



GEORGE H. W. BUSH FOUNDATION
FOR U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS

乔治布什美中关系基金会

A Conversation with President Jimmy Carter

The Past, Present and Future of U.S.-China Relations

A Message from Neil Bush

In 2019, the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations conferred upon President Jimmy Carter its inaugural George H. W. Bush Award for Statesmanship in U.S.-China Relations. My father's vision for the U.S.-China relationship – informed by his service as America's envoy to China in the mid-1970s – aligned with President Carter's vision. Whereas President Carter ushered in an important new chapter in the relationship between the two countries, my father, ten years later, kept this vital bilateral relationship on the rails in the immediate wake of the events of June 1989. President George H. W. Bush shared President Carter's deeply held belief that America's vital long-term interests were best served by the development of a relationship between the two nations that was functional, constructive, results-oriented, mutually beneficial and politically sustainable. My friend, Chip Carter, and I are blessed to be able to help carry on the important work of our fathers.



Chip Carter accepts the George H. W. Bush Award for Statesmanship on behalf of his father. He is joined by Neil Bush, David Firestein and Charles Foster.

A Message from James Earl “Chip” Carter III

I first visited China in 1977 when my father sent me as part of a congressional delegation. Having spent considerable time in China since then, I was pleased to join Neil Bush in Beijing during the 2019 celebrations of the 40th anniversary of U.S.-China relations. The partnership between The Carter Center and the Bush China Foundation has grown since then. In addition to working together to advance U.S.-China Relations, we've had the opportunity to continue our fathers' shared legacies together, including when I accepted the first George H.W. Bush Award on behalf of my father. In addition to both playing a role in our families' legacies on U.S.-China relations, Neil and I have found that we share common ground on other topics as well. At a time when our country is divided along party lines, it's refreshing that our families can come together to work on a common goal.

Interview Introduction

In the interview below, George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations president and CEO David Firestein discusses with President Carter the current state of and future prospects for the U.S.-China relationship. We at the Bush China Foundation salute the important contributions of The Carter Center to the advancement of U.S.-China relations and we look forward to continuing to work together closely to preserve and promote the visions and legacies of these two former U.S. leaders.

George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations President and CEO David Firestein:

Mr. President, thank you so much for taking the time to share your perspective on the U.S.-China relationship. Before getting into the questions, let me take this opportunity to say how deeply we, at the George H. W. Bush Foundation for U.S.-China Relations, appreciate your monumental contributions to the development of modern U.S.-China relations. You were the unanimous choice of the Bush China Foundation's Board of Directors to receive the inaugural George H. W. Bush Award for Statesmanship in U.S.-China Relations in 2019, the fortieth anniversary year of your visionary decision to normalize the diplomatic relationship between the United States and China. Thank you, Mr. President, for all you did as president, and all you have done in your post-presidency, to nurture this most consequential bilateral relationship.

Mr. President, the U.S.-China relationship is clearly in a very different place today than it was even just a few years ago. What is your take on where the relationship is today? Has the stark deterioration of the relationship we have seen over the last several years surprised you?

President Jimmy Carter:

The U.S.-China relationship recently was at its lowest point in years. The relationship has been of significant importance to me and to President George H. W. Bush, and I am hopeful that it will improve under the Biden administration. In January 2019, The Carter Center held a three-day meeting to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the normalization of U.S.-China relations. Our being the only U.S.-based organization to do this is a stark indication of how the bilateral landscape has changed in recent years.

Firestein:

Mr. President, a bipartisan consensus has emerged in Washington around the idea that China is America's most formidable national competitor and that the United States must respond with a "whole of government" and "whole of society" approach. Would you agree with this characterization? Do you believe that China's strategic intentions are fundamentally incompatible with the interests of the United States?



Visiting then Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping shook hands with then U.S. President Jimmy Carter in the White House, in Washington, in January 1979. /VCG Photo

President Carter:

The U.S.-China global trade relationship is one of the most important in the world. Since Deng Xiaoping and I made the joint decision to normalize relations 42 years ago, both countries have reaped countless benefits. Even in a competitive economic environment, there is room for mutual growth and cooperation. Our societies are entwined, and our governments need to protect this important societal and economic connection. Despite some fundamental differences, I believe leaders in Washington and Beijing share one common goal; to create peaceful and stable conditions for their people to pursue happiness.

Firestein:

Mr. President, your abiding commitment to the advancement of human rights worldwide was a hallmark of your presidency and has been a hallmark of your post-presidency through The Carter Center. Clearly human rights is one of a number of deeply contentious areas in the U.S.-China relationship today. Given the evident chasm between the two countries on this issue, is it at this point even possible for the United States to usefully engage China on human rights and, if so, what approach do you think would be most effective?

President Carter:

In my meetings with four generations of Chinese leaders I was always told China ranks the right to survive and live a better life more important than the right to be free. China's successful effort to eradicate abject poverty in the country is unique. When people are free from want and fear, they can begin to address broader freedoms. In this sense U.S. government officials and NGOs like the Bush China Foundation and The Carter Center should and must engage China on human rights issues. We should approach China from a position of engagement. Patience is necessary when engaging China on human rights issues.

Firestein:

Trade also has been a tremendously contentious area in the relationship. What adjustments do you think we need to make in our trade policy toward China so that better results can be achieved for the American people?

