

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Observing US-China Relations Since the Start of the Reform Era

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9np320nm>

Journal

East Asian Studies: China and Its Neighboring Regions, Vol. 57, No. 1, pp. 1-6

Author

O'Brien, Kevin

Publication Date

2026-07-20

DOI

10.30402/EAS.202606_57(1).0001

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Observing US-China Relations Since the Start of the Reform Era

Kevin J. O'Brien

University of California, Berkeley

Jack M. Forcey Professor
of Political Science

When I enrolled in a Ph.D. program 47 years ago, it was a hopeful time. The Third Plenum, which initiated the “reform and opening” (*gaige kaifang*) era, had occurred the previous December, and China and the United States had established full diplomatic relations nine months before on January 1, 1979. Today’s competitive relationship between two superpowers was inconceivable in the heady years after Deng Xiaoping visited Texas and was photographed wearing a cowboy hat. Instead, it was a time when thousands of young Americans were flocking to study China to learn about a new frontier: a country that evoked the American West in the 1800s, with an exciting future to be explored and a leadership that had an urgent desire to rejoin the wider world after a long period of isolation.

Consider how much has changed over the last 47 years. China is immensely wealthier and stronger than it was in 1979. The Communist Party is more confident and less focused on learning from the West, as it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Terms American policymakers often repeated, such as China was becoming a “responsible stakeholder,”¹ or that American China scholars coined, such as China was “playing our game,”² no longer have much purchase. China is making its own way, and even if the leadership is not exporting a “China model,” it is taking a distinctly Chinese path to be a modern, industrial, urbanized country.

The United States has changed, too. In 1979, following two oil crises, high inflation, and Jimmy Carter’s “malaise speech,”³ American was not an overly confident nation. But it was still riding high in the world, and the nation’s leaders and populace would only become more convinced that the US was a “shining city on the

¹ Robert B. Zoellick, 2005, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” Remarks to the *National Committee on U.S.-China Relations*, New York, NY. September 21. It is an irony that in the era of Donald Trump, China has a better claim to be a responsible stakeholder than the United States.

² Edward S. Steinfeld, 2010, *Playing Our Game: Why China’s Rise Doesn’t Threaten the West*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³ Jimmy Carter, 1979, “Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals,” July 15.

hill” after the collapse of the Soviet empire and the Soviet Union itself in the early 1990s. Although most American scholars never accepted Frances Fukuyama’s “end of history” argument⁴ or thought that village elections in China would trickle up and turn China into a liberal democracy,⁵ there was a widespread belief that world history was moving in America’s direction.

By the mid-2010s, this view was open to question. That Donald Trump’s first inauguration speech in 2017 referred to American carnage, cities beset with crime, factories closing, and a political elite out of touch with Americans who had been left behind made it clear that the US was at sea, both domestically and internationally. Despite Trump’s efforts to bully other countries and his penchant for starting wars, America is relatively weaker than it was at the end of the Cold War, increasingly isolated in the world, and appears to be learning from authoritarian countries rather than serving as a model of democracy. Cries of “America First” and its 1930s echoes of fascism sounded strange when they first reappeared, but now are a mainstream, acceptable view to hold. Combined with democratic backsliding around the globe, several misguided wars, and the rise of China, it is evident that the unipolar era has ended, America has experienced relative if not absolute decline, and Americans are struggling to adjust to their new place in the world.

This makes how the US and China get along one of the key issues of the current period. China may not consider itself a superpower, but the rest of the world does. And Americans may resist the idea that there is another civilization and political system based on different assumptions and principles vying for global influence, but there is. Does this mean Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations”⁶ is inevitable? I would like to think not, though the US is not doing everything it can to avoid a clash and neither is China.

On the US side, unhelpful developments include a former deputy national security adviser and a former Republican congressman declaring that a new cold war is underway and that America must figure out how to win it.⁷ In early 2025, Donald Trump also launched a trade war in which tariffs were eventually reduced from absurd levels that amounted to an embargo, but are likely to remain historically high. At the same time, both sides have established export controls, which come and go as negotiations proceed well or poorly. In the United States, it is no longer controversial

⁴ Francis Fukuyama, 1989, “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, 16 :3–18.

⁵ Daniel Kelliher, 1997, “The Chinese Debate Over Village Self-Government,” *China Journal*, 37, January: 63-86; Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, 2000, “Accommodating ‘Democracy’ in a One-Party State: Introducing Village Elections in China,” *China Quarterly*, 162, June: 465-489.

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, 1993, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3) (Summer): 22-49.

⁷ Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher, 2024, “No Substitute for Victory: America’s Competition with China Must Be Won, Not Managed,” *Foreign Affairs*, 103(3) (May/June): 25-39.

for policymakers to declare that China's rise must be slowed or halted—thereby providing support for an accusation commonly made in Chinese foreign policy circles.

