

Significance Of Religion In Sino-American Diplomatic Relations

Posted on July 27, 2022

Relations between the United States and China are usually discussed through trade, technology, military competition, Taiwan, the South China Sea, supply chains, and global influence. Religion may appear secondary to these strategic issues, yet it has become an enduring part of bilateral diplomacy. The original essay correctly argues that religious freedom affects the relationship because the two governments approach religion through sharply different legal and political traditions. The United States presents freedom of religion or belief as a universal human right and a formal foreign-policy concern. The Chinese government treats religious activity primarily through sovereignty, social stability, national unity, and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. These different frameworks turn domestic religious policy into an international dispute. (“United States Commission on”, 2026)

Religion is not merely a convenient excuse used by one side during trade negotiations, although strategic interests influence when and how governments emphasize the issue. Concerns about Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, house-church Protestants, underground Catholics, Falun Gong practitioners, and other communities have generated U.S. reports, sanctions, legislation, congressional hearings, and diplomatic statements. Beijing rejects much of this criticism as interference in internal affairs, political containment, and misrepresentation of policies aimed at counterterrorism, development, and social order. Both the human-rights substance and the geopolitical context must therefore be examined together.

Religion in International Relations

For much of the twentieth century, some international-relations theories expected modernization to reduce religion’s political significance. Events after the Cold War challenged that assumption. Religious identity influenced democratization, nationalism, conflict, peacebuilding, humanitarian action, migration, and transnational advocacy. The attacks of September 11, 2001, made religion and security especially visible in U.S. foreign policy, though the relationship should not be reduced to terrorism.

Religious communities cross national borders through institutions, media, pilgrimage, education, charitable networks, and diaspora relationships. A government’s treatment of believers can affect its international reputation and relations with countries where those communities have social or political influence. Religion thus operates as a matter of rights, security, identity, and soft power.

The United States' Religious-Freedom Framework

The United States Constitution limits government establishment of religion and protects free exercise, though American law and practice contain continuing disputes about the boundaries of those principles. Internationally, the United States institutionalized religious-freedom advocacy through the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. The law created an ambassador-at-large and annual State Department reporting and established the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom as an independent, bipartisan federal commission. ("United States Commission on", 2026)

These institutions monitor conditions, recommend diplomatic action, and identify countries whose governments engage in or tolerate severe violations. Religious freedom therefore has a bureaucratic presence that can continue across presidential administrations even when emphasis and policy methods change.

Country Reports and Designations

Annual reporting gathers evidence on laws, arrests, violence, registration, worship, religious education, conversion, dress, property, and conscientious belief. The State Department may designate a country as a "Country of Particular Concern" for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations. USCIRF makes independent recommendations but does not itself determine executive-branch designations.

China has repeatedly been treated as one of the most serious cases. USCIRF's 2026 Annual Report, covering conditions during 2025, again recommended that China receive the highest level of concern. This continuity shows that religion has not disappeared from the bilateral agenda with changes in trade negotiations or presidential administrations. ("Congressional-Executive Commission on China", 2025)

China's Constitutional and Regulatory Approach

China's Constitution states that citizens enjoy freedom of religious belief and that the state protects "normal religious activities." The meaning of "normal," however, is defined through law, regulation, administrative practice, and Communist Party policy. Religious organizations are expected to register and operate through state-approved structures, accept government supervision, and avoid activity authorities classify as threatening national security, social order, education, health, or foreign control.

The government officially recognizes Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism through state-controlled national religious organizations. Other religious or spiritual groups may lack legal recognition or be prohibited. Registration can provide buildings, clergy training, publication, and public activity, but it also subjects communities to monitoring and political requirements. Some

believers refuse registration because they understand state control as incompatible with religious authority.

Sinicization of Religion

Under Xi Jinping, the government has intensified a policy commonly translated as the “Sinicization of religion.” Official explanations describe it as adapting religion to Chinese culture, socialist society, and national conditions. Critics argue that the policy requires religious teaching, leadership, architecture, education, and institutions to submit to Communist Party ideology and political loyalty.

