

**The Slow March Towards War with China**

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### **Abstract**

For many years now there has been growing tension between the United States and China. As China's economic, political, and military powers grow exponentially, the United States must deal with a new reality going forward in the twenty-first century: the United States is no longer the world's sole superpower. Many reports say that the United States will no longer be the dominant power in the world as soon as 2030. The growing threat of China's economic and political power has caused many in the United States to wonder if war is inevitable with China. A conflict between the United States and China has been brewing for a long time now, with China being surrounded by several United States military allies and bases and with the United States being placed under increased pressure to respond to China's troubling actions concerning the freedoms of their people and problems with other countries in Southeast Asia. While there are many factors and explanations for the growing war with China, neo-realism provides the best explanation for the feud that has been brewing between the two superpowers over the last few decades, and why war with China will eventually happen.

## **The Slow March Towards War with China**

In recent years, there has been a lot of speculation towards the future of the United States' relationship with China. China and the United States have never been close allies, with China and the United States representing two completely different political ideologies, residing in two different parts of the world, and containing two, nearly opposite cultures. Since the Cold War, the United States has enjoyed being the world's sole superpower, but recently this status has been challenged by other rising countries. The main country that seeks to join the United States is China, and they are growing faster than many had anticipated even a few years ago. The United States cannot ignore China's dominating political and economic power, which will soon overtake the political and economic power that the United States currently holds. While it is unlikely that China's military will pass the might of the United States' military, China still presents a threat that people in the United States cannot stand for. The United States is particularly hawkish when it comes to foreign powers that threaten its standing, and if the two countries do not take immediate action to diverge from the paths they are on, war between the United States and China will eventually happen. While it may never reach United States soil, a war with China would have impacts that Americans and Chinese would feel for decades to come. Realism, one of the oldest theories of international relations, offers the best explanation for the history of foreign relations between the United States and China and the potential for war between the two countries in the future.

### **History of US-China Relations**

It is important to analyze the global events that have led up to the current state of foreign relations between the United States and China. While foreign relations with modern day China started after Mao Zedong's Communist revolution in 1949, it is important to look as far back as

the 1830s to understand relations between the United States and China today (CFR, 2021). While the first sign of relations between the United States and China can be traced back to the 1780s, one of the first key events for foreign relations between the two countries happened in the 1830s. After a dispute with British merchants occurred over the growing opium trade the Opium Wars began. The Opium Wars in China caused a sharp decrease in British trade in the area. This allowed American traders to establish more contact with Chinese merchants and create a relationship with China. Shortly after the Opium Wars, the Treaty of Wangxia was signed between the United States and China, marking the beginning of the official diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The Treaty of Wangxia began a growing positive relationship between the United States and China, and for a few years, there was no sign of any ill intentions on either side (Chronology of U.S.-China Relations, n.d.).

However, this changed when the United States passed the Page Law in 1875. The Treaty of Wangxia allowed a growing number of Chinese immigrants to the United States. The Chinese immigrants became workers willing to work for lower wages than European immigrants and other workers in the United States. As a result of this, non-Chinese workers felt that they were being pushed out of their jobs, particularly when it came to building the rail roads. Additionally, the California Gold Rush in 1849 caused Chinese immigrants to become even more successful. Many became entrepreneurs and started businesses, and to make matters even worse, most of the money being made by Chinese immigrants was being sent home back to family or to pay off old debts (Chinese Immigrant, n.d.). For all these reasons, there was a growing anti-Chinese sentiment brewing in this country, and the Chinese felt this as they continued their work (Aarim-Heriot, 2003). On a legal level, the Chinese felt it more strongly when Congress passed the Page Law. Officially, the Page Law was not specifically meant to discriminate against Chinese

