

PANDA DIPLOMACY IN SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

ПАНДА-ДИПЛОМАТІЯ У КИТАЙСЬКО-АМЕРИКАНСЬКИХ ВІДНОСИНАХ

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Abstract. *The term "panda diplomacy" refers to an international practice in which China gifts or leases giant pandas to foreign nations. Panda diplomacy is evaluated as an instrument of the PRC's soft power and public diplomacy. The study employed methods of content analysis, institutional analysis, and trend analysis. The establishment of regulatory norms for panda hunting allowed China to implement "panda diplomacy" for the first time in modern history at the end of 1941. The development of Sino-American relations has acted as a driver for the evolution of panda diplomacy. In 1972, on the occasion of the first high-level meeting between the leaders of the USA and the PRC, animals were exchanged as gifts, resulting in pandas settling in Washington for the first time. In the 2010s, tensions in relations between the PRC and the USA began to grow, which led to delays in decisions by the Chinese side regarding the extension of panda leases. China transformed its approach, focusing even more on subnational diplomacy. The cases of New York and California serve as examples of the transformation in the approach to actualizing panda diplomacy in American politics. The deterioration of relations at the interstate level caused the early recall of pandas from Washington; instead, the Chinese government emphasized relations with the state of California by leasing pandas to the San Diego Zoo. Prior to the 2024 US presidential election, China sent two pandas on lease to the capital's zoo. The intensification of political competition at the national level between the USA and the PRC has led to the repurposing of panda diplomacy into a tool of subnational diplomacy. The 2024 US presidential elections demonstrated that China's choice of panda placement within a single country is politically motivated and aims to encourage local stakeholders to support cooperation with mainland China, regardless of the state of relations at the interstate level.*

Keywords: *panda diplomacy, giant pandas, subnational diplomacy, paradiplomacy, public diplomacy, track II diplomacy, Sino-U.S. relations, PRC.*

Анотація. Термін «панда-дипломатія» слугує для позначення міжнародної практики, за якої Китай дарує або надає в оренду гігантську панду іноземній державі. Панда-дипломатія оцінюється як інструмент м'якої сили та публічної дипломатії КНР. У процесі дослідження

були застосовані методи контент-аналізу, інституційного аналізу та трендового аналізу. Встановлення регуляційних норм полювання на панд дозволило Китаю вперше у новітній історії реалізувати «панда-дипломатію» наприкінці 1941 року. У 1972 році з нагоди першої зустрічі високого рівня між лідерами США та КНР відбувся обмін тваринами як подарунками, у результаті чого у Вашингтоні вперше оселились панди. У 2010-х роках знову у відносинах між КНР та США почала зростати, що вплинуло на затягування рішень китайською стороною про продовження оренди панд. Китай трансформував свій підхід, ще більше зосереджуючись на субнаціональній дипломатії. Прикладами трансформації підходу до актуалізації панда-дипломатії в американській політиці виступають кейси Нью-Йорка та Каліфорнії. Погіршення відносин на міждержавному рівні спричинило дострокове відкликання панд із Вашингтона, натомість китайський уряд зроби акцент на відносинах із штатом Каліфорнія, надавши в оренду панд для зоопарку Сан-Дієго. До президентських виборів у США 2024 року Китай відправив в оренду дві панди для столичного зоопарку. Розвиток китайсько-американських відносин виступив драйвером еволюції панда-дипломатії. Загострення політичної конкуренції на національному рівні між США та КНР призвело до перепрофілювання панда-дипломатії в інструмент субнаціональної дипломатії. Президентські вибори 2024 року у США продемонстрували, що обрання Китаєм місця розміщення панд в межах однієї країни є політично вмотивованим і має на меті заохочення місцевих стейкхолдерів до підтримки співпраці з материковим Китаєм, незалежно від стану відносин на міждержавному рівні.

Ключові слова: панда-дипломатія, гігантські панди, субнаціональна дипломатія, парадипломатія, публічна дипломатія, дипломатія «другого треку», китайсько-американські відносини, КНР

Introduction. Giant pandas inhabit exclusively the mountainous bamboo forests of central China, rendering the species unique to the rest of the world. The term 'panda diplomacy' refers to an international practice whereby China gifts or leases giant pandas to foreign nations. The leasing or return of a panda is regarded as a diplomatic gesture that reflects Beijing's assessment of the current state of bilateral relations. Consequently, panda diplomacy is regarded as an instrument of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) soft power and public diplomacy. The relevance of studying this phenomenon is reinforced by the global trend toward expanding the network of leased pandas. The significance of panda diplomacy for U.S.-China relations is further underscored by the fact that the leasing of "bamboo bears" are included in the agendas of heads of state.

