

History 409: US Foreign Relations Since 1945



Nixon's Rapprochement with China: A Cold War Watershed

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The year 1972 was a dramatic turning point in the trajectory of the Cold War. In a visit that crowned their respective foreign policies, US president Richard Nixon and China Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong met with amicable intentions in Beijing, the first such meeting ever between these two countries. As Nixon toured around China, rapidly thawing the ice that had formed¹ since the defeat of the Nationalists in 1949, Leonid Brezhnev watched on nervously from Moscow. The Cold War was no longer a straightforward stare-down between American liberalism and Soviet Communism; as the Sino-Soviet split demonstrated just a few years earlier, sharing Communist roots was no longer enough to overcome the tension caused by the realpolitik of two superpowers separated by a long border. In the US, Nixon and Kissinger too were rapidly adapting; they left behind “unworkable moral maxims”² in favor of a pragmatist approach to managing power. Détente was now palatable with the “evil empires,” even for Nixon, who spent much of his early career fiercely stoking Americans’ fears of Communism; while international proxy confrontation never quite vanished, a concerted and serious effort was being made to talk more diplomatically as well. It was also around this time when the Cold War began to accept the nuances of not just a bipolar, but now tripolar, world - Washington and Moscow had to let Beijing into the club, and both came to the realization that they would have an easier time fighting the Cold War if China wasn’t on the other team. Ultimately, the 1972 Sino-American rapprochement was a decisive and monumental turning point in the Cold War with significant and lasting effects.

We can understand the 1972 Sino-American rapprochement in two ways. First, in the context of the Cold War power balance, it was fundamentally a shakeup of the familiar bipolar

¹ Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, 112.

² Leffler and Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crisis and Détente*, 377.

system: the two global hegemons competed for influence, often seeking to spread or at least protect their ideology, and to protect themselves and their bloc. China's massive population and growing influence started to offer significant advantages for whichever side China decided to work with; at the very least, China's support was a sure way to counter the other hegemon. China was the biggest fish in the Third World pond, and Mao was very aware of this.³ Nixon's 1972 visit was a natural product of both the Chinese and American foreign policies acting on their realization that they had to adapt to the shifting dynamics caused by China's outgrowing of just local hegemony. Naturally, the effects of rapprochement would impact not just China and the US, but also the Soviet Union. A second understanding of 1972's rapprochement is through the eyes of US foreign policy, and especially its highest steward, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. Up until the late 1960's, American policy was significantly defined by the public's (and often, therefore, their leaders') disdain for the ideology of Communism and the associated authoritarianism. Struggle against the Soviets (and in support of the Nationalists against the Chinese Communists) was not just prudent, it was also righteous and moral. A coexistence, especially a permanent and cooperative one as strived for in détente, was distasteful for swathes of young voters, already fiercely opposed to the Vietnam disaster, who disapproved of pragmatic power politics.⁴ In contrast, Kissinger's embrace of realism instead of the ideological and moral idealism of his predecessors enabled the US to regard the Soviet Union and China as rational actors with ordinary goals, and dealing with them were fundamentally exercises of diplomacy, power, and pragmatism – treating them as legitimate

³ Leffler and Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: Endings*, 184.

⁴ Leffler and Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crisis and Détente*, 377.

states. The pursuit of rapprochement with China, born from many realist considerations, was a natural product of Nixon and Kissinger's new foreign policy vision.

The arrival of détente with China should not have been a surprise, viewed from both a global balance of power perspective, and from the American foreign policy perspective. In 1964, the path to 1972 rapprochement was already being cleared: in this year, France became the first Western power to formally recognize the People's Republic of China.⁵ More worrying to US president Lyndon Johnson, however, was that China also detonated its first nuclear bomb,⁶ dubbed Project 596, in the remote deserts of Xinjiang, making China the fifth global nuclear power. Almost overnight, China suddenly had a seat at the great power table. Mao and Zhou Enlai were acutely aware of this, of course: via a series of proactive proposals for new nuclear arms control talks,⁷ China loudly announced its newfound power for the more aloof observers around the world. In some ways the timing could have not been more incidental for the Americans. By the mid to late 1960s, Johnson was losing the costly and unpopular war in Vietnam. It was one thing to systematically hemorrhage lives and cash, but at this point global public opinion was steadily beginning to turn⁸ against the US for its increasingly unsightly war. To American strategists, who had spent their efforts and sprawling US capital trying to court the Third World into its system, a tide of global disapproval and growing American isolation was cause for panic and concern. The fiasco in Vietnam had to end. Washington began to consider the possibility of enlisting the help of China; the enticing possibility of an honorable exit from Indochina weighed heavily on their minds. It would continue to be a critical issue for Nixon and

⁵ Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From "Red Menace" to "Tacit Ally"*, 66.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 67.

⁸ Ibid.

