From the moment President Richard Nixon visited China and signed the Shanghai Communique in 1972, the precedent was set for the extraordinary relationship between the world’s most powerful and the world’s most populous nation for decades to come. As James Mann suggested in his book *About Face*, the unique situation of the United States and China, marked by secrecy, countless concessions, and uneasy negotiations, originated from exceptional circumstances and administrative precedent. From the beginning, the US treated China distinctively, as government officials continually followed Kissinger’s footsteps in dealing with the cunning Communist regime. Many factors contributed to this complex relationship, including diplomacy styles, incorrect assumptions, and, most importantly, the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the glue holding the two nations together has disappeared, and with it the clear intentions of both countries. Now, we are faced with an emerging military and economic superpower of which the future is completely uncertain.

Understanding the origins of the opening of diplomatic relations with China is crucial when evaluating a policy for the future. Traditionally, diplomatic relations between any two countries must be formed under common interests and objectives. In this case, however, these common interests did not include the promotion of democracy, capitalism, or human rights, but were found in the common threat of the Soviet Union. The fear of the Soviets provided the glue that held the US and China together despite obvious disagreements and clashes in fundamental values, such as political ideologies and the Taiwan issue. Nixon sought China’s friendship not for the future but for the present, and this policy of engagement, based on the past, lasted for decades. Secret diplomacy, concessions to China’s “show us that you care” negotiating style, and the
ignoring of human rights violations dating back to Nixon and Kissinger restricted future presidents and established an unavoidable pattern (Mann 88). “Dealing with China was special, kept apart from normal diplomatic and institutional processes,” for it was based on the sole reason of reducing the threat of the Soviet Union (Mann 25).

From the original circumstances of developing relations with China came an outwardly friendly relationship that was constantly plagued by an underlying mistrust and uncertainty. Although the military, economic, and intelligence cooperation between the two powers were useful during the Cold War, the side effects are troubling and potentially destructive. The Tiananmen Square incident and the end of the Cold War, two significant events that changed Sino-American relations forever, gave reason for a reevaluation of the current relationship. Before 1989, American foreign policy regarding China consisted of cooperation and engagement and worked to serve a common objective of containing the Soviet threat. Following the Tiananmen Square incident, however, the outrage of the American public made it impossible for the US to continue treating China as an exceptional case. No longer could we ignore the human rights violations in China or our interests as a global democratic superpower. Similarly, with the end of the Cold War came the dissolution of the foundation and only common interest solidifying friendly relations between the two countries. Now China has their objectives and we have ours, and the underlying mistrust and dissimilar values that had been ignored for so long have finally exposed themselves. We now have to decide how to handle an emerging superpower with overwhelming market potential but uncertain military and political intentions.
Although the economic cooperation has proved beneficial to both countries, the military and intelligence cooperation have possibly enabled a potentially threatening Communist country to become stronger and more capable of hostile action. Now, in the absence of a clear common interest to hold the friendship together, President Bush is faced with a foreign policy decision that could dramatically alter the global situation. In any foreign policy decision, the most difficult obstacles to overcome are the misperceptions of the other side’s capabilities and intentions and the idea of a “mirror image” view of the situation. While the US perceives its role in Asia as a status quo power devoted to peace and stability, the Chinese resent us as a unilateral hegemon interfering with the rights of individual sovereignty. A fundamental mistrust exists between the two powers, and both predict a potential military threat from the other. In the words of Hu Jintao, who is preparing to replace Jiang Zemin as president, “the hostile forces in the US will never give up their attempt to subjugate China” (Safire). Viewing the US in “hostile” terms is a major setback to the ideas of engagement we have relied on in the past. We now have to look to the future to protect ourselves and uphold our fundamental principles of human rights protection and the promotion of democracy while at the same time containing the threat of aggression.

Again, as in the era of Nixon and Kissinger, this new policy requires that China be treated in a unique matter. The traditional ideas of liberalism and realism, engagement and containment, do not clearly supply a resolution to dealing with China. Containing the communist regime would inevitably lead to another Cold War environment, as well as harm both countries economically. A full policy of engagement, however, ignores the continual human rights violations as well as the potential military and power threat of
China. Although terrorism has been suggested as a new common ground for diplomatic relations, in reality China is not as important as other US allies in the war on terrorism and has not seriously committed to support any efforts outside of Afghanistan. In the absence of ideological commonality, the US now must protect its own democratic, moral, and economical interests in every way possible while continuing to engage with China. By combining the ideas of containment and engagement, the US would be increasing interdependence and the costs of aggressive Chinese behavior while defending itself and its interests at the same time. In the future, the US must demonstrate its strength and intentions by following through on ultimatums and policy decisions, avoiding the “weak” decisions of the Clinton administration. At all costs, we must avoid any more concessions regarding our defense of Taiwan against China aggression in order to secure the US position as a power in Asia and prove its loyalty to other allies such as Japan and South Korea. While military and economic cooperation should continue, arms and Western technology sales should be severely limited. Cooperation will increase security, but China has proved untrustworthy in the area of nuclear proliferation to countries like Pakistan; and although a stronger Chinese military was necessary during the Cold War, today it would only increase the threat to the US as a democratic superpower as well as to our allies in the region. The old idea that “China set the rules, and Americans were supposed to follow them” has ceased to apply to our foreign relations (Mann 114). As Shi Yinhong, an international affairs specialist said, “The US must neither be too fearful nor too nervous. In the end, the United States has a much bigger influence on China than China has on the United States” (Pomfret). We must use this influence to secure our place as the sole global superpower.
References

