

Nixon's Trip: Establishing US-China Relations

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President Richard Nixon's trip to the People's Republic of China in February, 1972 marked the formal establishment of normal relations between the United States and China, and can be arguably considered one of the most significant moments in modern world affairs. It was not just significant as the first ever visit of an American President to China, but it also signaled the end of a quarter-century of hostilities between communist China and the United States. The new relationship marked the beginning of a sizable shift in the Cold War arena, and brought China into the international community. The relationship between the two powers continues to play a major role in the current climate, so understanding its establishment is vital.

China had a tense relationship with the West throughout the 19th century. Western imperialism contributed to the eventual disintegration of the Qing dynasty and left China on the brink of collapse. During the ensuing civil war, the US backed the Nationalist faction against the Communists. By 1949, the Chinese Communists were victorious and gained control of mainland China, establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) while the Nationalists retreated to Taiwan and established the Republic of China there.

The relationship between the PRC and the United States was hostile from its inception. They were ideologically opposed, and the US [continued to support](#) the Nationalist government in Taiwan which claimed sovereignty over the entire county. The US also attempted to keep the PRC out of the United Nations and other international forums. The two countries were on opposite sides of the Korean and Vietnam wars, with China supplying arms and troops to communist forces and the US supporting the anti-communist factions.

Shifting dynamics in both countries created the opportunity for normalized relations. The Soviet Union and China split over ideological and geopolitical differences, and the Communist bloc appeared to be crumbling as the two states turned against each other. As the 1960s progressed, China found itself isolated; it was threatened by the Soviet Union, India, and large American deployments across Asia. The ongoing [Cultural Revolution](#) had also pushed China into turmoil and instability. The United States was also vulnerable on the global stage. It had been involved in the Vietnam War for almost two decades which had been largely unsuccessful, as well as unpopular both at home and abroad. It had damaged the United States' perception on the global stage, and worried allies. China was an important actor in the Vietnam war, and building relations would aid American interests in the region. President Nixon also believed the Soviet Union was the primary enemy, and the U.S should capitalize on the Sino-Soviet divide by establishing closer ties with China to weaken Soviet influence in Asia. Both leaders in China and the United States began expressing a desire for normalized relations, but the road to reconciliation was delicate and complicated. Various diplomatic overtures were made from both sides through intermediaries such as France and Pakistan. Pakistan also arranged the [secret visit](#) of the U.S National Security advisor, Henry Kissinger to Beijing for his meeting with Chinese Premier, Chou Enlai in July 1971, where they agreed that President Nixon would visit China in the following year.

Normalized relations with China faced considerable opposition at home and from American allies. US allies were distrustful of communist China and felt the United States was abandoning Taiwan. [Anti-communist Republicans](#) provided internal opposition, and Nixon faced considerable pressure from both Democrats and the press, who felt that Nixon was betraying America's close allies like [Taiwan](#). Despite the opposition, Nixon and his administration pushed through the China trip and tried to manage the image they presented at home and [abroad](#). Nixon felt that establishing closer ties with the People's Republic of China would shift the balance of the Cold War in Asia and [help to further American interests globally](#). This hypothesis proved to be correct, and the opening of relations had three immediate impacts:

1. Chinese support aided America's position during the Vietnamese peace negotiations. Because of the damage done to the US's image (domestically and abroad), a swift but 'honorable' exit to the conflict was crucial. China had been a principal ally of the North Vietnamese, and was able to pressure the North Vietnamese to come to the negotiating table. China also virtually ended military support for North Vietnam in 1973.
2. China also worked with the US in Korea, even though both powers continued to support opposing sides in the Korean war. The United States had clear objectives in that region, as it wanted "to bring about stability in the peninsula, avert war and lessen the danger of the expansion of other powers", and Chou Enlai "in effect" accepted these aims and objectives during his [meeting](#) with Kissinger.
3. The most important benefit for both countries from the new relationship was increased leverage against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had been increasing in military strength by acquiring advanced nuclear weaponry. It was also becoming more aggressive, and adopted the [Brezhnev doctrine](#) which justified military interventions in Central and Eastern Europe. Together, China and the US worked against Soviet expansion and influence over Asia and the Communist bloc which remained split between the Chinese and the Soviets.

The normalization of relations between these two countries in 1972 had major long-term reverberations. China, the most populous nation in the world, was brought into the international system and began playing a major role in the international community. The long-term economic [relationship](#) between China and the United States also grew out of this establishment, which continues to shape their respective economies to the present day.