immigrants. Rather, it sought to outlaw “unfree laborers and women brought for ‘immoral purposes’” (Page Law, 2019). Chinese immigrants were hit hardest by this new law; many Chinese workers were wrongly and unfairly targeted and harassed because of this law, and regarding the law’s attitude towards prostitution, mainly Chinese women were affected. Unfortunately, the Page Law was only the beginning of discrimination towards the Chinese. Anti-Chinese sentiments continued to grow, especially in the west, and Chinese immigrants continued to be harassed and discriminated against. After years of lobbying, the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882. While initially pursuing a ten-year moratorium on Chinese immigration, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first of many bills passed that promoted anti-Asian (and particularly anti-Chinese) sentiments. There were many other anti-Chinese bills that passed in the United States Congress, such as the Geary Act and National Origins Act. While there were some deals being made between the two countries, relations were not strong at this time. The countries had fervent disagreements on immigration policies, and anti-American sentiments were building in China like the anti-Chinese sentiments that had existed in the United States for some time now. The anti-immigrant laws evolved over time in the United States, turning from an outright ban of Chinese immigrants to the United States to a racial quota that prevailed for a long time (Chinese Exclusion Act, n.d.). Prospects for Chinese immigrants remained grim until the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was passed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Between the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, there was a lot of tension between the two countries. Wartime saw the two countries become temporary allies, but there was a lot of irreparable damage caused by the strict immigration bills from the United States (Yang, 2020). However, one of the most pivotal changes to foreign relations between the United States and China occurred during this period of

zero or reduced immigration: the various Chinese dynasties that were ruling through this time had been replaced by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the People's Republic of China had been established. The move to Communism radically shifted China's approach to foreign relations, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China sets the formation of modern-day China and its relationship with the United States.

### ***The Chinese Communist Party is Established***

After a bubbling Communist sentiment rises in China, the Chinese Communist Party finally takes power in October 1949 when the Communists were finally able to overthrow the Nationalist government. The new government, now led by the CCP, elected Mao Zedong as their leader. The defeated Nationalist government and soldiers were forced to flee the country, and these forces eventually moved to the island currently known as Taiwan. The move of these Nationalists to Taiwan has caused lots of tension between China and Taiwan, where China does not recognize Taiwan as a legitimate country but rather an extension of China. The United States had backed the Taiwanese against invading Japanese forces in World War II, and this caused a rift between the United States and China that has not been fully resolved even to this day (CFR, 2021). The disputes between the United States and China do not end with Taiwan; there are many international disputes between the two countries that have lasting consequences even now.

One key example of a dispute between the United States and China came from China's occupation of Tibet. The Chinese military had taken over Tibet in the 40s, and in March 1959, the Tibetans had attempted an uprising against the invading Chinese forces. They were met with a harsh crackdown, and many died in defiance of China. The Dalai Lama was even forced to leave Tibet, and this has not been reversed since. The United States joined in condemning China for its actions in Tibet, and the American CIA even helped arm Tibetan soldiers (The Tibetan

Uprising, n.d.). The United States and China never saw eye to eye on the issues in Tibet and Taiwan, and for decades to come, these conflicts would not be resolved.

Tensions grew even further when China held its first official atomic bomb test. The United States was not comfortable with the power China held along the Vietnamese border, and the atomic bomb test only worried the Americans further. Fortunately, formal relations between the United States and China got better overtime. The United States agreed to follow China's One China rule which severed the United States' tie with Taiwan. The United States and China were building a better relationship in the 1970s and 1980s, where there was increased diplomatic relations between the two countries and more trading. The United States even agreed to weapons deals with China (CFR, 2021).

Relations between the United States and China were mostly going well until the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989. In 1989, protesters had gathered in China's Tiananmen Square to peacefully protest for political and economic reforms. They were not happy with the current system and demanded change. Inspired by other effective peaceful protests in the past, the Tiananmen Square protesters peacefully protested for change in China. Economic reforms promised by the government were slow, and corruption ran rampant in China at the time. Soon after protesters organized their forces, martial law was declared in the area and the protesters were forced to disband. Once the Chinese government realized martial law was not effective enough, they sent thousands of troops and a large number of armored tanks and officers to shut down the protests (1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, 2019). The protesters never got violent, so the global community saw this as an obvious act of violence by the Chinese government. Reactions from the global community got even worse when the now famous image of "Tank Man" surfaced, a man standing up to a line of tanks in front of him to protest what the Chinese

government was doing. The Tiananmen Square protests saw hundreds of dead innocent Chinese protesters, and the global community did not respond well. Particularly, the United States had decided to suspend their military contracts with China and freeze their current relations overall. It would take a few decades before official economic and diplomatic relations would resume between the United States and China. As it stands right now, the United States and China remain strong trading partners. However, the tension that arose from all these events in the past can still be felt today.

