

GREAT DECISIONS

1918 • FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

HIGH SCHOOL

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TEACHERS:
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US-CHINA CONFLICT



**A STRAINED
PARTNERSHIP**

**TARIFF
TROUBLE**

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TENSIONS**

**WORLDWIDE
IMPACT**

BY SAMUEL LIN-SOMMER

A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP



FeatureChina/AP Images

A Chinese factory worker helps assemble smartphone earbuds. In 2024, the US spent \$41 billion importing smartphones from China, more than it spent on any other kind of product.

Whether you realize it or not, China is a part of your life. There's a good chance that [your phone](#), [computer](#), and [lighting](#) were made [there](#). If you use TikTok, you're using software that was invented in China. And a significant portion of the US population—1.5%, or 5.5 million people—[identified as being of Chinese descent](#) in a recent US Census Bureau survey.

In more ways than just those, the [US and China](#) are deeply intertwined. They have the largest economies and largest militaries in the world. In some ways, the two rely upon each other. In others, they are rivals.

In recent years, the US-China partnership has been strained by conflicts between leaders. This tension has consequences not only for the nearly two billion people

living in the two countries, but also for the billions more people whose lives are touched by their influence.

A HISTORY OF TWO SUPERPOWERS

The US has interacted with China for hundreds of years through trade, diplomacy, and immigration. Some of that history has been defined by **Sinophobia**,

or the hatred of anything related to China. These sentiments led to the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#), an 1882 law that banned most Chinese immigration to the US for over sixty years. Then and today, China was often used as a **scapegoat** to blame when times were bad.

Sinophobia, combined with hostility towards **communism**, help contribute to the way that some Americans view China. Today's Chinese government—the People's Republic of China—has existed [since 1949](#), when the Chinese Communist Party defeated the US-backed Kuomintang (KMT), or Nationalist Party, and exiled them to Taiwan. The US's support of the KMT, and the American anti-communist stance during the **Cold War**, meant that the US government treated the CCP as an outsider for decades. It wasn't until 1979 that the US [formally recognized](#) the CCP.

Meanwhile, in the decades after the 1949 Chinese Civil War, CCP leader Mao Zedong initiated a series of reforms that transformed Chinese society, which was at the time largely based on farming. His attempts to rapidly **industrialize** the nation led to **famines** that [killed tens of millions of people](#) and stunted China's economic growth. At the same time, other changes—including investment in education, healthcare, and infrastructure—helped [build the foundation](#) for today's superpower.

In 1978, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping helped the country transition from a planned **socialist** economy to one with more **free market** elements. In the following

decades, the US began to trade more and more with China as the latter grew into a manufacturing superpower.

For Chinese citizens, the consequences of this growth have been profound. More than 800 million Chinese people have escaped poverty in the last 40 years, and Chinese villages have turned into mega-cities. Today, the majority of Chinese adults receive a college education, compared to 8% in 1995.

As China has grown, some members of the US government have viewed China as a threat. The US has dominated the global pecking order since the end of World War II, and [some feel threatened](#) by a self-described Communist country that can match the US economically or militarily. Under Barack Obama's presidency, the US began trying to counter China's influence in Asia and the Pacific with what then-Secretary of State Hilary

Clinton called a "[Pivot to Asia](#)." This meant increasing economic and military ties with countries like Japan, South Korea, and Australia. China's current leader, Xi Jinping, for his part, has [publicly criticized](#) the West for conspiring to stanch China's growth.

ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

In 2024, the US and China shared [an estimated \\$658.9 billion](#) of trade in goods and services. In addition to phones, laptops, and light fixtures, China also makes the majority of the toys that Americans enjoy, the blow driers we use to dry our hair, and the plastic containers we use to store leftovers, among many other things. Most Amazon merchants are based in—you guessed it—China.

The reverse is also true, although to a lesser extent: the US sells an enormous quantity of its exports to China—especially medical devices, vaccines, and soybeans.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US IMPOSE TARIFFS ON CHINA?

YES

- ✓ The US needs to help domestic manufacturers that have trouble competing with China
- ✓ Tariffs can be used as leverage to negotiate better trade deals
- ✓ Some accuse China of foul play, like stealing US intellectual property, and tariffs can encourage them to stop

NO

- ✗ Tariffs ultimately hurt the US economy and US workers
- ✗ Tariffs hurt consumers by causing the prices of many products to go up
- ✗ Tariffs can escalate tensions that destabilize global politics



Sheila Fitzgerald/Shutterstock



Scott Olson/Getty Images

In 2024, China purchased about 45% of all the soybeans exported from the US. The ongoing trade war has caused this number to plummet, leading to a crisis for many American farmers.