China is also failing to do all it can to avoid conflict. Its alignment with Russia after the invasion of Ukraine and its aggressive actions in the South China Sea have been major irritants in the bilateral relationship. Chinese diplomats and scholars often argue that Russia-leaning neutrality is compatible with China's long-standing respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, and that the nine-dash line is more than a fig leaf for island-building and turning the South China Sea into a Chinese lake, but many in the United States are not persuaded by these claims. With respect to Ukraine, ample evidence points to China undermining sanctions and propping up Russia and its military, thus contributing to instability in Europe. On the South China Sea, critiques center on China interfering with freedom of navigation and threatening US regional allies, including Japan and Korea. China has also been targeting America's telecommunications networks, intellectual property, and electrical and water utilities in an ongoing campaign of cyberattacks.

Given these irritants on both sides, are the two countries on a path toward conflict, military or otherwise? Or a slightly better scenario: is this era reminiscent of US-Soviet relations circa 1952, and the best that can be hoped for is simmering hostility between the world's two superpowers for the indefinite future?

With some effort, these outcomes can be avoided. Trade relations have knitted together the US and China in a way that the US and USSR never enjoyed, and even with both countries onshoring or friend-shoring their hi-tech industries, it is difficult to imagine a complete decoupling or trade withering away. Tariff levels may be reduced after Trump leaves office, and there are also many issues on which the US and China have common interests, from combating international terrorism to nuclear non-proliferation to restraining North Korea and keeping the Strait of Hormuz open.

But common interests do not guarantee smooth relations and cooperation. Solar panel imports remain a fraction of their past level, and Chinese electric vehicles are effectively barred from entering the US. It appears that for some time to come the US will pursue industrial policy and seek to rebuild its domestic capacity. Likewise, with the highest-end semiconductor chips and other tech exports to China. Despite Donald Trump's December 2025 decision to permit the export of a powerful Nvidia chip, the next decade will likely see more restrictions rather than fewer. China will have little choice but to learn to live with less reliance on the United States for technology and markets, and there are signs it is doing this via increased outreach to Europe and maintaining a robust presence in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. China is also endeavoring to develop a homegrown chip-fabricating capacity that could one day rival TSMC's.

On the Chinese side, programs such as “Made in China 2025” will continue, as China seeks to become less dependent on foreign technology. China will continue to subsidize its leading companies and compete with the US for markets and influence worldwide, especially in the Global South. The US will need to learn to live with a rising economic superpower, and the best approach is to compete better, rather than to seek to block China’s rise. After this awkward period of adjustment and the unpredictable Trump administration, both countries may come to accept that the other is a proud, capable, and worthy economic competitor, where there are certain win-win outcomes, but other areas where both countries must do better on their own if they are to prosper and peace is to be maintained. When I first heard about the “Made in China 2025” program, my initial reaction was: robotics, nanotechnology, EVs, 5G, a smart electrical grid—that is exactly what the United States should focus on, too. The US and China will continue to do what is in their best interest, and though trade and globalization may not recover to the level it was soon, economic coexistence, with each side gradually learning to have reasonable expectations of the other, is possible. This awareness does not exist now, and the current trend is in the opposite direction, but within a decade or two it could develop.

Security issues are a knottier problem, and unexpected incidents or a steady growth of tensions could lead to conflict. American views on Taiwan have evolved. Public opinion polls from the Chicago Council of Global Affairs and the Pew Research Center show that about 2/3 of Americans have a favorable view of Taiwan and the same number believe that the US security relationship with Taiwan strengthens US security.⁸ It remains unclear whether America would go to war over Taiwan, but support for a vibrant democracy that has a lively civil society and deep respect for human rights, which also is an important supplier of the most advanced semiconductors, is unlikely to dissipate. The US has more at stake in Taiwan than it does in Ukraine, although it would likely struggle to build a coalition to oppose China in the way it joined with most of Europe to defend Ukraine after the Russian invasion. If China were to put more pressure on Taiwan, it could destabilize the world. Trump’s views on Taiwan are difficult to decipher. In his first term, his administration had a number of pro-Taiwan advisers, but his transactional, personalistic approach to politics could lead to deals with Xi Jinping that are much more favorable to China than to Taiwan. Trump has proven to

⁸ Christine Huang and Laura Clancy, “Taiwan Seen More Favorably Than Not Across 24 Countries,” available at *Pew Research Center*, August 11, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/08/11/taiwan-seen-more-favorably-than-not-across-24-countries/> Accessed on April 24, 2026; Craig Kafura, “Two-Thirds of Americans Think US-Taiwan Relations Bolster US-Security,” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*, November 15, 2023, https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/two-thirds-americans-think-us-taiwan-relations-bolster-us-security?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=15638830524&gbraid=0AAAAADCQMXys6tnn5pXdo_mjbe1faZDzl4&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIxe7cpvflIAMV19EWBR3R6CwEEAAYASAAEgKHH_D_BwE. Accessed on April 24, 2026.