### ***Analyzing the History of US-China Relations with Realism***

The fluctuation between positive and negative relations between the United States and China can easily be explained by using one of the oldest theories of international relations: realism (and its newer offshoot neo-realism). Realism is a system-level theory of international relations that focuses on the pursuit of power and how that affects the dynamics between two or more countries. Because realism is a system-level theory, realists understand that the global system is built so that countries have no choice but to pursue power. While the details and the actual decisions are left to the political and military leaders of a country, the overall pursuit of power is a consequence of having different nation-states competing in the world; world leaders have no choice but to grow the power of their country. Realists explain that every action a country takes is used to grow its power or sphere of influence. In realism, power is determined by the size and might of a country's military. Realism views people as inherently selfish and warring, and it views the world as an anarchic, self-help society. This helps explain why countries must pursue more military power and influence; they cannot reliably depend on other countries and must be strong independently. Neo-realism argues that the problem lies in the international system and not human nature (Antunes and Camisão, 2018).



The various trade laws that passed in the early stages of diplomatic relations between the United States and China are not military actions, but they can be described as a mutually beneficial deal that helped increase the power of both countries. Relations between the United States and China did not get contentious until the United States passed various laws that ultimately discriminated against Chinese immigrants. These laws eventually led to a ban on Chinese immigration. Chinese immigrants were amassing too much power in the United States and sending the money they gained back home. The United States was not gaining any power or influence from having the Chinese immigrants working in this country, and the money and power was moving more towards China. This imbalance led to anti-Chinese sentiments which caused the Chinese immigrant ban. The United States felt threatened by the growing Chinese power, and they took the necessary actions to preserve their power (Chinese Immigrant, n.d.).

After the Communist revolution happened in China, the CCP took over. Up until this point, the Chinese had not taken a large offensive position to amass more power. Relations with the United States prior to the CCP takeover largely see the United States as the aggressor. However, the CCP realized the need to gain more power and influence. China's attitude towards other countries like Taiwan, Tibet, and Vietnam prove that China is also trying to grow its power. To gain more power in this region, China used power politics to claim power over many of these regions. The global reaction to the Tiananmen Square protests proves that countries like the United States see China's pursuit of power and feel threatened by this. A growing China threatens the current balance of power for the United States, and measures needed to be taken (1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, 2019).

## **Present Day US-China Relations**

To understand the current state of diplomatic relations between the United States and China, it is important to look at the events that have taken place in the last decade. It is important to understand how the United States' foreign policy towards China and Asia overall has changed over the past decade. The administrations of President Obama, President Trump, and President Biden have different perspectives on China and how to handle foreign relations in Asia. While the details of President Trump's and President Biden's are most important to understanding our country's future with China, it is also important to understand how the Obama Administration viewed China because Obama was president when President Xi Jinping took over. President Xi Jinping changed many aspects of China's foreign policy, and his influence has a direct impact on whether the United States and China will go to war (Wong, 2017).

### ***US-China Relations During the Obama Administration***

The Obama years saw what many called the United States' pivot to Asia. During the Obama administration, many United States officials saw Asia as the new global center for capitalism and trade (Halper, 2010). There are many rising markets in Asia and many analysts predict that it will be the hub for capitalism in the coming years. The United States sees many opportunities to grow their power by moving their focus towards Asia (Smith, 2013). In the past, particularly with President Bush, the Middle East was the area to take advantage. The Middle East had many natural resources that the United States needed to exploit. In this new era, there are many opportunities presented in Asia as many of the countries in Asia start to grow exponentially. President Obama claimed to want to end the wars in the Middle East and stop the system of perpetual war in the United States. However, his attentions simply shifted from the Middle East to Asia. The global system is set up so that the most dominant country is always