One of the reasons the US imports so much from China is that Chinese factories are able to produce quality goods for cheap prices. There are a lot of reasons for this: China’s 1.4 billion people, many of whom are working class, compete for jobs, so employers can hire them for low wages; China has an efficient, large supply network; and the Chinese yuan is significantly weaker than the dollar.

Cheaper goods might seem like a great deal for US consumers. In other ways, the effects of this trade on everyday Americans are complicated. Economists say that some manufacturers in the US shuttered or cut jobs in the early 2000s because they could not afford to compete with cheaper imports from China and other countries. That

trend ended in the 2010s.

That being said, scholars also say that trade with China has increased the number of American service jobs—jobs that provide intangible goods to clients, like healthcare, finance, and technology.

FOREIGN POLICY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

During President Donald Trump’s first term in office, he was [aggressive](#) towards China. He called China an “enemy” and said “they’re ripping us off.”

He ordered [a series of tariffs](#), taxes on imported goods meant to protect American industries from competition. The taxes were on imports like steel, aluminum, solar panels, and washing machines. Trump claimed that the tariffs

were meant to protect American industry and stop China from allegedly stealing American **intellectual property**.

Studies found that these tariffs [generally hurt the US economy](#). Though the taxes might have helped workers who make goods covered by the tariffs, they burdened people whose industries rely on taxed imports. For example, US steelworkers may have been helped by steel tariffs, but the automotive workers who rely on imported steel to make car parts were hurt. US companies also raised their prices to compensate for having to pay tariffs, which affected American consumers. China retaliated against US tariffs by imposing fees of its own on key US exports like soybeans, medical

equipment, and oil, further hurting US industries.

US-China tensions rose dramatically when the COVID-19 pandemic began. The virus likely originated in China, and Trump drew on longstanding anti-Chinese racism in blaming China for the contagion, publicly calling it the “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu.” His rhetoric led to a flurry of hate crimes against Asian-Americans, including a White gunman murdering [eight Asian women in an Atlanta spa](#). Stop AAPI Hate, a watchdog group that formed in the wake of these crimes, says that anti-Asian hate crimes remain common today.

After the election of Joe Biden in 2020, tensions with China cooled off somewhat, but only slightly. Under Biden, the FBI [warned that](#) the Chinese government could manipulate the Chinese short-form video app TikTok to influence US politics. This planted the seeds for a law that forced ByteDance, TikTok’s Chinese owner, to sell off many of its shares.

TRUMP’S SECOND TERM

Soon after Donald Trump was elected to his second term as US president in 2024, he began escalating what some people call a **trade war** with China’s president, Xi Jinping. Just as he did in his first term, Trump cited protecting US industries and forcing China to stop taking US trade secrets. He also aimed to [punish the CCP](#) for not stopping the export of the drug fentanyl—something that Chinese leaders say they have gone to great

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE CHINESE COMPANY BYTEDANCE BE ALLOWED TO OWN TIKTOK IN THE US?

YES

- ✓ The US should demonstrate its commitment to free trade
- ✓ International investment helps grow the US economy
- ✓ Banning ByteDance sends a message of Sinophobia that could have an impact worldwide



NO

- ✗ It’s possible for China to collect information about Americans or shape their media feeds through the app
- ✗ China could install malware in US phones via TikTok
- ✗ Banning ByteDance sends a message of assertiveness to China in the middle of our trade war

Flamestar/Dreamstime.com

lengths to prevent.

China responded with tariffs of its own on US goods. At the end of October, Xi and Trump met in South Korea and agreed to lower their tariffs. As of publication, the

US taxes Chinese imports at an average of 45%, enough to dramatically reduce the profits of Chinese exporters. China taxes all US goods at 10%, with higher tariffs on goods like soybeans and coal.



About one-third of all US adults use TikTok. The percentage is even higher for younger people: about 60% of people between the ages of 13 and 30 use it.



Jim Watson/AFP/Getty Images

The average price of groceries in the US increased by 3.2% from August 2024 to August 2025. In the same time, the average price of all consumer products increased 2.9%. It might sound like a small number, but the costs add up for consumers.

TAIWAN-CHINA TENSIONS

Since the KMT fled mainland China to Taiwan in 1949, relations have been strained between Taiwan and its much bigger brother China. Most Taiwanese citizens think of themselves as Taiwanese, not Chinese. But the CCP believes that Taiwan is a

breakaway region that needs to be reunited with the motherland, possibly by force, if necessary. The Taiwanese government is preparing itself for a military blockade or invasion from China.