USCIRF reported in May 2026 that recent laws and policies had further codified this approach and intensified restrictions. Religious organizations may be required to promote patriotic education, display state symbols, study political doctrine, and ensure that clergy and teaching align with Party leadership. The dispute is therefore not simply about whether religion may exist. It concerns who holds final authority over doctrine, personnel, institutions, and public expression.

Uyghur Muslims and Xinjiang

The original essay focuses strongly on Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Since the late 2010s, extensive reporting by governments, researchers, journalists, international organizations, and survivors has described mass detention, intrusive surveillance, political indoctrination, restrictions on Islamic practice, family separation, labor transfers, and destruction or alteration of religious and cultural sites. Estimates of detention have varied, but the scale has been widely described as affecting hundreds of thousands and possibly more than one million people at the height of the campaign.

Chinese authorities have described the facilities as vocational education and counter-extremism centers and have argued that policy reduced terrorism and improved employment. Officials deny accusations of systematic persecution and portray outside criticism as politically motivated. Critics respond that broad indicators of religiosity and identity were treated as security risks and that coercion extended far beyond people accused of violent conduct.

Human Rights and Security Claims

Governments have a legitimate duty to prevent violence, but security policy must distinguish criminal conduct from peaceful belief, language, dress, family life, and worship. Collective suspicion based on ethnicity or religion undermines individual rights. International criticism has therefore focused not only on detention but on whether ordinary cultural and religious identity was treated as evidence of extremism.

The Xinjiang dispute has become one of the strongest links between religion, human rights, trade, and supply-chain policy. Forced-labor concerns led the United States to restrict imports connected with Xinjiang unless importers can meet demanding evidentiary requirements. Religion thus influences commercial policy through allegations about how labor and political control operate.

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is another major source of diplomatic tension. Chinese authorities state that Tibet has experienced economic development, poverty reduction, improved infrastructure, and protected cultural heritage. Tibetan advocates and international monitors report controls over monasteries, religious education, language, movement, political expression, and devotion to the Dalai Lama.

The future selection of the Dalai Lama is especially sensitive. The Chinese government claims legal and historical authority over the recognition process, while Tibetan religious authorities argue that succession is a spiritual matter. This disagreement combines religion with sovereignty, ethnic identity, and the political future of Tibet.

Protestant House Churches

Protestant communities may worship through the state-recognized Three-Self Patriotic Movement or in independent house churches. House churches vary greatly in size, theology, and political activity. Some function quietly for years, while others face raids, fines, property closure, detention, or pressure to register.

Authorities often frame enforcement through building, education, registration, fraud, or public-order law rather than explicitly punishing belief. This makes diplomatic assessment difficult because the legal form of a case may differ from its religious context. Critics ask whether neutral regulations are applied selectively to communities refusing political control.

Catholicism and the Vatican

Catholic relations involve an additional international actor: the Holy See. The principal dispute concerns the appointment of bishops and whether authority belongs to the pope, Chinese institutions, or a negotiated process. A provisional Vatican-China agreement on bishop appointments sought to reduce division between state-recognized and underground Catholic communities, but its terms and implementation have remained controversial.

The issue also intersects with Taiwan because the Holy See maintains formal diplomatic relations with Taipei. Religious diplomacy therefore influences recognition, church governance, and cross-strait politics simultaneously.

Falun Gong and Other Prohibited Groups

Falun Gong has been prohibited in China since 1999, and practitioners have reported detention, imprisonment, torture, forced ideological transformation, and other abuses. The Chinese government classifies the movement as an illegal cult and defends suppression as protection of society. International human-rights organizations dispute the proportionality and legality of the response.

Other groups designated as cults or illegal organizations also face severe punishment. The terminology matters because labeling a movement dangerous can remove ordinary procedural sympathy before evidence is evaluated. At the same time, religious-freedom analysis does not require accepting every group's doctrine or conduct; it requires distinguishing peaceful belief from actions that legitimately violate law.

China's Sovereignty Argument

China consistently argues that religious affairs fall within domestic sovereignty and that foreign governments use human rights selectively to weaken competitors. Officials point to U.S. racial conflict, anti-Muslim discrimination, hate crimes, and restrictions debated within Western societies as evidence of hypocrisy. They also argue that U.S. foreign policy sometimes ignores abuses by strategic partners while condemning rivals.