be susceptible to flattery and manipulation, and there is limited evidence that his advisers would point out that Xi is getting the better of him if tensions flared over Taiwan. As with tariffs, Trump has also shown a proclivity to back down when quick victories prove elusive. His notion that great powers should rule the world and divide it up among themselves suggests he could sell out Taiwan, much as he has been inclined to accept and promote Russian claims about Ukraine. The toppling of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela highlighted the prospect of a return to spheres of influence, where Russia, China and the US have their own backyards and can operate largely free of constraint in them.

On the US side, some outmoded ideas need to be reconsidered if America and China are to coexist peaceably. The US, for example, cannot believe that it is America's right to have the only powerful navy in Asia, or be alarmed that China is putting increased funding into its military. The period in the 1970s and 1980s when national defense was essentially the fourth of China's "four modernizations" are over, and US policymakers cannot be surprised that an economic powerhouse seeks to extend its power internationally. The US will have to live with a stronger, internationally more prominent China in the Global South and elsewhere, even if it draws red lines such as further expansion in the South China Sea.

This is happening to a degree already. China is supporting the Russian war effort in Ukraine, from buying oil to providing an economic lifeline through trade to providing materials for weapons. And the US response has been muted. This is a positive sign if the goal is to coexist with a country that makes decisions you do not agree with but must learn to live with. Likewise, with China slowing the pace of political reform and repudiating democratization, however unfortunate that is. That is the way it is. More controversially, human rights is not the issue it once was, especially with Trump in power, but possibly afterward too. Despite the justified criticism of China for its policy toward Uyghurs and the mildest of dissidents, there is a growing awareness that China is unmoved by outside pressure on core issues. On the Chinese side, China has shown signs of learning to live with the US alliance structure in Asia, better relations between Japan and Korea, some export controls, and Western supply chain diversification away from China. For peaceful coexistence, these are encouraging developments.

There are thus reasons to be optimistic about the long term, if not the next decade, though even in the short term Biden and Xi spoke in San Francisco about increasing people-to-people exchanges, strengthening military-to-military communication, AI, fentanyl, and climate change. Trump and Xi also made some headway at the May 2026 Beijing summit on Chinese purchases of American farm goods and Boeing airplanes, and creating Boards of Trade and Investment, even if no agreements were signed and little appeared to be accomplished on ending the war in Iran, intellectual property theft,

or formally extending the trade truce. Strong Chinese cautions about supporting Taiwan received ambiguous responses from a president who would not say if the US would defend Taiwan if it was attacked and who, on Air Force One afterward, spoke of the island democracy as a negotiating chip and said he had not decided whether to approve a long-delayed \$14 billion arms deal. Xi also succeeded in being treated as Trump's peer on the world stage and showcasing China's role as an established first-tier power that the US deals with on an equal footing. Under Trump, tariffs have swamped other elements of the relationship, but even there, the ludicrously high tariffs have been rolled back, export controls on rare earths and chips have been tempered, and it is possible to imagine a world where limited but meaningful cooperation occurs.

What can scholars do to promote better US-China relations? Speaking truth to power overstates the importance of academics, but speaking truth to the consensus is a realistic aim. Over the last 47 years, I have not moved greatly on my views on China, so when US political elites and journalists were imagining that China would become a democracy I thought not, and now when so many Americans believe that China is an enemy, I believe that we must understand where China is coming from: what its perspective is when officials in Washington, for example, proclaim that China is an expansionist Marxist-Leninist state that is seeking to enlarge its empire.⁹ It is important to appreciate how China understands the US Secretary of the Navy's statement that the US expects to maintain dominance across the seven seas.¹⁰ Before calling China ideological, Americans should think about whether the US is ideological or at least perceived to be. And China must also try to understand the US on its own terms if its leaders are to understand why the US does what it does, and how many domestic and foreign policies are not directed at holding China down. This is a time that we need more thinking about coexistence and fewer stereotypical views of the other country as an implacable foe.

⁹ Mike Pompeo, "Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum: "Communist China and the Free World's Future," Speech at the *Richard Nixon Presidential Library*, July 23, 2020, available at <https://2017-2021-translations.state.gov/2020/07/23/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-at-the-richard-nixon-presidential-library-and-museum-communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future/> Accessed on April 24, 2026.

¹⁰ America's Navy, "SecNav Delivers Remarks at the National Press Club," February 21, 2023, available at <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Speeches/display-speech/Article/3304431/secnav-delivers-remarks-at-the-national-press-club/> Accessed on April 24, 2026.