

## Historical Perspective - the Past and Future of U.S. Relations with China and the USSR

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# CHAPTER I.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE— THE PAST AND FUTURE OF U.S. RELATIONS WITH CHINA AND THE USSR

*Donald W. Treadgold\**

Let us begin with a Yugoslavian story. It seems that Carter and Brezhnev fall into a heated ideological disagreement at their Vienna summit, and both have heart attacks which apparently render them moribund. Teams of doctors, however, are put to work reviving them, and they eventually succeed — but only after a hundred years have passed. They reawaken simultaneously, and the first thing they hear is a radio news broadcast. The first item begins, "The President of the United States and the First Secretary of the U.S. Communist Party . . ." Brezhnev shouts, "See, I told you so!" The second item begins: "Serious disturbances are reported on the Chinese-Finnish border." Carter shouts, "See, I told you so!" The third item begins: "President Tito, on his 187th birthday, has received a Yugoslav youth delegation." (Remember, it is a Yugoslavian story.) That anecdote does not really relate what the future will be like, for Tito will not live to be 187 years old.

Since particular legal, diplomatic and commercial problems will be explored by later speakers, this paper will attempt to analyze some of the broad underlying motives and aims of Americans. I use the term "Americans" generally, because many of the most important U.S. involvements with Russia and China, especially with China, were not governmental at all. I shall conclude by offering a few warnings for the future. I give here more attention to China than to Russia, because the Chinese connection is the new — or more precisely, the recently — one and therefore, the active ingredient of the mix.

United States relations with Russia and China began at a time when Great Britain ruled the seas. Although Britain had just lost the American colonies, it was about to succeed in building itself a new empire which would bring it close to domination of the world. This domination was generally benevolent, disturbing very little the indigenous institutions of the colonized country. Many aspects of American relations with Russia, China and other countries in distant continents were determined by the actions and reactions of the British. Nevertheless, the United States found itself gradually preparing to assume its dominant role in world affairs during the mid-twentieth century.

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The first American envoy was sent to Russia as result of a Congressional resolution passed in 1780. That envoy, Francis Dana, served in a strictly unofficial capacity; he was a young man who took with him someone younger still, John Quincy Adams, who was to return in 1809 to become the first U.S. minister in St. Petersburg. Alexander I and Thomas Jefferson exchanged a pleasantly distant correspondence. In those years, the Russians were obtaining a foothold in Alaska and they established a settlement known as Fort Ross, short for "Rossiia," near San Francisco. The possibility that the Russians would annex and colonize the West Coast never materialized. A trade treaty was signed in 1832, but had little effect; Russia seemed far away, as did "Russian America," to the still Atlantic-oriented United States. During the Civil War, Russian squadrons called at northern ports, mainly as a way of tweaking the nose of the British lion which was showing some sympathy for the South. These naval visits helped create the atmosphere in which Alaska was sold to the United States in 1867 for a paltry \$7 million which many then regarded as a grossly excessive sum.

In the nineteenth century, American-Russian relations followed a generally uneventful course. Many Russian radicals and liberals admired U.S. society and government or aspects thereof; several Americans sympathized with Russian opposition to autocracy and deprecated its rigors and repressive qualities. Such men included Andrew Dickson White, U.S. minister and future president of Cornell University, and George Kennan, a distant relation of our contemporary of the same name and author of a book entitled *Siberia and the Exile System* which had a sizable impact on American opinion. But other U.S. diplomats were seldom so gifted and knowledgeable. A striking example was David Francis, our ambassador in 1917, the year in which the last tsar was overthrown and the Provisional Government came to nominal power. Shortly after Lenin returned to Russia, Francis sent Washington a cable: "Extreme socialist or anarchist named Lenin making violent speeches and thereby strengthening government; designedly giving him leeway and will deport opportunely." The deportation, needless to say, was not forthcoming.

The February Revolution and the coming of democratic government, though it proved abortive to Russia, did have an important effect on the circumstances in which the United States entered World War I. Now all the major European allies against Germany — Britain, France and Russia — were ostensibly committed to Wilsonian ideas or slogans. But the world was *not* made safe for democracy, nor was Russia. The Russian Civil War followed, accompanied by an Allied intervention in which no U.S. troops fought and in which American motives were far from unambiguously anti-Bolshevik. From such agonies emerged the Soviet regime.

It was not until well after Britain and France had accorded the USSR formal recognition that the United States followed suit. The United States was not always well served by its envoys: Ambassador Joseph E. Davies, for example, thought Stalin's purge trials were justified. During World War II, many Americans tried to paint their Soviet ally democratic, but after 1944-45 Stalin all but destroyed this picture. The story of the so-called "cold war" and new beginnings of *détente* with Nixon after 1972 need not be retold here.

