On October 9th, the East Asia Institute and the Confucius Institute hosted “The National Committee on U.S.-China Relations: CHINA Town Hall”, for the second consecutive year. This year, UTSA’s Institute of Texan Cultures and World Affairs Council of San Antonio joined to support this nationwide event to promote awareness of U.S.-China relations. UTSA was once again selected to host the event, out of the 100+ venues chosen around the United States and China. There were over 70 people in attendance and the event was followed by a reception.

The primary focuses of the event were to raise awareness, facilitate understanding, and engage conversations about the complexity of U.S-China Relations. Each year, the event has a prestigious and highly qualified speaker initiate the discussion via webcast online. That speaker is then followed by a local speaker, who specializes in U.S-China relations, and talks to the audience member in person at a chosen site.

For the first-half of the event, Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State and National Security Advisor, spoke, via webcast, on behalf of the 2018 National Committee on U.S.-China Relations: CHINA Town Hall. Her talk addressed the complex U.S.-China relationship and its influence on U.S. economy, policies, and security.

For the second-half of the event, local speaker Dr. Harold Tanner, Professor and Chair of the Department of History at The University of North Texas, discussed the topic of how “People to People Engagement Constructs Solid Foundations for Sino-US Relations” with an open discussion afterwards.
Starting off the event, Dr. Wanxiang Yao, the Director of the East Asia Institute and Confucius Institute, welcomed audience members and thanked Dr. Tanner and the audience for attending the day’s event. Afterward, Dr. Yao introduced Dr. Rhonda M. Gonzales, Interim Vice President for Student Success, and she gave an official welcome to the audience members on behalf of the University. She also highlighted the importance of people-to-people diplomacy for creating mutual understanding among different cultures.

The audience's focus was then directed towards Condoleezza Rice as the live town-hall discussion began. She talked about the many pressing issues that were of importance to not only the United States, but to China as well. She spoke about issues regarding China’s growth, the South China Sea, National Security, and Intellectual Property. She noted that these issues had a mutual impact on both countries and hold key importance for the future of both parties; therefore, it would be beneficial for both countries to cooperate accordingly.

“China has a power that has risen very quickly. I was in China in 1988 and the streets of Beijing had a few horse carts, a few automobiles, and a lot of bicycles. That’s not Beijing today. This is a country that has risen and grown rapidly. The country lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and is a force on the World stage,” said Rice. In addition to this, she also commented on the positive impact that Chinese economic expansion has contributed to international economic growth.

Another intriguing aspect of Rice’s discussion was her effort to highlight that China and the U.S. are competitors, yet competition does not always have to end in conflict. According to Rice, “We have to compete in a way in which we don’t take unfair advantage of an international trading system that is supposed to be open and free.” She acknowledged the two countries have different approaches and agendas for international trading. Competitions can lead to beneficial outcomes, but the two nations must cooperate in a way to avoid a confrontation. “Let's try to do it in a way that makes the world safer and more prosperous,” said Rice.

Rice also made remarks on Vice President Mike Pence’s speech, regarding U.S.-China relations, on Oct. 4, 2018. She commenced by stating that the Vice President laid out a very compelling and comprehensive case about the difficulties that have been growing between the United States and China. Nonetheless, when Rice was asked about Pence’s quote on how previous administrations ignored China’s actions, she reminded everyone listening, as well as the Vice President, that not everything being done in the White House is new. There is a long history of trying to get China to deal with intellectual property issues and trying to get China to open its markets. She finished by stating that perhaps the Vice President is focusing on the fact that these frustrations have been accumulating over time, and that we have yet to gain a positive Chinese
response. In that sense, the ball is in China’s Court.

The discussion was then opened to take in questions from viewers all over America who were watching this live event. Addressing a question relating to the Trump administration’s recent debate over ending U.S. student visas to Chinese students, Rice declared that she would be in opposition of ending the student visas. She defended herself by stating that as a university professor, she would like to train the best and brightest from all over the world. She believes that everyone benefits if they are well trained and that after coming to study in the U.S., these students can go back and improve the economic status of their countries and their people. She has confidence in our openness and innovative system and encourages us to travel and continue to learn about other countries and find opportunities to see other cultures.