The purpose of the article is to trace the evolution of the methods employed by the Chinese state in utilizing giant pandas within its diplomatic relations with the United States. Additionally, this paper seeks to determine the contemporary role of panda diplomacy in PRC-U.S. relations, both at the interstate level and within the framework of subnational diplomacy between regions.

Literature Review. In 2013, environmentalists from the University of Oxford (*Buckingham et al., 2013*) concluded that, beyond the interests of conserving the giant panda species, panda diplomacy is implemented to achieve strategic political objectives. The aforementioned authors argue that panda lease agreements can be understood as a manifestation of *guanxi* in China's bilateral relations with countries that have signed free trade agreements with the PRC or contracts for the supply of natural resources and technology to the Middle Kingdom. The shared stewardship of this unique species is intended to strengthen ties by elevating them to a personalized level characterized by trust, loyalty, and long-term cooperation.

The economic impact of panda diplomacy on bilateral trade has been a subject of scholarly investigations. Notably, a comprehensive statistical study by Jin, Kang, and Lu (2022) titled "China's Panda Diplomacy: The Panda Effect on International Trade" which demonstrates a significant correlation between the commencement of a panda lease and a subsequent surge in exports from Sichuan Province to the host country. The findings reveal a distinct sequence in this trade expansion: the growth is initially driven by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs), followed by a gradual increase in exports from private sector firms. A similar conclusion is reached by Mattia Longhi and Caterina Morelli (2025) in their study, "The Role of Chinese Panda Ambassadors in International Trade". They argue that Chinese exports to a host country experience a notable surge following the

birth of a panda cub. This event serves as a powerful signal of successful cooperation in species conservation, which, in turn, fosters a substantial strengthening of bilateral ties and economic exchange.

Roi Nan (2026), in the article 'From pandas to palaces: A soft power analysis of China's cultural diplomacy through panda diplomacy and television drama,' argues that panda diplomacy serves as a core component of China's broader soft power strategy. Nan asserts that the primary objective of this practice is to construct a national identity centered on trustworthiness and a commitment to peace. In this regard, Aranceta-Reboredo (2022) advocates "What About the Animals? A Case Study Comparison Between China's Panda Diplomacy and Australia's Koala Diplomacy" for a paradigm shift in "non-human" diplomacy, calling for a transition from viewing animals as mere diplomatic objects, whose inherent interests are often ignored, to treating them as diplomatic subjects.

To date, no specific studies by Ukrainian authors dedicated to the issue of panda diplomacy have been identified.

Methods. The methodological framework of this study is grounded in the prism of soft power within international relations. The research employs the following methods: content analysis of historical sources, official statements, and public speeches by high-ranking officials responsible for foreign policy decision-making, aimed at reconstructing public discourse and identifying political priorities inherent in state actors' strategies; institutional analysis to assess the activities of organizations and institutions responsible for Sino-American relations; and trend analysis to track modifications made by the Chinese side to the mechanisms of panda diplomacy practices.

Main results of the research. In the 1930s, the hunting of pandas in their natural habitats within the mountainous regions of the Chinese provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi, and Gansu remained entirely unregulated. This lack of oversight was exploited by missionaries from the United States and Europe, who sought to profit from the sale of these exotic bears to Western zoos. The first panda from China arrived in the United States in 1936, housed at the Chicago Zoo. A year later, the zoo's collection was augmented by another black-and-white bear; subsequently, two more pandas were acquired by the Bronx Zoo in New York. However, the lifespan of these pandas in captivity did not exceed a few years; Mei Mei, in Chicago, lived the longest, surviving until 1942. In 1940 and 1941, both giant pandas at the Bronx Zoo passed away, prompting the zoo's administration to seek new specimens. By that time, however, China's ruling party, the Kuomintang, had issued a ban prohibiting foreigners from hunting pandas.

