

h-diplo **Article REVIEW**

Macabe Keliher. “Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy.” *Diplomatic History* 31.2 (April 2007): 227-258.

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Markets or ideology? Friend or foe? What determines the nature of the relationship between the United States and China and exactly what is that relationship? Perhaps now more than ever the twists and turns of Sino-American policy –and its origins—may have real meaning for Americans. It is impossible to step inside a Wal-Mart, or any other discount store, and not be inundated with goods made in China. From Frisbees to flags, pants to plants, and with automobiles looming in the near future, the Chinese have gained a trade advantage in the United States market that was the stuff of fantasy in the nineteenth century. Except Americans assumed, of course, that the Chinese would provide the bottomless market for *American* goods rather than the reverse. While Americans eagerly consume low-cost Chinese products, domestic issues of the environment, democracy, human rights, and the repressive encounter on Tiananmen Square have been placed on the diplomatic back burner.

Concurrently, most Americans appear more concerned with “rogue nations” constructing a nuclear missile than the Chinese selling them one. They tend to ignore Beijing’s foreign policy and only recently have the troubling by-products of a seemingly benign Chinese capitalism begun to appear on the pages of American newspapers. Forgotten in the euphoria—at least temporarily—is the success of Mao Zedong’s Revolution, the Korean War, Taiwan, and Chinese threats to literally all of its neighbors in the ensuing decades. With the broad Pacific separating the U.S. from the Orient, for the preceding century China was viewed as a mega-commercial opportunity rather than a hegemonic threat to Asian, European, or United States interest. The disconnect is striking. Not surprisingly, perhaps, markets have trumped ideology. Traditionally, however, the debate has not focused upon ideology, but rather upon markets—and whether they would be dominated by U.S. rivals, particularly the English or Japanese.

Macabe Keliher has weighed into the debate over *when* and *why* Americans developed a China policy in his recent article in *Diplomatic History*. The author contends that historians have over-emphasized the early twentieth century’s Open Door Era, replete with John Hay’s notes and the acquisition of the Philippines, as the point of inception for a U.S.-China policy and the development of the China market. He is also critical of those scholars who perceived an increasingly close bond with Great Britain -- the world’s greatest imperial power following the defeat of Napoleon -- which encouraged a compliant U.S. to follow the Crown’s lead in Asia. Instead, Keliher argues, we need to

look more closely at the 1840s, especially the events surrounding the Treaty of Wangxia, to locate the genesis of American policy. Following John Quincy Adams' earlier caveat that the U.S. should not become "a cock boat in the wake of a British man-of-war," Keliher contends that Washington also cooperated with American merchants and shippers in recognizing the British threat to U.S. interests in the Pacific and advocated an aggressive diplomatic effort to combat their dominance. That effort culminated in the "Tyler Doctrine" for the Pacific and the first formal Sino-American commercial treaty negotiated by Caleb Cushing in 1844.

Keliher illustrates how historians such as Tyler Dennett and John King Fairbank stressed the deference of the U.S. to Britain in China in the nineteenth century at the same time that the two nations challenged each other repeatedly over territory, borders, and especially markets from Maine to Montevideo. Since the drums of war beat loudly on several occasions, Keliher finds the cooperation over China to be a strange, and unlikely, anomaly. Although for decades Americans had linked their greatness with Asia, only by the 1840s had American merchants found a ready market in China for furs, cotton, and opium. The increased revenues—into the millions of dollar -- seemed a portent of greater riches on the horizon. British successes in the recent Opium War (1842) threatened that promise and demanded action by Washington to establish American commerce on a parallel footing. Keliher indicates that Cushing, a noted Anglophobe and the scion of a prominent Massachusetts shipping family, became the logical choice for such a mission.

Keliher's article is well documented and his arguments convincing. His manuscript was no doubt submitted too early to consider recent monographs by Edward P. Crapol (*John Tyler: The Accidental President*) and myself (*Broken Glass: Caleb Cushing and the Shattering of the Union*) which are in fundamental agreement regarding the importance of the Tyler-Cushing mission and the aggressiveness of American policy in China and along the Pacific rim. Crapol concedes, however, that Americans owed a considerable debt to British belligerence which paved the way for Cushing's success: "In a delicious irony, it was the hated British who gave John Tyler the opportunity to knock on and open China's door." (p. 173) Concurrently, Foreign Secretary Lord Aberdeen recognized the strength of the American presence in Hawaii and "uncharacteristically . . . said no to further expansion of its empire." (p. 173)

Arguably, merchant interest and U.S. assertiveness began even *before* the timeline Keliher defines. Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren sent agents to Central America with the notion of constructing a trans-Isthmian route that would facilitate U.S. trade with both the western coast of North America and the Far East. Jackson, too, dispatched Edmund Roberts in the mid-1830s with an eye towards improving American commerce with Cochin China, China, and perhaps even Japan. While the merchants and diplomats promoted their interests, the vital role of religion should not be ignored. New England clerics maintained a high profile in China and served to advance their national presence—certainly more so than their English counterparts. Cushing remained

unimpressed, referring to the preachers as “mere school wardens to children” and their missions “a misappropriation of funds.”

Keliher correctly identifies Cushing as a longtime enemy of the British Lion and a major proponent of Tyler’s China policy. He was, however, not Secretary of State Daniel Webster’s first choice for the China mission. That honor was intended to go to Minister to Britain Edward Everett -- hardly an Anglophobe -- and Congressmen approving funding for the assignment assumed that he would accept the appointment. Everett refused; he had little interest in abandoning London for the Orient. Meanwhile, Cushing had just been denied the post of Secretary of the Treasury by the Senate and thus became “the available man.” And if the British were wary of or threatened by the Cushing mission, they did not reveal it. The American diplomat could only offer gratitude for the cooperation of Crown officials from Gibraltar to Canton whose hospitality included a camel ride to the Sphinx in Egypt and a tiger hunt in India. Cushing found a similarly warm reception when he visited the Governor at Hong Kong, Sir Henry Pottinger. Cushing also did not hesitate to imitate the tactics of his rival in dealing with the Chinese. When the imperial legate dragged his feet in negotiations, the American threatened the use of naval force -- a demonstration of “gunboat diplomacy” that would have delighted Lord Palmerston. Importantly, of course, the U.S. did not share the British appetite for territorial acquisition in China -- much to the relief of the Emperor’s agent. Finally, while Keliher makes a valid point about the potentially critical nature of the China trade, it is arguably hyperbolic to ask whether the “U.S. economy would rise or fall” as a result. While Americans may have fantasized about the Orient, European -- even Latin American -- imports and exports to and from the U.S. dwarfed American commerce with Asia. Even so, Cushing’s Treaty of Wangxia established “most favored nation” status for the United States and protected American interests in China effectively for more than half a century.

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