To summarize, in the 1920s and 30s, a few Americans believed, or at least hoped, that the Soviets were building a new earthly paradise; Lincoln Steffens, for example, reported somewhat prematurely, "I have seen the future and it works." A larger number hoped, more modestly, that the United States could cooperate effectively with Stalin against Hitler. In order to believe that such cooperation was realized, one must overlook the Nazi-Soviet Pact which enabled Hitler to begin World War II and the ways in which American aid was concealed by the Soviet government from its own people. The appearance of genuine American revolutionaries in the 1960s came when there had been exposure of Stalin's misdeeds by Khrushchev and others to dim the luster of the USSR for leftists. For many of them, China replaced Russia as the land of idealist dreams. Nixon, Ford and Kissinger may or may not have been wise in their dealings with the Soviet Union, but certainly they were under no romantic illusions about the Soviets. Even the Carter administration has refused to be deceived although some hold that it has been inept in its management of Soviet affairs.

United States relations with China followed a quite different course. China was markedly different from Russia which represented a strange breed of Europeans, and the few Russians who reached the United States were not easily identifiable in the American polyglot of the nineteenth century. But from the time the first Chinese immigrants arrived in California about 1850, they seemed, at worst, a dirty and incomprehensible lot. At best, they seemed hard-working yet difficult to understand and easy to spot among masses of whites. American attitudes always mixed contempt with affection, even love, for China. For instance, the first university chair in Chinese in this country was established in 1901 after a retired general hit his Chinese butler over the head in a fit of rage. Regretting his actions afterward, the general endowed the Dean Lung (the butler's name) Professorship at Columbia University.

The first Americans touched Chinese soil in 1784 when the ship *Empress of China* visited Canton, beginning a long history of trade with China. Such trade was responsible for the creation of several New England commercial dynasties. To be sure, there were always some exaggerated expectations, both before and after the first U.S.-China treaty was concluded by Caleb Cushing in 1843. Some believed that a salesman could become a John D. Rockefeller

overnight if every Chinese would buy from America one ounce of wheat or one shirt per year, or even if every shirt bought by a Chinese was to be lengthened by one inch (a serious calculation of a half century ago). Such expectations were never realized and will not be in the foreseeable future. But realistic businessmen found buying and selling on a modest scale profitable.

Influential Americans aimed at three successive but overlapping forms of change for China — envisaging Christianization, the introduction of democracy and the establishment of socialism. The first U.S. missionaries to arrive in China were Elijah Bridgman and David Abeel in 1830. As were most American missionaries throughout the nineteenth century, they were Protestants of the fundamentalist variety. Most of them were ill-equipped for the task of conversion, knew little of China or the Chinese language, and hated Chinese culture. One described the street chapel through which most missionaries tried to work as “the missionary’s fort, where he throws hot shot and shell into the enemy’s camp . . . .” Another wrote that “the invention of the Chinese language has been ascribed to the devil, who endeavored by it to prevent [the triumph of Christianity].” (This is a view which Western students of the language to this day may find seductive, but it is one they try to resist.) During the forty years ending in 1914, it was reported that 17 million Chinese Bibles or Testaments had been distributed. The literate Chinese, into whose hands these religious materials fell, found they could neither understand them, since pietist dogma excluded any notes or comment, nor sell them. The result was that such items were worthless. Here we can only mention in passing the Taiping Rebellion. The rebels were composed of a Christian sect owing their professed ideology almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon missionaries. The leaders were, however, too crude (like most of the missionaries of the time) and maladroit to conciliate the Western powers and the Chinese scholar-gentry, whose neutrality, at the very least, was needed in order to sustain the rebellion.

Just before 1900, the fundamentalist Protestants were replaced by modernists in both the United States and China. In their hands, Christian conversion and the introduction of democracy came to be equated with each other. Sun Yat-sen, the first president of the Chinese Republic, was a Christian modernist. Beginning with William Howard Taft and Woodrow Wilson, American presidents called for the conversion of China to Christianity and the export of American-style democratic institutions to the former Celestial Empire. Shortly thereafter, however, there appeared Americans who were ardent democrats but who were not Christians. Notable among them was John Dewey, whose Chinese disciple Hu Shih wanted a China modeled after the United States but who was also sensible enough to realize that the transformation could not come overnight. On the American side,

these expectations helped set the stage for the image of China projected in Pearl Buck's novel *The Good Earth* and the 1937 film based on it. The hopes of Americans rather than the cold Chinese reality were conveyed to the 23 million Americans who saw the film (not to mention nearly 50 million others outside China).

