

A FRAGILE RELATIONSHIP



The
United States
and China
since 1972

Harry Harding

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China since 1972

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FOREWORD

PRESIDENT Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in February 1972 marked the beginning of a new era in Sino-American relations. For the first time since the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949, the two countries established high-level official contacts and moved their relationship from confrontation toward collaboration. Over the subsequent twenty years, however, U.S.-China relations have experienced cycles of progress and stalemate, crisis and consolidation. The tensions over the tragic events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 are the most recent and disruptive example, but they have their precedents in the crisis over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in 1981-82, and in the stalemate in Sino-American relations in the mid-1970s. Paradoxically, although the political, economic, and cultural ties between the two countries are vastly more extensive today than they were two decades ago, the overall relationship remains highly fragile.

This book is one of the first comprehensive surveys of the U.S.-China relationship during this tumultuous period. In it, Harry Harding, a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies program at Brookings, proceeds chronologically from the initial breakthrough of the early 1970s to the deadlock of today. The book demonstrates how the revolutionary changes in the international environment, the dramatic domestic developments in both mainland China and Taiwan, and the transformation of American economic and political life in the last decades of the cold war have provided a less and less supportive context for Sino-American relations. It also addresses the evolution of each society's perceptions of the other, showing how conflict over such substantive problems as Taiwan, regional security, and human rights has been exacerbated by shifts of mood from euphoria to disillusionment and back.

Harding believes that a return to the economic partnership of the 1980s, let alone to the strategic alignment of the 1970s, is less likely than continued tension or even confrontation between Washington and Peking over trade, human rights, and the proliferation of advanced weapons. But he also explains the importance of maintaining a working relationship with China and avoiding a return to the hostility and estrangement of the 1950s and 1960s. His principal recommendation is that the two countries let go of their outmoded

dream of a "special" relationship and work toward achieving a "normal" one.

An earlier draft of this book was reviewed by two study groups that met at Brookings in the spring of 1991. The first was composed of leading American scholars and policymakers interested in China, including Doak Barnett, Mary Brown Bullock, Richard Bush, Ralph Clough, Thomasingar, Carol Lee Hamrin, John Holdridge, Arthur Hummel, Lonnie Keene, Richard Kessler, Paul Kreisberg, Thomas Robinson, Alan Romberg, Roger Sullivan, Robert Sutter, Kent Wiedemann, and Eden Woon. That core group was joined in its final session by Alton Frye, Jim Hamilton, Jim Mann, Robert McNamara, Douglas Paal, Edward Ross, Harold Saunders, and Daniel Southerland. The second study group was made up of Chinese scholars of Sino-American relations then in the United States, including Ding Xinghao, Hao Yufan, He Di, Huan Guocang, Jia Qingguo, Tong Yanqi, Wang Jisi, Zhai Zhihai, and Zhu Hongqian. The author thanks all of these colleagues for taking the time to provide extensive and thoughtful comments on his manuscript.

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January 1992
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Overview

ON February 21, 1972, Richard M. Nixon, thirty-seventh president of the United States, emerged from the door of Air Force One and began walking down the ramp to the tarmac of Peking's Capital Airport. At Nixon's orders, an aide blocked the aisle of the plane to prevent other officials from following too closely.¹ Merely by stepping onto Chinese soil, the president would change the global balance of power in America's favor, helping to extract the United States honorably from Vietnam and to promote the prospects for détente with the Soviet Union. Nixon had determined that such an achievement was not to be shared with others.

Waiting for Nixon at the bottom of the ramp was Zhou Enlai, the only man ever to serve as prime minister of the People's Republic of China since its establishment in 1949. For Zhou, too, this was a pregnant occasion. Ever since his government had been created, the United States had refused to formally acknowledge its existence. There had been sporadic ambassadorial-level contacts but nothing higher. The United States had embargoed all trade with China and persistently worked to exclude it from the United Nations. The arrival of the president of the United States acknowledged the failure of that strategy and thus was a vindication of Zhou, his government, and the entire Chinese Communist movement.

Nixon, having noticed Zhou clapping lightly and remembering that polite Chinese always return applause, began clapping his hands as he descended the steps of his plane. When he saw that none of the other Chinese officials waiting for him on the tarmac were applauding, he stopped, and although still quite far from the bottom of the ramp, extended his hand toward Zhou Enlai. When he reached the ground, he grasped Zhou's hand for a bit longer than usual. By demonstrating, clearly and dramatically, his willingness to shake hands with the Chinese premier, Nixon meant to compensate for John Foster Dulles's pointed refusal to do so at the Geneva Confer-

ence on Indochina in 1954, a slight that a wounded Zhou had always resented.²

Despite the gratification that both men must have felt at their first encounter, the moment was still awkward. Extensive advance work for the visit, including lengthy meetings between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, had given the Americans little confidence about how Nixon would actually be received in China. Kissinger had fretted over the danger that, in the end, the Chinese might fall victim to the temptation to humiliate the president. Back home, according to one poll, a plurality of the public worried that Nixon might be "fooled and trapped" by visiting China.³