President Carter:

Concerns around protection of intellectual property rights, coercive technology transfer, state subsidies, and non-tariff barriers should be addressed by the Chinese and U.S. governments so that each has a market for their goods. Weaponizing trade issues will hurt citizens of both countries. I'm a farmer, and I know China imports vast quantities of American agricultural products. The current trade war has prevented American exports from reaching Chinese markets.

Firestein:

Mr. President, a seemingly growing number of American observers of the U.S.-China relationship predict that the United States and China may very well come to blows – actually go to war – over Taiwan or other issues of comparable geostrategic significance. To what degree do you worry about the possibility of military conflict between the United States and China? What do you think the United States and China can realistically do to minimize the possibility of conflagration?



President Jimmy Carter and then Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping. Credit: National Archives and Records Administration

President Carter:

It is my belief that both countries desire peace and have worked to prevent conflict. In 1979, our Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act, which acknowledges the One China Policy but also makes it clear that force should not be used between Mainland China and Taiwan. Over the past four decades there have been multiple situations that could have led to conflict, but the leaders of both countries made peace their priority. Through diplomacy, any crisis has been diverted.

Firestein:

President George H. W. Bush believed that virtually no major global challenge could be enduringly resolved in the absence of effective U.S.-China cooperation. Notwithstanding the current tensions in the relationship, are there ways in which the United States and China can come together in common cause, for example, in promoting sustainable global development – an area that The Carter Center has long championed?

President Carter:

There are global challenges that require the U.S. and China to cooperate. Global warming, nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, and various regional conflicts could best be resolved with leadership and participation from Washington and Beijing.

Many of the Carter Center's resources are allocated to eradicate neglected tropic diseases and to sustain good governance in the developing world. I believe Africa is the best place for the U.S. and China to cooperate. In 2014 the two nations joined forces to contain Ebola. Afterward they created the African Centers for Disease Control. Now the two countries should and must design and implement a joint strategy to vaccinate more than one billion people in Africa. Both the U.S. and China are involved in development assistance in developing nations. It should be natural for the U.S. Agency for International Development, the China International Development Cooperation Agency, and American and Chinese non-governmental organizations to share information and best practices.

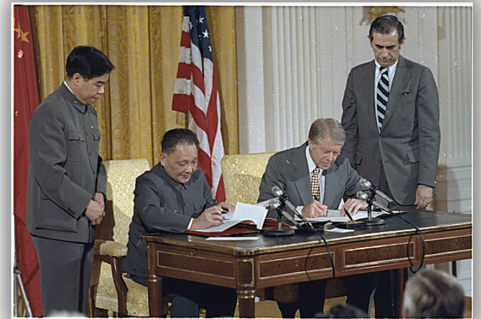
Firestein:

Mr. President, from the early 1970s until perhaps 2017, there was an enduring bipartisan consensus in this country on the value and benefit to the United States of engagement with China. For example, your decision to normalize the diplomatic relationship in 1979 and President George H. W. Bush's subsequent efforts to keep the U.S.-China relationship on track in the wake of the events of 1989 were both rooted in the belief that the long-term interests of the United States – and indeed the cause of China's political, economic and social evolution – were best served by a relationship between the two countries that was normal, functional, healthy, and increasingly robust. Many now reject that belief. What would you say to those who reject the premise that U.S.-China engagement is good for America?

President Carter:

In December 1978, when Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and I announced our decision, we knew that we were opening an era of opportunity for both nations. I have been proud to witness the benefits that have followed. Most important in my opinion has been four decades of peace in East Asia and the Pacific. During the previous four decades both the U.S. and China suffered during numerous violent conflicts in the region. Since then our nations and the entire region have benefited from this peace.

The United States has benefitted. Trade and investment with China have advanced our economy. New jobs were created. Tourism has flourished. Chinese merchandise has made ordinary Americans' lives better. Our universities and colleges welcomed thousands of Chinese students and scholars. Our institutions have gained from the talent of Chinese researchers, and their American experience has influenced modern China.



On Jan. 31, 1979, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and President Jimmy Carter sign diplomatic agreements between the United States and China.
Credit: Jimmy Carter Library.

Firestein:

Mr. President, at the end of 2018, you wrote, "The United States and China need to build their futures together, for themselves and for humanity at large." That is a particularly farsighted and courageous exhortation given the state of U.S. political and public sentiment toward China today. Can we still be hopeful, in 2021, about the prospects for building our futures together? What can both countries do today to advance your inspiring vision?

President Carter:

"Building Hope" is a basic tenet of The Carter Center. I am hopeful about the prospects for building our futures together. I am confident that both the American and Chinese people desire peace and prosperity. Together they can call on their leaders to abandon irrational policies. My 97th birthday falls on China's National Day this year. I hope stability and vitality will be restored to the relationship Deng Xiaoping and I established.

The Carter Center and I take the long view on this relationship and, for that reason, I am hopeful. While the official diplomatic relationship between our countries is just four decades old, we have had positive interactions for centuries. Even when diplomatic tensions are high, The Carter Center, the Bush China Foundation, and other organizations like the China-U.S. Exchange Foundation in Hong Kong focus on promoting people-to-people exchange. Strong business, educational, and personal connections between China and the U.S. create strong roots that help our relationship endure temporary policy disagreements.

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