



# EXPLAINED

## Panda diplomacy

PHOTO: REUTERS

### How some of the laziest animals in the world became so important in international relations

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No International Relations degree, no Model United Nations (MUN) experience. And yet, these black and white bears are arguably some of the best diplomats the world has ever seen.

And how exactly did that come to be?

By a stroke of geographical good luck, the entire land territory of pandas' natural habitat falls within China's borders. It is quite rare for one country to contain an entire species within its territory. China utilised the fact that they have something that every country wants, but no other country has – a bamboo-eating, endearingly lazy, and insanely fluffy animal – to its full political and economic advantage.

A threatened species, a large percentage of the panda population lives under human care in captive breeding programmes in zoos and nature reserves in China. The country's large-scale investment into conservation efforts has proven to be very successful, as the panda numbers have increased. In 2021, China announced that giant pandas are no longer endangered. China deserves a lot, if not all, of credit here; their efforts in saving the giant panda are surely praiseworthy.

#### What is panda diplomacy?

Panda diplomacy is the phenomenon where China sends pandas to different countries as tokens of goodwill and friendship with the countries. Later, if they want to exert political pressure or express displeasure with a country's actions, they take the panda away.

Giving away pandas is not a new practice. China has been sending pandas as diplomatic gifts since as long ago as the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE). However, the country eventually shifted to long-term loans instead of gifts after pandas were declared endangered in 1984.

The host countries pay a fee of a million US dollars per panda per year, plus an additional "cub tax" of at least \$200,000 for any baby pandas born in the host country. This money is in turn invested in panda conservation efforts back home. As per the deal, the cubs should also be returned to China before their fourth birthday.

China gains multiple benefits from their giant cuddly diplomats.

Collaborating to take care of the pandas promotes mutual trust between the countries. The citizens' fondness for the bears allows for greater dialogue between the governments. The worldwide efforts boost more widespread research and development in panda conservation. China also earns a sweet amount of money which saves out-of-pocket investment into their own comprehensive conservation efforts.

Last but not least, it helps increase China's "soft power". Pandas are friendly, cuddly, lazy, and culturally iconic. Their presence can make China and its culture to also seem friendly, which helps bring in foreign money by attracting tourists.

#### Who has the pandas, and why?

Today, 22 countries have about 70 pandas loaned to them. Panda diplomacy experts have observed that China has a trade deal or relationship with each of these countries, increasing its own economic power.

The modern era of panda diplomacy began in 1972 when U.S. President Richard Nixon travelled to China to begin normalising relations with the country. The trip, in which First Lady Pat Nixon expressed her love for the fluffy bears, opened up diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries. Soon, the National Zoo in Washington DC received Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing, two giant pandas.

The list of countries with pandas is long, but each has the same story of a useful trade relationship. After the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement was signed, there was a rush to send over the cuddly diplomats to Singapore and Malaysia and to give Thailand an extension on keeping the pandas it already had.

Which zoo received the pandas in the United Kingdom is very interesting. Instead of the London Zoo, as you would expect with its higher number of tourists and more resources, it is the Edinburgh Zoo in Scotland. According to trade deals worth four billion dollars, Scotland exports salmon and Land Rovers to China.

#### When is a panda taken away?

It is part of the agreement between the countries that panda cubs born in the host countries will have to be returned to China before their fourth birthday. A famous example of such a cub sendaway is the 2017 return of US-born Bao Bao from the National Zoo in Washington D.C.

Not all pandas are returned under friendly conditions, however. If your country signs a deal with China to get a panda, but its actions displease China in the waiting period, there's a chance you may not get to see the panda.

In 2012, China made a deal with Malaysia to loan a pair of pandas to the Kuala Lumpur Zoo in April 2014. Then, a Malaysian Airlines flight consisting of 152 Chinese nationals went missing, and the public felt that the Malaysian government could have done more to look for the missing plane and its passengers. China expressed its displeasure by delaying sending the pandas by a month.

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Some concepts explored in this article

#### DIPLOMACY

The profession or activity by a country's representatives to maintain international relationships abroad.

#### GEOPOLITICS

The study of how geographical location affects politics and relationships between countries.

#### SOFT POWER

The ability to influence choices and preferences through cultural reputation and appeal.

#### CONSERVATION

The careful protection or preservation of something, in this case, nature and the earth's biodiversity such as plants and animals at risk of being extinct.

#### CAPTIVE BREEDING

The act of maintaining the population of plants or animals in environments controlled by humans.