At first, these apprehensions seemed vindicated. The arrival ceremonies were scheduled so that they could be televised live in prime time in the United States. And yet, to the dismay of the American advance men, there were no crowds of Chinese gathered at the airport to greet the president. There was only a Chinese military honor guard—larger than usual, to be sure, but still according a welcome that Kissinger described as "stark to the point of austerity."⁴ The ride from the airport through the heart of Peking to the Diaoyutai Guest House also disappointed the Americans. The Chinese not only had failed to turn out any crowds to welcome the president but had actually kept curious onlookers well away from the motorcade route. There were none of the "photogenic Chinese multitudes" that Nixon's staff had hoped to show television viewers in the United States.⁵ Moreover, to the chagrin of his Secret Service detail, the president was forced to ride in the premier's Red Flag limousine rather than in a car from the White House fleet sent over for the occasion, for the Chinese refused to allow Nixon to use an American car when riding with Zhou Enlai.⁶

The awkwardness that imbued such a momentous occasion reflected the enormous gaps that separated the two countries in 1972. All along China's eastern periphery were traces of an American military presence, aimed one way or another at containing China's influence. Chinese and American military officers still met at meetings of the armistice commission at Panmunjom, witnesses to the inconclusive war the two nations had fought on the Korean peninsula twenty years before. The United States maintained diplomatic relations and a security treaty with the Nationalist government in Taipei, the rival regime that the Communists had forced into exile in 1949, and which still issued periodic calls to recover the mainland. American troops were still stationed on Taiwan, in part to deter a potential Communist assault. Further to the south, in Vietnam, the

United States was waging war against one of China's allies: American planes were bombing Chinese troop concentrations and supply routes, while Chinese antiaircraft batteries were firing back at them.

Gaps in history and culture also separated the two countries. The United States was the world's richest capitalist country; China, one of the world's poorest Communist states. More than any other Western nation, America embodied concepts of individual liberty, political pluralism, and economic opportunity alien to China. China was just past the high-water mark of its Cultural Revolution, a utopian yet futile effort to inculcate its population with the ideals of collectivism, asceticism, and continuous class struggle. The Chinese still vividly remembered the encroachment of Western imperialism in the nineteenth century and regarded the United States as one of the principal beneficiaries of economic and political privilege in China. Many Americans perceived China as an aggressive and irrational power whose support for revolutionary movements around the world made it an even more dangerous adversary than the Soviet Union.

Nor was there yet a firm consensus in either country on the wisdom of a mutual accommodation. In China, whose leaders were increasingly embroiled in an intense struggle over the coming succession to Mao Zedong, two principal political factions—one composed primarily of military officers, the other of radical civilian leaders—were opposed to any opening to the United States, questioning America's intentions and doubting its sincerity. According to some later Chinese accounts, the restrained greeting at the Peking airport reflected the insistence of some of those leaders that it would be wrong to conduct "propaganda for Nixon" on Chinese soil.⁷ In the United States, two previous administrations had resisted proposals to broaden contacts with China for fear of a storm of domestic opposition, especially from conservative anti-Communists with strong ties to Taiwan. In 1967, just two years before Nixon came into office, more than 90 percent of the American public held unfavorable images of China, and about 70 percent saw China as the greatest threat to the security of the United States.⁸

And yet, despite the gaps between the two countries and the awkwardness of the first few hours of the Nixon visit, the president's stay in China proceeded remarkably smoothly. Within hours of his arrival at the state guest house at Diaoyutai, the president was summoned to a meeting with Mao Zedong, where the chairman announced that he "liked rightists" and was pleased to deal with the leading representative of American conservatives.⁹ Perhaps to their mutual surprise, the two leaders, both of whom had international

reputations as committed opponents of each other's political philosophy, found that their ideological differences would have little relevance to the conduct of their relationship. Whatever their public postures, Mao and Nixon were practitioners of *realpolitik* and, as such, wanted to engage in an accommodation if they could identify areas of common interest.

The shared interest that brought the two countries together was their apprehension about the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had, under Leonid Brezhnev, undertaken a sustained expansion of its military power, conventional and nuclear. Much of that power was being deployed along the Sino-Soviet frontier, in ways that posed a direct threat to the security of China. At the same time, the Soviet Union was clearly gaining an advantageous position in the global balance against the United States, whose will to continue the rivalry was being steadily sapped by the inconclusive war in Vietnam.