This critique has some force as an assessment of inconsistent diplomacy. States frequently apply moral principles unevenly. However, inconsistency does not prove that the underlying religious-freedom allegations are false. A government's own failures should reduce self-righteousness and increase commitment to evidence, but they do not eliminate the rights of people living under another government.

Religion as a Genuine Concern and Strategic Instrument

The original essay asks whether Washington is sincere or uses religion to gain leverage in trade and politics. The answer need not be one or the other. U.S. officials, legislators, religious organizations, diaspora groups, and human-rights advocates may possess genuine concern, while the state also understands sanctions and public criticism as strategic tools. Foreign policy commonly combines values and interests.

China similarly combines ideological conviction, security objectives, national integration, and international image. Policies may be sincerely presented as protection against separatism or extremism while also strengthening Party control. Diplomatic analysis should not assume that one

hidden motive explains every action.

The 2020 Turning Point

The original essay refers to President Donald Trump's signing of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act in June 2020. That legislation required reporting and supported sanctions related to abuses in Xinjiang. The period marked a shift from criticism through annual reports toward a wider set of financial, visa, trade, and supply-chain measures. (Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, n.d.)

The significance of the legislation extends beyond one administration. Subsequent U.S. policy continued to address Xinjiang through sanctions, import restrictions, congressional attention, and diplomatic statements. Religion and ethnicity became embedded in the broader strategic competition rather than remaining a temporary dispute connected only with 2020 trade talks.

Sanctions

Targeted sanctions can restrict travel or financial access for officials and entities linked with abuses. They communicate condemnation and may impose personal cost. Broad sanctions, however, can harm ordinary people, reduce dialogue, or produce retaliation. Their effectiveness depends on clear objectives, international coordination, evidence, and enforcement.

China has responded with sanctions against U.S. officials, researchers, and organizations and has condemned unilateral measures as violations of sovereignty. Reciprocal sanctions can reduce access and make independent verification harder.

Trade and Forced-Labor Policy

Forced-labor allegations connect religious freedom with corporate responsibility. Companies sourcing cotton, solar components, minerals, electronics, or other goods may face difficulty tracing labor through complex supply chains. The United States has adopted a presumption against certain Xinjiang-linked imports, shifting the burden toward importers.

Corporate due diligence should avoid treating every person or product from Xinjiang as automatically tainted while also recognizing that state restrictions can make reliable auditing difficult. Workers may be unable to speak freely in official interviews, and suppliers may conceal subcontracting. Ethical trade policy requires credible evidence and transparent procedures.

Diplomatic Dialogue

Public condemnation can protect visibility, but private diplomacy may be necessary for prisoner release, family reunification, clerical access, or practical improvements. Dialogue should not become silence, and criticism should not eliminate every channel of communication. The two governments cooperate or negotiate on issues such as climate, public health, finance, and security even while disagreeing sharply on rights.

Religious diplomacy may involve officials, scholars, faith leaders, diaspora communities, and international organizations. Exchanges can reduce misunderstanding, but participants require freedom to speak rather than carefully staged tours alone.

Information and Verification

The original essay notes the absence of a free press and restrictions on social media. Limited independent access makes verification difficult. China organizes official visits and releases policy documents, while outside researchers use satellite imagery, procurement records, leaked documents, survivor testimony, demographic data, and open-source investigation.

Each source has limits. Survivor testimony is essential but may not represent every location; satellite images require interpretation; government reports may reflect policy priorities; Chinese official data may omit coercion. Strong analysis triangulates multiple forms of evidence and states uncertainty instead of repeating the most dramatic claim without context.

Transnational Repression and Diaspora Communities

Religious-freedom disputes do not stop at China's borders. Uyghur, Tibetan, Christian, Falun Gong, and other activists abroad have reported pressure on relatives, surveillance, threats, and attempts to silence public activity. USCIRF and other institutions identify transnational repression as a growing concern.

