

China and U.S. in the 20th Century, Part Two: Ending the Cold War

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Word Count **923**

Level **1020L**



U.S. President Richard Nixon (left) and Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai toast each other at the end of a banquet in the Great Hall of the People in Peking, China, on February 21, 1972. The dinner ended Nixon's first day on his visit to the People's Republic of China. Photo by: Bob Daugherty

The second in a two-part series

When Richard Nixon became president in 1969, most experts thought that he would not change U.S. policy toward China. Up until that point, the U.S. and the People's Republic of China, a communist country, had been hostile toward each other.

Nixon, however, had concluded that the policies against China no longer made sense. The People's Republic of China was here to stay, and some sort of relationship with it was in the interests of the United States. The United States was in the middle of a war in Vietnam. Ties with China might help Nixon end the war.

Also, Nixon hoped that the balance of power in the Cold War might shift in America's favor. At the time, the U.S and Soviet Union (now Russia), a communist country, were competing to be the most powerful country on Earth. The conflict was not an actual war but a threat of using nuclear weapons. In 1971, Henry Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, traveled to China to meet with Chinese leaders.

Nixon administration breaks the ice

The Americans knew Taiwan was the main problem for Chinese leaders. Both the People's Republic of China and the independent island nation of Taiwan claimed to be the real China. Up until that point, the U.S. recognized Taiwan. Kissinger showed that the United States was ready to change its mind. In return, he hoped the Chinese would push the Vietnamese into peace talks to end the Vietnam War. Nixon would be able to withdraw American forces from Vietnam without looking as if he surrendered. The U.S. also hoped that the Soviet Union would ease the Cold War if China and the U.S. cooperated.

Nixon flew to Beijing early in 1972 and met with Chairman Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. In the end, they agreed to open offices in each other's capital, which would act as embassies. Nixon also agreed to acknowledge that China's capital was in Beijing. Mainland China received China's seat in the United Nations, the organization whose role is global cooperation. Taiwan was expelled from the U.N.

In 1979, during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the U.S. recognized the People's Republic of China. Formal diplomatic relations were established between China and the United States. The Americans agreed to end its defense treaty with Taiwan, stop considering its government as the government of China, and reduce arms sales.

Congressional action upsets China

However, Congress undercut these agreements by taking strong action in favor of Taiwan. It passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which allowed continued business, cultural and other relations between the U.S. and Taiwan. It also told the U.S. government to give Taiwan whatever military aid it needed to defend itself. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was angered by the decision, which continued to trouble Chinese-American relations for many years.

Ronald Reagan campaigned for the presidency as a friend of Taiwan who would restore normal relations. Chinese leaders were concerned when Reagan was elected in 1980.

In 1984, Reagan traveled to China and returned to Washington saying the Chinese leaders were not real communists. For the rest of his presidency, relations between the United States and China thrived. On the other hand, Reagan's administration still supported Taiwan and continued selling weapons to the island.

In 1989, George H.W. Bush succeeded Reagan as president of the United States. He had spent more than a year as a U.S. official in Beijing and thought he knew China well. The Cold War was rapidly coming to an end, and peaceful change came to Eastern Europe as nations after nations got rid of its communist leaders.

Chinese demonstrations crushed

Many people began imagining the spread of freedom and democracy across the globe. In China, students led the call for change. In May 1989 they occupied Tiananmen Square, the huge square in Beijing. Similar demonstrations broke out in other Chinese cities. Finally, Deng chose to crush the demonstrators. On June 4 in Beijing, soldiers drove the demonstrators out of the square, killing hundreds. Similar massacres occurred in other cities.

The “Tiananmen massacre” shocked millions around the world, and people demanded that Chinese leaders be punished. In Washington, lawmakers wanted to put sanctions on China, to block it from doing business with U.S. companies. Bush was convinced that good relations with China were essential to America’s national security and agreed only reluctantly to sanctions.

China steps to the forefront

By the end of 1989, the Cold War was over. Communism was fast disappearing in Europe, and in 1991 the Soviet Union broke apart, into Russia and 14 other countries. But in China, authoritarian rule by the Communist Party persisted. Deng made economic reforms that were enormously successful, and the country soon became an economic powerhouse.

Businessmen in the United States, Japan and elsewhere rushed at the opportunity to buy, sell and invest in China.

In the 1990s and early years of the 2000s, China’s power and influence grew. Many experts in the United States and other nations feared that the rise of China would scare its neighbors and hurt American interests in Asia. Others argued that as China grew richer, it would be forced to become a democracy. Although a democratic China is unlikely, hope persists that China’s rise will not cause conflict.

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Quiz

- 1 Which section of the article highlights the idea that there were people living in China who did not like communism?
 - (A) Introduction [paragraphs 1-3]
 - (B) "Nixon administration breaks the ice"
 - (C) "Chinese demonstrations crushed"
 - (D) "China steps to the forefront"

- 2 Which paragraph in the section "Congressional action upsets China" describes an action that improved the relationship between China and the United States?

- 3 What is the MAIN reason why the author included the section "China steps to the forefront"?
 - (A) to explain why the Soviet Union broke apart after the Cold War and divided into numerous countries
 - (B) to compare communism in Europe before the Cold War, with communism in Europe after the Cold War ended
 - (C) to show that the Soviet Union was able to continue its communist government after the Cold War ended
 - (D) to describe economic changes that China made after the Cold War and the effects of those changes

- 4 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3]. What purpose does the introduction serve in developing the MAIN idea of the article?
 - (A) It shows that there were reasons to improve the hostile relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China.
 - (B) It reveals the methods used by President Nixon to change U.S. policy toward China.
 - (C) It describes some effects of the Cold War that had existed for some time between the United States and the Soviet Union.
 - (D) It introduces the idea that the People's Republic of China was less powerful than the Soviet Union.