The establishment of regulatory norms enabled China to implement "panda diplomacy" for the first time in modern history. Madame Chiang Kai-shek (Soong Mei-ling), the wife of the Kuomintang leader, gifted two pandas to the United States as a diplomatic gesture of solidarity between the two nations amidst the backdrop of World War II. To capture the pandas in their natural habitat, a team of seventy hunters and forty hunting dogs was assembled; within six weeks, they successfully captured two panda cubs (1941 *Graham's Giant Panda Hunt*). In late 1941, an official presentation ceremony was held at the Bronx Zoo, where the two Chinese bears were gifted in the presence of the Chinese Consul, Dr. Tsune-chi Yu.

In May 1958, press attention was captured by the U.S. State Department's decision to deny the entry of a panda purchased for the Bronx Zoo by Austrian animal dealer Heini Demmer and New Jersey animal importer Frederick Zeehandelaar. The purchase price was set to be the highest the zoo had ever paid (\$25,000, which, adjusted for purchasing power, is equivalent to over \$260,000 as of 2026). Despite the intervention of CIA Director Allen Dulles to facilitate the matter, the panda was denied entry onto American soil due to a U.S. Treasury Department ban on the import of any goods from the People's Republic of China, aimed at preventing communist China from accessing American currency. Writing for *The New York Times*, journalist Murray Schumach noted with slight irony that the Bronx Zoo "is clinging to a hope that the State Department may concede that the admission [of the panda Chi Chi] would not be a victory for international communism" (Schumach, 1958). However, the State Department, led at the time by John Foster Dulles, brother of Allen Dulles, upheld the Treasury Department's position (CIA and Panda Diplomacy, 2015).

Ultimately, the female Chi Chi embarked on a European tour through Frankfurt, Copenhagen, and Berlin, finally settling in London, where she lived until her natural death in 1972 without producing offspring. During her time in the British capital, Chi Chi was chosen as the model for the

World Wildlife Fund emblem (*WWF's History...*)

In February 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon and First Lady Pat Nixon conducted a landmark visit to the PRC, symbolizing the end of Communist China's international isolation. Among other gifts for the Chinese side, the Nixons brought two musk oxen named Milton and Matilda from the San Francisco Zoo (2 *Musk Oxen...*, 1972). In turn, as part of the visit's itinerary, the First Lady visited the giant pandas at the Beijing Zoo. According to the Richard Nixon Foundation, during a formal dinner with PRC Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, the First Lady commented on photos of the pandas, saying, "Aren't they cute? I love them" to which her counterpart responded by promising to gift some (50 *Years of "Panda-monium"*, 2022). Ironically, the gifted pandas arrived in the United States less than two months later via the airport named after John Foster Dulles, the very man who had blocked the import of Chi Chi during his lifetime. The Nixons personally selected the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., as the home for Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. On April 16, 1972, an official welcoming ceremony was held at the zoo, featuring consecutive translation into Chinese and attended by over 20,000 visitors. In his speech, the Chinese Consul noted that the pandas served as a "symbol of friendship between the peoples of the PRC and the U.S." (*First Lady Pat Nixon...*, 2022). During the first year, over one million Americans visited the zoo to see the pandas.

The pandas' offspring did not survive. Ling-Ling passed away in 1992, followed by Hsing-Hsing in 1999. The fate of the musk oxen was more complicated and briefer: in the warm climate of Beijing, the animals, accustomed to a naturally cold environment, developed health issues, leading to their presumed death three years later in 1975. The United States learned of Milton's death following a personal visit to the Beijing Zoo on March 16, 1975, by the U.S. Envoy to China, George H.W. Bush. In his 1976 correspondence, Bush inquired whether it was true that "Matilda the Musk Ox has joined Milton in heaven?" (*Bush*, 2014, pp. 220-255).

In 1982, China abolished the practice of gifting pandas, replacing it with a leasing framework. The first panda lease agreement was reached in 1984: Yong Yong and Ying Xin from the Beijing Zoo resided at the San Francisco Zoo for three months during the Olympic Games hosted by the United States (*Beyond 'panda diplomacy'...*, 2013). Subsequently, this pair toured for more than four years, appearing as guests at 14 zoos.

In 1993, under pressure from international conservation organizations, relevant Chinese associations adopted a new model for overseas panda leases. The terms of the agreement required a ten-year duration, during which local scientists and their Chinese counterparts would conduct joint research on the species. Under this model, the pandas and any subsequent offspring remain the property of the People's Republic of China. Furthermore, the host country is required to pay an annual fee of \$1 million to support species conservation within its natural habitat, and any cubs born in captivity are to be repatriated to China at the age of four to participate in breeding programs.