going to attack the growing countries that threaten its hegemony. China has the most economic and political power in Asia, so naturally, the United States is going to target the country that threatens its position as the sole superpower. The United States also feels threatened because of China's military. As realism states, the power of a country is most prominently expressed in the power of its military. The CCP has modernized the People Liberation Army, and their military spending has increased radically. Many of these changes that happened during the Obama administration happened due to reforms instituted by the new leader of the CCP: President Xi Jinping. President Xi Jinping started the One Road: One Belt initiative which has helped China modernize its economy and expand its capitalist powers (Wong, 2017). The Belt and Road Initiative is said to be one of the largest infrastructure bills ever, and involves the modernization of Chinese banks, power plants, railways, and highways. While the Belt and Road Initiative was originally only meant to help connect Chinese affluent coasts with the poorer interior parts, the Belt and Road Initiative has since expanded to outside China's borders. Any Belt and Road Initiative recipient outside of China can now receive its infrastructure and help in modernizing that part of the world, but this gives China a lot of power in that area. China's Belt and Road Initiative seeks to give China a massive amount of power on the world stage which frightens many in the West, particularly the United States. The United States had earlier identified Asia to be the new source of power, but the United States was too slow to meet the needs of the ever-expanding Asian markets. Other countries are taking advantage of the Belt and Road Initiative, filling their infrastructure needs where the United States could not fulfill them. While in the short term the Belt and Road Initiative is a positive development for the growth of these countries (especially developing countries like Pakistan, Malaysia, and Myanmar), the presence of Chinese infrastructure in these countries exposes them to political pressure from China (Hillman and

Sacks, 2021). These countries can now easily be pushed to support China in other affairs under the threat of losing out on the advantages of the Belt and Road Initiative. This is not good news for the United States and countries in the West, particularly because they would lose a significant amount of power in Asia. During the Obama Administration, relations with China were largely peaceful, with the United States remaining wary of China's exponential rise. On the surface, relations were mostly friendly, with the only real conflict currently coming from China's misunderstanding of Obama's early proposal of an economic pivot to Asia (Li, 2016). At the end of President Obama's term, the only main concern moving forward was the issue of North Korea and how the United States and China would move forward in dealing with a potentially nuclear North Korea (Lieberthal, 2013).

### ***US-China Relations During the Trump Administration***

The election of President Trump in 2016 was an unprecedented event that surprised many all over the world. As an outsider that ran with flagrant rhetoric, especially towards China, many in the United States and China were worried about the actions of the Trump Administration and how it may affect diplomatic relations between the United States and China. Trump started his campaign with vicious attacks against China and the trade deals that the country had with the United States. At this time, Trump pointed to record high trade deficits with China, and he riled up his supporters with claims of renegotiating deals that the United States had with China so that American workers would not be exploited (Wilson, 2016). Once President Trump was elected, however, diplomatic and economic relations with China would not become better. In fact, relations between the United States and China got worse, and the American working class was not better off because of President Trump's actions. During the early stages of President Trump's term, relations between the United States and China were largely positive. Some analysts in

China even considered the Trump Administration to be better for China's future than the more outwardly hawkish Clinton Administration. President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), however, ultimately left a power vacuum that Xi Jinping was able to fill. The Belt and Road Initiative was elevated once again to fit the needs of countries where the United States was now not going to deliver (Quan, 2018). More conflict arose between the United States and China when dealing with North Korea (Sutter, 2017). In 2017 and 2018, North Korea was conducting long-form missile experiments that violated an agreement North Korea had with the United States. This made the United States (and particularly Donald Trump) very mad, and they asked China to help rein in North Korea. China was soft on North Korea and Donald Trump took this personally. After many conversations with Xi Jinping, they were able to come to an agreement (Gurtov, 2017). However, the lack of response from China towards North Korea's defiance showed a large chink in the armor of the relationship between the United States and China. The United States had started to further investigate China's human rights violations because of these disagreements, and it had relations between the United States and China started to sour again. President Trump was taking a more violent and militaristic approach towards North Korea's missiles than compared to his predecessors, but China had not helped in any way. China's defiance showed a clear message to the United States: China was willing to cooperate and take North Korea's side if it meant that it could be defiant to the United States indirectly. This shows that the United States is losing its hegemony in Asia, and the threat of China only angers leaders in the United States further. To make matters worse, Donald Trump's aggressive and isolating nature on the global stage was causing two other countries to grow closer; relations between Russia and China started to grow a lot more positively during the Trump Administration. Many of the United States' recent interactions with Russia, particularly over the

annexation of Crimea in Ukraine, have left Russia searching for a new ally to take on the United States. They have found this new ally in China. Russia and China agreed to a large-scale energy deal (estimated to be \$400 billion) that seemed to negate the negative effects of sanctions placed on Russia by the United States (McGovern, 2017). As relations between Russia and China get better over time, their positions on international matters become more closely aligned. This is extremely worrying for countries in the West and the United States because these countries are typically the opposing side to foreign conflicts. A united Russia and China presents a great threat to the United States' position as the world's sole superpower. This disrupts the current international balance of power, and the United States is sure to act more aggressively to keep their balance of power as it is.

