, Mao's decision backfired. Eisenhower and Dulles did not want to appear to retreat under pressure. They accepted a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, hoping to prevent an attack by the Chinese communists.

Diplomatic pressure

The crisis put pressure on the United States to talk to representatives of the People's Republic. Diplomatic conversations began in 1955, but the talks broke down over the issue of Taiwan. The American side demanded the Chinese leave the Taiwan Strait alone. The Chinese side insisted that the "liberation" of Taiwan was a domestic issue, to be resolved by whatever means necessary.

Unhappy that the Americans did not want to continue the talks, Mao caused another crisis in the Strait in 1958. Dulles immediately warned that the United States would step in if Taiwan was threatened. A few weeks later, however, he publicly expressed doubt that Chiang's force could ever regain control of the mainland. Secretly, Dulles began to explore the possibility of recognizing Mao's government on the mainland while also continuing to recognize Chiang's government on Taiwan. This was called the "two Chinas policy." It was rejected by both Mao and Chiang.

Eisenhower argued that it was in the interest of the United States to have relations of some sort with the People's Republic of China. However, he also recognized that the domestic political context of the 1950s made this almost impossible. Peace with China would have to wait until the American political climate changed.

Cultural revolution takes hold

When John F. Kennedy was elected president, American supporters of Taiwan worried that Kennedy would try to improve relations with Mao's China. Kennedy, however, did not officially recognize the People's Republic. This was in spite of Kennedy's efforts to improve relations with Eastern Europe. We can never know whether Kennedy would have recognized Mao's regime had he not been killed. Many of Kennedy's aides argued that Kennedy did not take action because he worried how he would be viewed at home. He did not want to be seen as soft on communism.

When Lyndon Johnson entered the White House, he did not have such strong feelings about China. He tried to ease tensions with the People's Republic, but nothing came of it. Soon, Johnson was overwhelmed by war in Vietnam. The Chinese were too deeply involved in Mao's Cultural Revolution, his massive effort to reform China.

Quiz

- 1 Which paragraph in the section "People's Republic of China emerges" explains WHY the U.S. government got involved in the Korean War?

- 2 Which piece of evidence BEST explains one cause of the poor relationship between China and the United States?
 - (A) Traditionally, the U.S. government recognized other governments, whether or not they liked the government, if they showed control of their countries.
 - (B) Once Chinese Communists were killing Americans, anger toward the Chinese increased in the United States.
 - (C) Eisenhower argued that it was in the interest of the United States to have relations of some sort with the People's Republic of China.
 - (D) When John F. Kennedy was elected president, American supporters of Taiwan worried that Kennedy would try to improve relations with Mao's China.

- 3 Mao Zedong would be MOST likely to agree with which of the following statements?
 - (A) The United States should give China guidance on Taiwan.
 - (B) The United States should continue cooperating with Taiwan.
 - (C) Taiwan is a free country and is an ally of the Chinese government.
 - (D) Taiwan belongs to China and there is only one Chinese government.

- 4 What is the MOST important reason WHY Mao wanted the United States to stop supporting Taiwan?
 - (A) because he wanted to regain control of Taiwan
 - (B) because he wanted to give independence to Taiwan
 - (C) because he thought the United States was planning to invade China from Taiwan
 - (D) because he thought the United States was giving money and resources to Taiwan