The first long-term lease under these regulations was granted to the San Diego Zoo (California) in 1996. The turn of the century was marked by difficult challenges in bilateral relations that threatened to terminate the practice of panda diplomacy. In 1999, following the NATO airstrike on the PRC Embassy in Belgrade, the Chinese side suspended negotiations regarding panda leases for zoos in Atlanta and Washington, D.C. However, both agreements were eventually finalized: Atlanta welcomed giant pandas for the first time, and Washington, after a nearly two-year hiatus, received its new residents, Mei Xiang and Tian Tian.

In the 2010s, rising tensions in Sino-U.S. relations began to impact the Chinese side's timelines, leading to delays in decisions regarding panda lease extensions. Furthermore, China transformed its approach by increasingly focusing on subnational diplomacy and seeking "advocates" for panda hosting among regional political elites. In 2010, the parties initiated the High-Level Consultation on People-to-People Exchange (CPE). That same year, the U.S.-China Governors Forum was established as a platform to deepen relations between American governors and the leadership of Chinese provinces. Simultaneously, the U.S.-China Initiative on City-Level Economic Cooperation was launched (*Lawrence*, 2013).

The cases of New York and California serve as examples of this transformed approach to actualizing panda diplomacy within American politics. Since 2014, Carolyn Maloney, a Congresswoman representing a district in New York, has been an active advocate for housing pandas

in New York City. According to her, during a meeting with Chinese officials following the aforementioned 1999 incident, she was able to defuse tensions by pivoting the conversation toward a discussion of pandas. In 2014, the Congresswoman visited a panda reserve in China (*Burns, 2016*).

Cui Tiankai, the PRC Ambassador to Washington, informed Maloney that the Chinese side was prepared to engage in preliminary negotiations and would “consider the formal initiation of cooperation when conditions are mature” (*Burns, 2016*). Maloney met with Li Xiaolin, President of the Chinese People’s Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), and attended the ‘Panda Night’ event featuring the Chinese Ambassador. Having secured support from the city’s business elite, specifically billionaires Maurice Greenberg and John Catsimatidis, the Congresswoman obtained the consent of Mayor Bill de Blasio, whose endorsement was one of China’s key prerequisites for granting a panda lease.

Both billionaires maintain significant interests in the PRC. For instance, in 2018, Maurice Greenberg was honored at a ceremony in Beijing with a “friendship” medal for fostering business ties with the People’s Insurance Co. of China. Since 1975, the billionaire has made annual business trips to China, and Starr Companies, which he headed, was the first foreign firm to receive a license to provide insurance services in the PRC. Among Maurice Greenberg’s other accolades are “honorary citizen” keys and honorary citizenships from numerous Chinese cities (*Heping, 2018*).

A charitable event organized to raise funds for leasing pandas for New York City collected \$127,000 of the required \$50 million. Observers noted that hosting the event at an expensive hotel was counterproductive, as the organizational costs potentially exceeded the amount raised. A notable detail regarding the chosen venue, the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, is its ownership by a Chinese insurance company (in 2014, the U.S. State Department advised President Barack Obama to refrain from staying at this hotel). The event’s sponsors included China Construction America and China Merchants Bank, with Zhang Qiyue, the PRC Consul General in the Big Apple, occupying a seat at the head table.

Congresswoman Maloney also participated in the announcement of Hainan Airlines’ inaugural flights from New York to Hainan Province. The politician’s initiative was further publicly endorsed by Yue-Sai Kan, a New York-based businesswoman with close ties to the PRC. Notably, Ms. Kan contributed \$23,000 to Carolyn Maloney’s campaign fund (*Bredderman, 2022*). Furthermore, Maloney was even supported by a Republican, former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who wrote: “Surely the greatest American city ought to have pandas” (*Burns, 2016*).

However, fundraising events for the New York panda lease were met with protests from animal welfare advocates and animal rights activists opposing the “import” of Chinese bears. In 2022, Carolyn Maloney lost her Congressional re-election bid to fellow Democrat Jerry Nadler, whose platform included the slogan “No to Pandas in Captivity”, effectively ending Maloney’s years-long effort to secure pandas for New York City (*Moss, 2022*).