After the webcast, our local speaker, Dr. Tanner, was introduced again to the audience and gave his lecture. He outlined his lecture with three main points, “History Matters”, “People-to-People Engagement/ Diplomacy leads to Positive Results” and “People-to-People Engagement/ Diplomacy Faces Serious Challenges”. He started with the history of Chinese-U.S. relationships and the steps we’ve taken to try and strengthen our bond with China.

People-to-People diplomacy was coined by President Eisenhower in 1956. He coined this term to explain that people-to-people relationships are an instrument of American foreign policy, used to greater understand and connect with other countries. The idea of people-to-people diplomacy was also prevalent before Eisenhower in China; Zhou Enlai, Premier of the PRCC, stated “Diplomacy is conducted through the form of government to government relations, but its basis nonetheless lies in influencing people and winning them over...” These two different countries, with similar goals in mind, established this idea of people-to people diplomacy as instruments of the state. Then in 1949, Enlai created the Chinese People’s Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA) in order to broaden the outreach of people-to-people diplomacy by hosting delegations in over 130 countries and over 20 multi-lateral organizations.

China’s first attempts at people-to-people diplomacy involved helping third world countries such as Africa and parts of Asia during the 1960’s which created a bond between those countries and China. These practices weren’t applied to the West until the early 70’s with events such as Edgar Snow’s relationship with Mao Zedong and the event of “Ping Pong diplomacy” where Zhuang Zedong and Glenn Cowan exchanged gifts in Nagoya Japan, at the 31st Table Tennis Championship. After this event, China made efforts towards U.S.-China People-to-People exchange. Currently, there are over 14,000 U.S. students studying in China, and over 350,000 Chinese students attending U.S. colleges and universities. This is a resulting achievement of the U.S.-China relationship. Other resulting achievements of People-to-People diplomacy towards China involve the creation of the US-China Strong
Foundation, and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

“The leading factor limiting China’s People-to-People diplomacy to a broader audience is that China is a communist state, and that is a hard sell to Americans.” stated Tanner. Other factors, also, make it difficult to tell a Chinese story in terms dictated by Anglophone international discourse. This ideology stems from the message crafted towards domestic (Chinese) and American consumers. Issues like human rights, stigmatization of minority groups, trade friction, the South China Sea, Taiwan, and China’s governance in Hong Kong have a direct effect on people-to-people diplomacy.

The limiting factors of American People-to-People diplomacy towards China include thinly disguised interest in regime change, a heightened American nationalist rhetoric, and a heightened criticism of China and the Chinese people group. The statements from U.S. officials paint a negative light on this topic. For example, the growing topic of ending visas for Chinese students, and more recently, Vice-President Pence’s speech at the Hudson Institute. Both of these views have greatly hindered American people-to-people diplomacy.

Tanner explained that in recent years, China and the United States impression of each other has gone down, citing the previous examples of each countries’ obstacle to true people-to-people diplomacy. He also stated that there is currently an underlying structure already implemented that can potentially solve these issues between the two nations. These are things such as personal relationships forged in the context of business, Chinese immigrants coming in to work as university faculty members, employees and owners of American companies, and mutual interest in the Chinese people and Chinese Culture in the U.S. and vice versa.

Tanner concluded that people-to-people diplomacy is an absolute necessity as an instrument of state policy. While both China and the U.S. have experienced successes through People-to-People diplomacy in the past, the current political climate poses as an obstacle for both sides of People-to-People diplomacy and People-to-People engagement. Both People-to-People diplomacy, and People-to-People engagement, interact and interchange freely within each other and are necessary to improving relations.

After the lecture, audience members had the opportunity to ask Dr. Tanner some questions about different topics such as China’s policies and its state of affairs. A reception followed the lecture for attendees. It was an opportunity to meet and speak with Dr. Tanner to discuss the lecture, as well as speak with fellow peers, and more. With many attendees learning about U.S-China relations, as well as people-to-people diplomacy. This event allowed UTSA to stay connected with what’s happening in the world.