Host governments have a duty to protect lawful speech and association while investigating foreign interference through evidence and due process. Diaspora communities also shape bilateral politics by testifying, organizing, voting, and maintaining connections with people inside China.

Religion and Soft Power

A country's treatment of religious communities affects its soft power. China presents itself as a civilization of harmony, development, noninterference, and respect for cultural diversity. Reports of demolished sites, detained clergy, or forced political instruction weaken that message among international religious audiences.

The United States similarly damages its credibility when domestic hate crimes, discrimination, or political rhetoric appear inconsistent with universal freedom. Soft power depends less on perfect performance than on whether institutions acknowledge failure, permit criticism, and provide remedies.

Taiwan and Religious Freedom

Taiwan complicates Sino-American religious diplomacy because it has developed a pluralistic religious environment and democratic protections while remaining at the center of strategic tension. U.S. engagement with Taiwan is not primarily religious, but contrasting political systems influence perceptions of Chinese cultural identity and freedom.

The Vatican's diplomatic recognition of Taiwan and negotiations with Beijing demonstrate that religious institutions can affect formal state relations. Any change in recognition would carry symbolic consequences beyond church administration.

Can Religious Diplomacy Improve Relations?

Religious public diplomacy can create contact among communities, universities, charities, and cultural institutions. It may humanize a relationship otherwise dominated by military and economic rivalry. Cooperation around heritage preservation, disaster relief, aging, poverty, or interfaith education could build limited trust.

Such diplomacy cannot substitute for rights. Carefully managed conferences are not meaningful when independent clergy or believers cannot participate freely. Engagement is strongest when it creates space for honest disagreement rather than serving only as image management.

Risks of Politicizing Religion

When religion becomes a geopolitical weapon, believers can face greater suspicion. Chinese authorities may portray independent communities as agents of foreign influence, while U.S. debate may reduce complex Chinese religious life to evidence against the entire country. Religious

communities then become symbols in a rivalry they do not control.

Policy should distinguish criticism of government conduct from hostility toward Chinese people, culture, or citizens abroad. It should also avoid treating Christianity as the only meaningful measure of freedom. Protection must extend to Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists, traditional practices, new movements, atheists, and people who change or reject belief.

Policy Principles

U.S. policy should use verified evidence, apply standards consistently, coordinate with allies, protect refugees and diaspora activists, and target responsible institutions rather than entire populations. Sanctions should include clear legal criteria and review. Trade measures should be accompanied by practical guidance for companies and protection against discriminatory profiling.

China could improve international trust by allowing independent worship, reducing political requirements for doctrine, permitting credible access to affected regions, releasing people detained for peaceful religious activity, and separating security enforcement from ordinary cultural and religious practice. These steps would not require abandoning sovereignty; they would demonstrate that sovereignty includes protection of citizens' rights.

Conclusion

Religion is a significant and continuing factor in Sino-American diplomatic relations. It operates beside trade, technology, military competition, and geopolitics rather than replacing them. The United States treats freedom of religion or belief as a universal right and has built reporting, designation, sanction, and legislative mechanisms around that principle. China treats religion through Party leadership, national unity, security, and the Sinicization policy.

The condition of Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, independent Christians, Catholics, Falun Gong practitioners, and other communities has made domestic Chinese regulation an international issue. Beijing's claim that Washington uses religion strategically does not by itself answer the documented concerns. At the same time, U.S. credibility depends on consistency, evidence, and willingness to confront religious discrimination at home and among partners.

The original essay was right to predict that religion could intensify diplomatic tension. By 2026, it remains embedded in sanctions, import policy, public reporting, diaspora activism, and strategic competition. A more constructive relationship would require China to permit greater independent religious life and the United States to pursue rights without turning believers into instruments of rivalry. Religious freedom is most credible when it protects people rather than merely strengthens a government's negotiating position.

References

Congressional-Executive Commission on China. (2025). *Annual report*.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2026). *2026 annual report*.

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2026). *China's codification and escalation of the Sinicization of religion*.

U.S. Department of State. (2024). *Report on international religious freedom: China*.

Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, Pub. L. No. 116-145.