Foreign relations between the United States and China grew even worse during 2020. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the entire world, and the United States blamed China for it. COVID-19, which originated in Wuhan, China, spread throughout the world and caused a massive economic downturn as countries were forced to lockdown their economies. President Trump's rhetoric towards China grew even nastier, with the President referring to the outbreak as the "China Virus" and blaming China for not warning the world sooner. While President Trump was not completely wrong in his criticisms of China during the pandemic, his hateful rhetoric only sought to sour relations between the United States and China even further (Yuan, 2020). The pandemic also revealed that the global supply chain relies heavily on supplies coming from China. Many countries were forced to go to China to receive the vitally important Personal Protective Equipment, which gives China even more power on the global stage (Mandelbaum, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic allowed the United States to see China as it really is. The leaders of the United States undoubtedly felt threatened by China's dominance on the global

stage. The COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly change the United States' approach to foreign relations with China going forward. Relations between the United States and China were already rough before the pandemic, with a growing number of disagreements rising between the two countries on foreign affairs, not to mention President Trump's trade war (Yang, 2020).

### ***US-China Relations in the Present and in the Future***

While President Biden has only been in office for a few months now, there are already key differences that can be noticed in his approach to China when compared to his predecessor. As the COVID-19 pandemic starts to reach its final stages and countries open again, the global economy is starting to get back on track. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has left lasting damage on the American economy and relations between the United States and China. President Biden has promised to back of the trade war with China, explaining that President Trump's trade war with China largely resulted in a win for China. However, President Biden still represents the status quo when it comes to politicians and hopes to increase United States naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region (CFR, 2020). This decision is in-line with the standard United States foreign policy of trying to increase our global dominance and power in every region of the world. More military power in that area only hopes to provoke China further and make relations worse. The Biden Administration also has recently been cracking down on Chinese companies that do business in the United States, particularly with technology companies. Chinese companies have long been accused of stealing data from American citizens, and the Biden Administration promises to place strict security guidelines on these companies (Yu, 2021). The Biden Administration continues the ban on Huawei products being sold in the United States over security concerns, and the security concerns over Chinese companies will not go away any time soon. Moving forward, President Biden will also have to work with China on climate change.

The hostilities between the United States and China, combined with President Trump's decision to move the United States away from the global climate crises, do not give many hopes about the planet's future. The Biden Administration will have to cooperate with China to work on climate change, as China is currently the leading country on climate efforts.

### **Conclusion**

By looking at the history of relations between the United States and China and the global events that occurred in the past decade, it is easy to see that the United States and China will never again be fully allies. The flow from friend to enemy for the United States and China can be explained with neo-realism; the countries are both looking to increase their power on the global stage. The United States is the current dominant superpower that looks to maintain the world's balance of power, whereas China is the rising power that seeks a dominant position in the world's economy. The two countries are trapped in an unescapable Thucydides Trap; the rise of China makes the United States fearful of losing its position of power. The Thucydides Trap describes why war and conflict between the United States and China is inevitable. Arguably, there is already a new Cold War taking place between the United States and China, but the issues between the two countries could escalate to a real war based on the path the two countries are currently on. The war between the United States and China may not be fought in a traditional sense. Most likely, the war between the United States and China will happen in the global economy. Cyberwarfare between the two countries is also likely. Since the United States and China are both nuclear states, war on American or Chinese soil is unlikely through mutually assured destruction. However, proxy wars between the two countries are highly likely, especially as China seeks to control more of Asia. The exact details of war between the two are unknown,



but it is certain that war will be a terrible outcome for American and Chinese citizens. For the sake of both countries' futures, war must be stopped between the United States and China.

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