



RCAS Commentary

Back to the Future

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September 27, 2025

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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Back to the Future

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This year is the 80th anniversary of the Chinese victory in its War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression, which was an important milestone in global history, along with the victory of the Allies in the worldwide anti-fascist war. Both the Chinese and American people were fighting together in the smoke and debris of the 1940s, pushing back fascism. Now, eight decades on, with geopolitical tension, the spirit of fraternity supplanted by suspicion, we are left to wonder how wartime allies became today's rivals.



▲China showcased its developing military might at a parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II on Sept 3, 2025. The parade, which lasted about 90 minutes, exhibited missiles, fighter jets and other military hardware, some of it displayed publicly for the first time. (Photo: Xinhua / Liu Xu).

Despite the upsurge in tariffs, decoupling in trade, strategic encirclement and a freeze in diplomatic ties, there remains one key fact: The relationship between China and the United States is currently one of the most important bilateral relations in the 21st century. The way the two parties investigate and discover their shared history allows for a stabilizing effect or explains why the problem can lead to a prolonged confrontation.

China and the United States developed a strong relationship on battlefields and airfields during World War II, which included American pilots known as the Flying

Tigers. These pilots participated in life-threatening missions while working in areas where Japanese fighter aircraft were required to provide air cover.

Examples of weapons Washington has employed lately include trade wars with tariffs and wide technology bans on Chinese firms like Huawei and SMIC, as well as export controls to deter China's efforts to create semiconductors. In the military domain, the U.S. has been steadily growing its presence in the Indo-Pacific by establishing new bases and drills under the AUKUS pacts. From the South China Sea to the Taiwan Strait, American warships sail with ever-increasing frequency, moves that Beijing sees not as stabilizing but provocative and dangerous.

China, for its part, has responded with rising assertiveness. It sees Washington's efforts to contain its legitimate growth and deny it a valid role on the world stage. In speeches, white papers and diplomatic communiques, Beijing has emphasized the importance of mutual respect, sovereignty and non-interference. Eighty years ago, the world was at war, a war in which more than 70 million lives were lost. A point of convergence existed between China and the United States, despite their essential differences in culture and politics, as well as their shared concerns over aggression and the need for peace.

Such a collaborative spirit in the face of a common enemy is needed now more than ever. The modern-day challenges are not easy: climate change, pandemics, terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Chinese and American soldiers once dined with one another, fought alongside one another and at times died with one another. Their epic struggle still lives in the memories of many Chinese families who were especially touched by the bombings of Chongqing or the cruel actions of the Japanese in Yunnan province.

China has never forgotten. The image of Sino-American cooperation during wartime continues to have symbolic power in museums, textbooks and national commemorations. It was an era in which huge forces stuck together against a familiar and well-known enemy, one in which ideology was a minor thing compared with a shared cause, and in which the notion of mutual trust was a daily reality, not an idealistic dream.

The end of World War II should have marked the beginning of a new era of cooperation. However, the world that emerged from the burnt remains of war was soon divided again, not by borders but by ideological lines. The either/or logic of capitalism and communism promoted by the Cold War pitted China and the United States against each other in a divide that would take decades to heal.

Although Chinese civil war came to an end with the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Washington chose to accept the Republic of China as the legitimate government, and foreign relations were suspended. Worse, U.S. policy early in the Cold War was more focused on containment and less on comprehensive dialogue.

However, what occurred in the shadow of the Tokyo tribunals was the worst — protecting the lives of Japanese war criminals, particularly those involved in Unit 731, the chemical and biological weapons operation. Responsible for one of the most horrific instances of human experimentation and torture in history, this secret division of the Imperial Japanese Army conducted live vivisections and chemical and biological tests on Chinese civilians and prisoners of war. Rather than seeking justice, American intelligence services granted immunity for members of Unit 731 in exchange for their experimental data.

Such a betrayal to gain an advantage in biological warfare against the Soviet Union exacted a heavy price on the Chinese psyche. It was not perceived as a moral failure only but as an example of the kind of realpolitik Washington was ready to adopt, despite its cost in terms of truth and justice.

Despite this setback, the thaw in the 1970s was dramatic. One of the twists was the visit of U.S. President Richard Nixon to Beijing in 1972. The practice of strategic necessity — i.e., the Sino-Soviet division — led China to re-link with the United States. As early as 1979, diplomatic relations were fully normalized. China's reform and opening-up policy, initiated by Deng Xiaoping, was supported by the U.S. and helped China integrate into the global economy.

Chinese scientists, engineers and policymakers began to seek educations at American universities. American businesses arrived in China with technological advancements, financial expertise and administrative experience. The accession of China to the World Trade Organization in 2001 was packaged as a win-win event — a rising China would become a responsible stakeholder in an American-led liberal order, and American corporations would have a massive new market.

During this stage, trust built during the war was restored to a degree. However, at the bottom of it all, strategic distrust remained. Beijing considered the military relations Washington established with Taiwan, as well as alliances with countries in the Asia-Pacific region, as a threat. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers became increasingly concerned about the rapid emergence of China as a significant force in the world. The story of convergence became a struggle for power.

Alliances formed intuitively, which is why they persist. But Chinese-American cooperation during wartime was the result of human contact, not high-level

arrangements. Modern diplomacy will need to revive that spirit. Second, strategic trust must be earned; it cannot be demanded. The postwar shielding of Japanese war criminals may have been in America's interest during the Cold War, but it was an enormous blow to moral credibility. Similarly, today's moves involving technology bans and military encirclements cannot be separated from the historical reverberations. Third, the world is too interconnected now to think in zero-sum terms. Competition, if channelled constructively, can fuel innovation and progress, but if it's weaponized, it will only lead to resentment, division and ultimately, conflict.

In tense times, it's tempting to retreat into grievance and suspicion. The ghosts of the past, including betrayal, occupation and war, loom large. But nations, like individuals, are not defined only by what happened to them but by how they decide to respond. China and the United States have both been through extraordinary transformations since 1945. They are no longer wartime allies or Cold War adversaries but grown-up powers with responsibility to the world. They must know that the world cannot afford another great power clash, not in an age of nuclear weapons and planetary crises.

A new model of coexistence is not only desirable, it is critical. This is not to ignore differences or pretend that problems do not exist. It simply means recognizing these things honestly, dealing with them responsibly and remembering that peace is always more difficult and more precious than war.

As China marks the 80th anniversary of its victory, it does not do so with triumphalism but with solemn remembrance. The sacrifices of millions, the heroism of Chinese and American fighters and the indomitable hope for peace are not ghosts of the past but stars pointing the way to the future. The question now is whether we will respect past sacrifices with wisdom or waste them in a fog of rivalry. Let history not be a chain that binds us to conflict but a bridge that leads to understanding. For the sake of the Chinese and American people — and indeed for all humanity — it is time to rediscover what we once knew: that even in the darkest hour, unity is possible, and peace is worth fighting for.

This article was first published at China US Focus, Hong Kong, September.19, 2025, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/back-to-the-future-25880>.

About Author



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