In the 1920s came the return of the American missionaries' beloved Sun Yat-sen, and after his death, Chiang Kai-shek, emerged as leader of the Kuomintang. It seemed that a democratic China was at hand; at any rate, the Kuomintang leaders had to promise democracy in order to be given a place among the peacemakers of World War II. The possibility that such a promise was not in the power of any Chinese to make, given China's institutional heritage at that point, never seemed to concern Americans.

By this time, the U.S. government had given up hopes for Christianization but was still exploring the possibility of democratization. Other Americans were, however, sensing that something had gone wrong. In the 1930s and 40s, a new anthropological relativism suggested that each culture had gone, and ought to go, its own way; America should not prescribe formulas for others. As for the Chinese intellectuals who would either plan their country's destiny or rationalize its realities, many of them had rejected Christianity and were abandoning liberal and democratic ideas for Marxism-Leninism. That doctrine, or variants thereof, became popular in many Chinese intellectual circles outside of the area where the Chinese Communists, almost smashed by Chiang, had found refuge around Yen-an. Some Americans, such as General Stilwell, tried during World War II to browbeat the Chinese into doing things "the American way," but experienced only frustration and disillusionment. By now Edgar Snow, a few missionaries and a number of secular writers began to tell the American public about the new tidy, orderly and efficient China being built by Communists who were basically only agrarian reformers.

Wilson had urged democracy as the guiding principle of the future. Franklin D. Roosevelt announced the four freedoms, the truly operative ones being anti-imperialism, decolonization and national independence. Lyndon B. Johnson selected free elections to emphasize. The Carter administration had deemphasized free elections (except for Rhodesia), and instead has chosen to stress another part of the democratic vision — "human rights." These rights are expected to be enjoyed to some degree by all regimes, though why that fragment of democracy was emphasized, rather than any other, remains a mystery.

Chinese Communism has not been well understood in this country. I know influential people today who are both very conservative and very anti-Soviet, who do not think Chinese Communism is really Communism at all, and who seemed to expect that democracy would be introduced to the

mainland by virtue of the covering of a single wall with big-character posters. Nixon, Kissinger and others knew better. It is impossible, however, to refrain from noting that if, in the last two decades, any top policy-maker in Washington has understood East Asia, and has been prepared to deal with Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese and others with the requisite sensitivity (regardless of the substance of the policy concerned), such person's existence has remained well concealed. The quite unnecessary shocks administered by two presidents to our friends in Japan and Taiwan, respectively, are only the most obvious examples.

With this as background, I would like to make my last and most important point. Americans in a position to shape the country's official and unofficial actions have had an unilinear view of human development even though the world's actual history has been multilinear. In relation to the area we have discussed, the profound institutional differences — leaving aside for the moment the cultural differences — between the West and the continental Orient have been largely ignored. In Japan (*not* on the continent), U.S. occupation was apparently successful in accomplishing miracles. The major reason for such success lay, to a large extent, in Japan's feudal or semi-feudal history, which provided the necessary prerequisites for Japanese capitalism and democracy today. It was not because General MacArthur was a near-perfect Shogun (though he indeed was). In contrast, the lack of developed institutions of private property, law and structured or hereditary personal relationships in continental East, South and West Asia and Africa presents formidable obstacles to the immediate reproduction of Western societal patterns. Thus, the problem can be traced to thousands of years of history and not to some recent mistake of a U.S. or Asian/African policy-maker. Such tradition might be uprooted eventually by determined social engineering — though, as of yet, I know of no one who is capable of conducting it — or, perhaps, by a process of gradual evolution; it will not be corrected by a few sermons from the White House. In the Orient, instant democracy is impossible. Instant Communism is possible, however, because it adapts the traditional institutions of despotism to new, updated political and economic slogans and technological innovations. What the foregoing proposition may mean for the future of the United States is a question which cannot be explored here, though the obvious conclusions to be drawn are scarcely those which justify much optimism.

The United States must have relations of some kind with both the USSR and the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.). Some might think that 17 million people, an economic growth rate upward of ten percent, and a degree of freedom might also entitle Taiwan, not to mention Hong Kong, Macao and Singapore, to some attention. In these areas the Chinese are living far better lives than in the P.R.C. But with the two great mainland powers, some kind

of diplomatic, commercial and even cultural contacts may be possible and desirable. They are best undertaken without illusions and with the maximum possible understanding of the past limits and the alternatives of the future, avoiding the raising of impossible hopes whose certainty of being dashed will produce only despair. America enjoys much admiration, envy and even trust (despite all we have recently done to dissipate that) abroad. We have stumbled before, but each time we have risen to our feet, a capacity we all hope will be preserved and carried into the next century, at least.