Such circumstances provided a compelling motive for a rapprochement between the United States and China. At a maximum, the two countries could find ways of coordinating their strategic postures, or even pooling some of their military assets, in a united front against Soviet expansion. At a minimum, ending the Sino-American confrontation would mean that neither the United States nor China would have to be worried about a two-front war. Instead, that burden would be shifted to their adversaries in the Kremlin. Thus, simply by shaking hands at the Peking airport, Zhou Enlai and Richard Nixon had fundamentally altered the contours of global geopolitics. From a strategic perspective, it was indeed, as Nixon would later claim, "the week that changed the world."¹⁰

Although less prominent than containing Soviet expansionism, a second common interest was bringing the United States and China closer together. Chinese leaders, including Mao, were more and more interested in resuming the economic and cultural ties with the United States that had been suspended since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Unlike their successors, Mao and Zhou were not prepared to see China fully integrated into the world economy, let alone to launch a program of vigorous economic reform. But they had determined that their country should end the self-imposed isolation of the Cultural Revolution and turn outward again to acquire the foreign technology necessary for China's economic modernization. An improved relationship with the United States would be an important part of this strategy, not only because it would be a prerequisite for the purchase of advanced American equipment, but also because it would facilitate the import of similar technology from American allies in Western Europe and Japan.

Many in the United States were also aware of the advantages of renewing cultural and economic ties with China. Scholars, missionaries, and ordinary tourists had long been fascinated by China and would welcome the opportunities to teach, study, preach, and travel there. American business would benefit from regaining access to a market that, at its peak in 1946, accounted for 5 percent of total American exports.¹¹ Although not a part of Henry Kissinger's calculations in planning the opening to China, these considerations would help gain domestic support for the reorientation of American China policy that he and Nixon envisioned.

Thus, when Nixon met Zhou Enlai at the foot of the ramp to Air Force One in February 1972, their encounter reflected the vast differences between the two countries and the potential rewards from a more cooperative relationship. This complex blend of common and competitive interests, memories of a rancorous past, and hopes for a more favorable future provided an uncertain footing for the new ties that the two leaders were inaugurating. What kind of relationship could be built on such unsteady ground and how enduring would it be?

TWENTY YEARS' EVOLUTION

An oscillating pattern of progress and stagnation, crisis and consolidation has characterized the relationship between China and the United States during the past twenty years. The Kissinger and Nixon visits of 1971 and 1972 constituted the initial breakthrough, transforming the U.S.-China relationship from confrontation to collaboration and reestablishing high-level official contacts for the first time since 1949. On this basis, it was possible to expand economic and cultural ties between the two countries, although they were hampered by the absence of formal diplomatic relations and the relatively closed nature of late Maoist China. Trade grew rapidly, but direct American investment in China was still impossible. Exchanges of short-term cultural and academic delegations also grew quickly, but there were as yet no avenues for scholars, journalists, or students to spend extended periods in either country.

The inability of the Nixon and Ford administrations to complete the normalization of diplomatic relations, together with their interest in pursuing détente with the Soviet Union, introduced severe strains into the Sino-American relationship in the mid-1970s. So did the resurgence of radicalism in Chinese domestic and foreign policies in 1975 and 1976, as the Gang of Four made their final bid to remove

more moderate adversaries in the struggle to succeed Mao Zedong. Trade and cultural exchanges diminished and high-level contact became more contentious. By 1976, the initial advance in U.S.-China relations had given way to a sense of stagnation.

The establishment of formal diplomatic ties between the two countries at the end of 1978 marked the revival of a relationship in decline. The normalization of Sino-American relations was made possible by the emergence of new leaders in Peking and Washington who possessed the flexibility and commitment to strike a bargain that could push the relationship forward. In the United States, the Carter administration had enough political capital to agree to terminate official relations with Taiwan, remove American forces from the island, and end the mutual defense treaty with Taipei, thus meeting China's conditions for the establishment of official relations. In China, Deng Xiaoping had consolidated his political position sufficiently to tolerate the continuation of an extensive unofficial American relationship with Taiwan that would include an ongoing program of U.S. arms sales to the island.

This compromise attracted criticism in both countries. The terms of normalization were denounced by many in Congress, which added language to the Taiwan Relations Act reiterating an American commitment to the security of Taiwan. The Taiwan Relations Act, in turn, was condemned by many Chinese as a betrayal of the agreement on the normalization of Sino-American relations. But despite the criticism, the deal struck by Carter and Deng remained in effect.

With normalization complete, Sino-American relations entered their second cycle of progress and stalemate. Cultural, economic, and strategic ties scored steady breakthroughs between 1978 and 1980: the first wave of Chinese students and scholars, the first direct air links between the two countries, the first American commercial tourists, the first dispatches by American correspondents permanently stationed in Peking, the establishment of the first American joint ventures in China, the first exchanges of military delegations, and so on. The eagerness with which citizens of each country approached each other, and the unanticipated speed with which Sino-American relations expanded, produced a mood of excitement and elation on both sides of the Pacific.

Then came disenchantment, as each country backed away from the other's embrace. During the presidential race of 1980, Ronald Reagan declared his desire to restore some officiality to American relations with Taipei, a big departure from the concessions on the Taiwan issue that had been made by the Carter administration at