

A Diplomat in Asia *An Interview with Ambassador Nicholas Platt*



*Ambassador Nicholas Platt is one of America's most distinguished Asia experts. Educated at Harvard College and the John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, Ambassador Platt began his thirty-four-year Foreign Service career with assignments in Hong Kong (1964–68), Beijing (1973–74) and Tokyo (1974–77), and culminated with service as the US Ambassador to the Philippines (1987–1991) and Pakistan (1991–92). As explained in his *China Boys: How US Relations with the PRC Began and Grew* (New Academic Publication/VELLUM Books, 2010), Platt was one of the earliest “China Watchers” in the US State Department and was a member of President Richard Nixon’s staff when the President made his historic 1972 trip to China. Platt also held a number of positions in Washington, including National Security Council Staff Member for Asian Affairs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, and Acting Assistant Secretary of State for UN Affairs. Ambassador Platt was President of the Asia Society from 1992 to 2004.*

Editor’s Note: In the interview that follows with EAA Associate Editor Peter K. Frost, Ambassador Platt provides “insider” glimpses of Mao Zedong; Richard Nixon; and insightful assessments of past, current, and future China-related topics.

Peter: *As you explain in your fascinating book, Mao Zedong’s 1972 decision to invite President Nixon to China was a turning point in US–China relations. Why did Chairman Mao do this?*

Ambassador Platt: Chairman Mao was worried about a possible military invasion by the Soviet Union and calculated that a move toward the United States would help protect his country. The Soviets had built up their military forces along the border with China during the late 1960s. The Chinese responded with a near-hysterical national campaign to “dig deep and store grain.” In 1969, fighting had broken out between Soviet and Chinese forces along the Ussuri River. Mao had read Nixon’s 1967 article in *Foreign Affairs* decrying an international system that left China out and believed he would respond to signals suggesting that the PRC and the US move closer. He was right.

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Peter: *What sort of problems did President Nixon have to negotiate? Are these still around today, or have new issues—like cyber spying—taken over?*

Ambassador Platt: The agenda included the major issues left over from US support of the Nationalists during the Chinese civil war, particularly the status of Taiwan. The Shanghai Communiqué, negotiated by Dr. Kissinger, acknowledged Beijing’s primacy, but left final resolution of Taiwan’s status up to the Chinese sides in the future, where it remains an issue today. The immediate problems negotiated during Nixon’s visit dealt with the mechanics of forging a working relationship: trade, investment, travel, legal claims, exchanges in culture, science, education, and sport. The solutions devised jump-started the biggest and busiest bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century. Cooperation in each of these areas has created additional complicated issues, and technological advance has added new ones like cyber spying.

Peter: *Your comment in your book that President Nixon’s performance in China “confirmed for me Nixon’s reputation as the great foreign policy president of his time” shows an interesting side to one of our least popular presidents.*

Ambassador Platt: Historical surveys written a century from now will probably limit themselves to two sentences about Richard Nixon: one dealing with his opening to China and the other his resignation as president for misuse of power. The China move had a profound impact on the dynamics of international relations, presaging an end to the Việt Nam War, and ultimately the Cold War itself. Judging from his own modest description of the visit as “the week that changed the world,” Nixon knew it. But what impressed me, even more than his grasp of the strategic picture, was his detailed knowledge of the policies and the personalities of world leaders as revealed in that final meeting in Shanghai.

Peter: *Your book also describes what it was like to be in China with your family. Can you still recognize traditional Chinese values today, or have China’s stunning economic growth and things like Weibo (a Chinese Internet service like Twitter) brought radically new changes?*

Ambassador Platt: Traditional Chinese values are more alive today than they were in 1973. Then, the country was recovering from the most violent period of the Cultural Revolution, which attacked family loyalties, Confucian teaching, material incentives, and individual initiative, among other values. The Chinese we met in 1973 were polite, curious, cautious, and suspicious but seemed stunned, compared to people we knew in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Deng Xiaoping’s reforms freed Chinese to do what came naturally, unleashing a tidal wave of economic growth and materialism, which ironically has led to a search for “something to believe in.” The Internet has not changed, but instead magnified traditional values, providing the Chinese people with a way of expressing themselves and organizing collective action that frightens the government. The prevailing blend of individual entrepreneurship, family ties, and official relationships that drives China today is traditional practice on steroids.

Peter: *How about other issues? Can the current regime solve such problems as growing inequality, pollution, and corruption?*

Ambassador Platt: The Chinese Communist Party knows that its credibility and long-term hold on power depend on the way it faces these problems. They cannot be solved soon, but only coped with over time. Corruption is endemic and will be dealt with case by show trial case. There can be no sustainable solution as long as the Judiciary remains under party control.

Our ties with the PRC are like the weather, with cold high-altitude winds and temperatures affecting issues like territorial disputes, climate change, cyber espionage, and military relations; while, closer to the surface of the earth, warmer, more moderate conditions govern unprecedented levels of public interactivity.

The technology and regulatory frameworks exist to reduce pollution of air, water, food, and medicine. Other countries have shown the way. But the party will be constrained by the requirement for enough economic growth to maintain political and social stability. The delicate balancing act will slow but certainly not stop progress.

Inequality is ages old in China and has defied all radical solutions, most recently Maoist policies. The government needs to be seen as trying to reduce the gaps and acting fairly.

Peter: *What's behind China's push to claim disputed territory? Is this about getting energy resources, appealing to nationalism, or what?*

Ambassador Platt: The growth of China's power has refocused its attention on long-standing territorial disputes, reinforcing Beijing's determination to reclaim its place as the leading power in the region and raising levels of anxiety among neighboring countries. History and nationalism raise the stakes, particularly where Japan is concerned. At home, the party needs public support for sweeping domestic economic reforms and cannot be seen as weak. The need for energy resources is a factor but seems a lower priority for now. Ironically, China is treating its most serious territorial issue, Taiwan, with patience and restraint.

Peter: *As President of the Asia Society, you have worked to increase our knowledge of Asia. How well-informed do you think Americans are?*

Ambassador Platt: My twelve years at the Asia Society coincided with a surge of interaction between Asia and the United States—in trade, investment, travel, sports, and culture. The Internet became a public tool during that time, lowering dramatically earlier barriers to communication between ordinary people, companies, museums, sports teams, universities, and governments. The number of Americans who needed to know about Asia has grown along with the capability to transcend complex differences. That said, Asians know a lot more about America than we do about them. We have a long way yet to go.

Peter: *Is there anything I should have asked but didn't?*

Ambassador Platt: The future of US-China relations will determine our long-term relationship with Asia. Our ties with the PRC are like the weather, with cold high-altitude winds and temperatures affecting issues like territorial disputes, climate change, cyber espionage, and military relations; while, closer to the surface of the earth, warmer, more moderate conditions govern unprecedented levels of public interactivity. At least 15,000 Americans and Chinese get on planes every day and go in each others' directions to trade, tour, study, or make deals. Just last month, five new direct civil aviation links were established between secondary cities in China and the US. The governments set the tone, but private individuals provide the energy. This dynamic, unforeseen when we first got together, makes me optimistic about future forecasts, whatever turbulence may lie ahead.

Peter: *Ambassador Platt, thanks for doing the interview!* ■

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