Dr. Han Yin Li, an Associate Professor at the Institute of International Strategy of Tokyo International University, described this case as emblematic of Chinese diplomacy: “In recent years, China has attempted to promote its soft power and national image overseas, while the means are mixed with non-governmental, semi-official or track II channels with the coordination of the Chinese embassies overseas. And definitely the Chinese public diplomacy targets individuals and particular persons with political influence in the targeted countries through exchanges, sponsorship and recognition” (*Bredderman, 2022*).

In 2020, the State Department under Mike Pompeo compiled a list of six Chinese organizations (including the CPAFFC) linked to the Chinese Communist Party and held responsible for spreading propaganda abroad (*Pompeo, 2020*). Simultaneously, the U.S. government withdrew from the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding, stating that the “CPAFFC’s actions have undermined the Governors Forum’s original well-intentioned purpose” (U.S. designates Chinese body a foreign mission...). A spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry commented on the U.S. government’s decisions, labeling them as phenomena of “neo-McCarthyism” and rejecting all allegations made by the U.S. State Department (*Foreign Ministry Spokesperson...*).

Furthermore, even under the Joe Biden administration, the course toward limiting vulnerable cooperation with China remained steadfast. In 2022, Congress passed the CHIPS and Science Act and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), designed to protect technological sovereignty and maintain leadership in semiconductors and green energy, such as electric vehicles (*Sullivan, 2026*).

In November 2023, China responded, notably by recalling Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, along with their three-year-old cub Xiao Qi Ji, from the Washington Zoo to mainland China. The pandas departed for home via the same Dulles Airport on a special Boeing 777F aircraft named the “FedEx Panda Express” (*The History of Giant Pandas...*).

In contrast, during the same month, the People's Republic of China announced the return of pandas to California. The importance of this region is underscored by both its economic capabilities and its ties with China. As early as 1993, in an article for Foreign Affairs, James O. Goldsborough defended California's right to conduct an autonomous foreign policy, citing the state's GDP (which ranked eighth in the world at the time, ahead of the PRC) and its population (31 million, making it the most populous U.S. state) (*Goldsborough, 1993*). Furthermore, California is home to the largest Chinese diaspora in the United States, and the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco is responsible for relations with Asian nations.

In November 2023, on the sidelines of the APEC summit in San Francisco, a high-level meeting took place between the leaders of the U.S. and China. This was preceded by California Governor Gavin Newsom's visit to China, during which he met with President Xi Jinping (marking the first visit by a U.S. governor to the PRC since the United States withdrew from the Governors Forum) (*What Governor Newsom's Trip to China Accomplished...*). Notably, the announcement regarding the return of the pandas was made neither during the press conference nor in the official remarks following the leaders' meeting (despite Joe Biden previously signaling his intent to raise the issue). Instead, it was delivered at a dinner for business and political leaders at the Hyatt Regency later that day (according to The New York Times, the White House administration had not been pre-notified of this announcement). The high profile of the event was underscored by its guest list, which included Elon Musk, Tim Cook, Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo, California State Treasurer Fiona Ma, and others (*Li, 2023*).

In his speech, Xi Jinping shared that he had “also learned that the San Diego Zoo and the Californians very much look forward to welcoming pandas back. Pandas have long been envoys of friendship between the Chinese and American peoples. We are ready to continue our cooperation with the United States on panda conservation, and do our best to meet the wishes of the Californians so as to deepen the friendly ties between our two peoples”. The PRC President also further his vision that the strength of Sino-American relations lies “exchanges at subnational levels. I welcome more U.S. governors, Congressional members, and people from all walks of life to visit China” adding: “I also hope that California and San Francisco will continue to take the lead on the journey of growing China-U.S. friendship!” (*Full text of Xi's speech..., 2023*).

