

Contemporary Contentions

In the 18th and 19th Century, the economic and diplomatic relationships between the United States and China developed, and although far from perfect, tied the U.S. and China inextricably close. They were forever changed in 1949 with the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Ousting the previous U.S.-backed government, the CCP transformed the country into a communist state, turning the new People's Republic of China into an adversary of the United States during the Cold War. A slow process of normalization of relations began in 1972 when President Richard Nixon visited China amidst China's worsening relationship with the Soviet Union.¹ Both countries declared their mutual opposition to a single superpower in Asia, a steppingstone towards further cooperation.² In 1979 under President Jimmy Carter, the US diplomatically recognized the People's Republic of China and adopted the "One China Policy," recognizing the CCP as the sole governing body of China and rejecting the former government exiled in Taiwan.

Until the end of the 20th Century, U.S.-China relationships were centered around mutual economic interests. As major trading partners, the two countries' economies became increasingly intertwined. The United States helped propel Chinese participation in global economic bodies by granting China permanent normal trade relations that paved the way for China's membership in the World Trade Organization in 2001.³ These factors helped foster the rapid industrial growth, economic power, and global influence that have come to pose a challenge to U.S. policymakers today.⁴ By 2010, China was the world's second-largest economy after the United States. This growth increased Beijing's capability to vigorously pursue its own national interest. Territorial incursions in the South China Sea revealed China's land ambitions. A massive foreign direct investment campaign began to link the Chinese economy with nations across the globe, a challenge to the United States' dominant global economic position.⁵ In 2011, Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for the US to refocus its interests in the Asia-Pacific Region to combat an ever-growing, ever adversarial China.⁶

Currently, former cooperation has faded into fierce competition, particularly in a technological arms race over AI, the production of semiconductor chips, and over China's continued economic growth and global influence. These areas of contention are only further complicated by the level of interdependency between the US and Chinese economies.⁷ This begs the question: *How will the United States reshape its foreign policy to face these new realities?*

¹ "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

² Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China," U.S. Department of State, February 27, 1972, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>.

³ "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

⁴ "Timeline: U.S.-China Relations," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-china-relations>.

⁵ World Bank Group, "Belt and Road Initiative," World Bank, March 24, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/brief/belt-and-road-initiative>.

⁶ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," Foreign Policy, February 11, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>.

⁷ Dan Wang and Arthur Kroeber, "The Real China Model: Beijing's Enduring Formula for Wealth and Power," Foreign Affairs, August 19, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/real-china-model-wang-kroeber>.