The US has for decades maintained a balancing act to further its own interests and prevent war between China and Taiwan. The US government officially

recognizes the CCP, but not Taiwan, while maintaining robust military support for the island nation and trading with both countries.

Biden and Trump's presidential administrations have deepened trade and diplomatic ties with Taiwan. In 2022, then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi met with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan, becoming the first speaker to visit Taipei in over 20 years; in response, Beijing launched military exercises around the island.



THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US FORMALLY RECOGNIZE TAIWAN?

YES

- ✓ It's the US's duty to protect small nations from large aggressors
- ✓ Taiwan is a strategic military ally of the US in East Asia
- ✓ The US can't afford to lose access to Taiwanese exports like semiconductors and microchips

NO

- ✗ The current status quo has maintained peace since 1949
- ✗ Recognizing Taiwan could prompt China to retaliate economically against the US
- ✗ China may feel threatened and invade or blockade Taiwan as a result, risking global conflict



US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen

Official Photo by Wang Yu Ching/Office of the President/Flickr

Anchalee Bunyaphum/Dreamstime.com

Meanwhile, China has only grown more powerful. Its military has doubled the size of its nuclear arsenal to 600 weapons in the course of five years. The Council on Foreign Relations, a nonpartisan think tank, recently [wrote that](#) US military analysts worry that “China’s growing military capabilities and assertiveness, as well as the deterioration in cross-strait relations, could spark a conflict that leads to a US-China confrontation.”

THE FUTURE OF US-CHINA RELATIONS

The feud between the two juggernauts already affects ordinary people. To cover the cost of tariff, American businesses have raised prices on goods from automobiles to footwear. Some experts say that companies [use the tariffs as cover](#) to hike their prices even further,

contributing to the **inflation** burdening people nationwide.

Meanwhile, many Asian Americans already have experienced anti-Chinese animosity firsthand, in the form of slurs, bullying, and violence.

Despite the bluster of US and Chinese governments, “Both China and the United States have an interest in preserving much of their economic relationship,” writes the Carnegie Endowment’s [Christopher S. Chivvis](#). Because of that, their slow drift from one another might not last. A recent survey of the Chinese populace showed that 48% want China to [take a shared, rather than dominant](#), leadership role in the world.

For the sake of billions of people affected by US-China tensions, we can only hope that the two countries find their way towards collaboration.



FUN FACTS!

In 1971, China invited the US national table tennis team to China for “ping pong diplomacy”

This year, a group of US high schoolers traveled to China for “pickleball diplomacy”

For millennia, China has gifted pandas, which are native to China, to other nations in a practice of “panda diplomacy”



When President Richard Nixon visited China in 1972, he ate Peking duck with Premier Zhou Enlai in a nationally televised banquet that helped make traditional Chinese food popular in the US



As of 2023, the US had the largest Chinese population outside of Asia

TEEN TRAILBLAZER



Arun Neveder/Getty Images for Art Hearts

Ashlyn So

In 2021, an 84-year-old Thai immigrant named Vichar Ratanapakdee was shoved to the ground in Anza Vista, California, and died from a resulting brain hemorrhage. Then-thirteen-year-old Ashlyn So and Ratanapakdee shared mutual friends, and the tragedy [moved So](#) to organize a rally against anti-Asian hate in San Mateo, California. As tensions rose between Asian, Black, and Latino communities, she organized a “[Gold and Black Unity](#)” rally to call for solidarity. So also started a [petition](#) demanding education about Asian-American history and anti-Asian racism that has garnered over 2,000 signatures. On top of her organizing, she is also a trailblazing fashion designer: she has participated in New York Fashion Week four times, and in 2021, she exhibited a fashion line called “Beneath the Surface” inspired by her activism. Her designs featured symbols of AAPI struggle and power.



BACK AND FORTH

1. What do you think this cartoon is trying to say? Why do or don't you agree?
2. Who do the people at the far ends of the boat represent? How do they seem to feel about the situation?
3. What happens when the bomb goes off? Does it affect one side of the boat, or both? How does this relate to tariffs?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Do you think China is portrayed fairly by the US media and politicians? Why or why not?
2. What, if anything, should the US be doing differently in its dealings with China?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Which products have you noticed becoming more expensive lately? How do you think this relates to tariffs on China?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

Chinese Exclusion Act	industrialize	socialist
Cold War	inflation	tariffs
communism	intellectual property	trade war
famines	scapegoat	
free market	Sinophobia	



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