Thus, the leader of the PRC deliberately chose a formal gala to announce the new panda lease, avoiding comments on the decision following his meeting with the U.S. President, thereby emphasizing the importance of subnational ties between China and California. In doing so, Xi Jinping framed his decision as a unilateral act rather than a reaction to his American counterpart's request, presenting it as a symbolic gesture of friendship toward the region rather than an indicator of relations at the national level.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed seized upon this announcement to raise the issue of hosting new pandas in her city. She personally presented her proposal to the PRC leader before his departure for Beijing. On December 1, 2023, the Mayor reiterated her request in an official letter addressed to Xi: “I propose, as I did on the runway when bidding your farewell, that we establish a partnership in which our San Francisco Zoo will host your cherished diplomats – Giant Pandas”. In turn, the Mayor referenced Xi's speech regarding San Francisco and California's leadership in Sino-American relations. In her letter, London Breed highlighted the sister-city relationship between San Francisco and Shanghai (the first such partnership between Chinese and American cities, established in 1979), along with an October 2013 Memorandum of Understanding between the respective cities' zoos, which established a “sister zoo relationship” between the institutions (*Breed, 2023*).

The beginning of 2024 was also marked by the continued presence of pandas on the high-level agenda. In January, during a formal ceremony in Beijing celebrating the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USA and the PRC, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the parties “should ensure peaceful coexistence, with effective management of disagreements as the top priority” promising that giant pandas would return to the United States by

the end of the year (*Wang Yi...*, 2024).

In February, California Governor Gavin Newsom stated that “California and China share deep cultural and economic ties, and we look forward to the opportunity to again welcome these iconic bears to the Golden State,” while commenting on the news of a lease agreement reached between the San Diego Zoo and the Chinese side (*Giant Pandas...*, 2024).

In April 2024, London Breed, accompanied by thirty public officials and entrepreneurs, made a visit to Shanghai, during which she visited the pandas at the local wild animal park (*Mayor Breed*, 2024). However, as of April 2026, the San Francisco Zoo has not yet been able to host the coveted desired. Conversely, the San Diego agreement took effect on July 27, 2024, with the arrival of a giant panda pair from Shandong Province.

The proximity to the renewal of the electoral cycle also prompted official Beijing to relaunch panda diplomacy at the national center. In May 2024, U.S. First Lady Jill Biden participated in a video announcement regarding the return of pandas to the Washington Zoo (*The Pandas Are Coming...*, 2024). Three weeks before the U.S. presidential election, the “FedEx Panda Express” Boeing 777F completed a flight to deliver giant pandas Qing Bao and Bao Li to the United States.

It is further worth noting that Bao Li is the son of Bao Bao, who was born at the National Zoo in the American capital in 2013. Thus, as emphasized by the Chinese Ambassador to Washington, Bao Li descends from a family that has resided in Washington since 2000, representing the third generation of his lineage to inhabit the Smithsonian National Zoological Park (*Bao Bao...*, 2017).

As part of the analysis of panda relocation and placement sites, the article’s authors found that as of the U.S. Presidential Election on November 5, 2024, no pandas were hosted in the traditionally Republican-leaning states of Tennessee and Georgia (due to the death of the last male in Memphis in 2023 and the repatriation of the panda from Atlanta to China on October 12, 2024, respectively). In contrast, zoos in the Democratic-leaning jurisdictions of California and the District of Columbia received new arrivals (on June 27 and October 15, 2024, respectively).

On April 24, 2026, just weeks prior to the announced high-level meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and PRC President Xi Jinping, China announced the lease of two giant pandas to the Atlanta Zoo (*Kurt*, 2026), a region that traditionally votes for the Republican candidate (*Tsivaty*, 2026).

Conclusions. The results of this article reveal that the development of Sino-American relations has served as the primary driver behind the evolution of panda diplomacy. American public interest in Chinese bears during the 1930s prompted China to ban panda hunting for foreigners while simultaneously utilizing the animals for diplomatic purposes, specifically through the gifting of pandas in 1941. It was President Richard Nixon’s geopolitical “pivot” toward the PRC, the presidential couple’s gift of musk oxen, and the First Lady’s fascination with the black-and-white bears that spurred Communist China to gift pandas to a Western Bloc nation for the first time. The subsequent compromise between species conservation interests and diplomatic objectives led to the transition toward a leasing model. As political competition intensified at the national level between the U.S. and the PRC, panda diplomacy was repurposed into a tool of subnational diplomacy. Despite the United States’ withdrawal from the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding, this practice gained new momentum in 2023. The 2024 U.S. Presidential election demonstrated that China’s selection of panda placement sites within a single country is politically motivated, aimed at incentivizing local stakeholders to support cooperation with mainland China, regardless of the state of intergovernmental relations.

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