Kissinger as 1972 approached.⁹ Meanwhile, in the uneasy wake of the Sino-Soviet split, a border skirmish erupted¹⁰ between China and the Soviet Union along the Ussuri River, marking part of the Eastern Siberia/Heilongjiang border. It signaled a new low between the two Communist powers, each rapidly cooking up denunciations of the other. China was beginning to tip the scales of power balance; as US foreign policy found more reasons to consider warming up to China, the USSR was simultaneously distancing itself. The balance of power was beginning to budge, and China would only occupy a greater share of the weight as time went on. The perspective from within the US Department of State, with the start of Nixon's presidential tenure, only served to accelerate the now inevitable warming of Sino-American relations. Nixon, who ran on an overwhelmingly popular platform of ending the Vietnam War, had his own vision for his empire's overseas interests. Via the Nixon Doctrine, he advocated for a delegation of American responsibilities to regional powers,¹¹ like Iran and Zaire, aligned with certain American interests to act on the US's behalf – fundamentally, this was a scaling back on the costly and unpopular deployment of American soldiers overseas, and yet still a cheap way of maintaining the imperial hand of a global hegemon in distant lands. The Nixon Doctrine vis-à-vis China and Vietnam was almost ideal – if China could be convinced to keep tabs on Vietnam, or at least be an influential conciliatory party in Hanoi peace discussions, that was already ample reason to seek a better relationship. More sustainably, China could be a possible counterweight to the Soviet Union as well. It was one thing to make Brezhnev worry about an ICBM hitting Moscow, but it was another to make him worry about the possibility of a

⁹ Leffler and Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume III: Endings*, 183.

¹⁰ Leffler and Westad, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume II: Crisis and Détente*, 370.

¹¹ Cohen, *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations: Vol. 4. Challenges to American Primacy, 1945 to the Present*, 176.

protracted conflict with a threatening neighbor directly on the Union's border. Nixon really saw a long-term possibility of a friendly China putting in check both the Soviets and Vietnamese,¹² releasing significant American efforts in Asia, allowing for renewed initiatives to check the Soviets in Europe. Kissinger, being ever the realist, approved of his boss' vision enthusiastically. With realpolitik now at the forefront of the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy and given the selection of geopolitical levers the US could extract from good Sino-American ties, rapprochement quickly turned into an inevitability.

In July 1971, it was revealed suddenly that Kissinger had been secretly meeting with Zhou in China.¹³ In retrospect, this seems unsurprising; however, this news took everyone by surprise at the time. Even more surprising was the announcement of what was to follow: Nixon himself would visit China the following year. Thus, in February 1972, Nixon's Air Force One touched down first in Shanghai, then in Beijing, making Nixon the first American president to ever set foot in the People's Republic of China. Over the following week, Nixon was toured around the country, conducting frequent meetings with Chinese officials and being shown cultural sites and performances of interest across Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou in highly publicized receptions. Americans at home were glued to their televisions.



Air Force One, with Chinese Honor Guard, in Beijing.

¹² Ibid, 179.

¹³ Ibid, 181.

The visit bore fruit almost as soon as it ended. At the end of the summit, Nixon revealed the *Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China*,¹⁴ also known as the Shanghai Communiqué. In the short statement that reads much like a press release, the key points of the summit were revealed to the public. Both countries, in the Communiqué, broadly agreed to “conduct their relations on the principles of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, nonaggression ..., noninterference ..., equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.”¹⁵ With the primacy of the Shanghai Communiqué, we must be weary of the audience to which it was intended: the public, and the world. Paying diplomatic lip-service to vague, idealistic principles like sovereignty and nonaggression should certainly have been anticipated and can probably be interpreted as only politeness. However, the Communiqué had telling elements as well. A “wish to reduce the danger of international military conflict”¹⁶ hinted at arms limitation talks or potential military cooperation, something that surely irked Brezhnev to no end. They denounced “hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region,”¹⁷ perhaps paving the way for a positive public image of China taking on some of America's burden in placating East Asia. More importantly, it was agreed that both

¹⁴ *Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China* (Shanghai Communiqué). February 27, 1972.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

countries would work towards “the normalization of relations”¹⁸ between them, formally signaling a reduction in tensions, and laying a practical path towards the development of diplomatic relations. The most specific element of the Communiqué, however, was the formal US recognition and acceptance of the One China policy, a commitment for the



Nixon meets Mao in person during the 1972 visit.

withdrawal of American military forces from Taiwan, and a promise for American non-intervention in the Taiwan issue.¹⁹ This was a telling move; the Republic of China had been supplanted in the UN by the People’s Republic of China in the previous year, and this signaled a further reduction of American backing for Jiang Jieshi. While the nuances of US-Taiwan relations in this period are too involved to discuss, one critical conclusion we may draw from the Shanghai Communiqué is how eager Nixon and Kissinger were to pursue a rapprochement, so much so that Taiwan was cast away as a bargaining chip. Historically, especially among US Republican politicians, a sense of “losing” China to the Communists, with plenty of blame to go around, was an important matter. Nixon’s relegation of Taiwan was not a move that was taken lightly, and further goes on to show just how realpolitik could edge out ideological concerns in a Nixon presidency. The immediate aftermath of the thawing ice was captured neatly by the essence of the Shanghai Communiqué, and elucidated the forces pushing for rapprochement in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

both the global arena and within the US foreign policy mission. Kissinger described the year following Nixon's visit as a "honeymoon" in a new Sino-American relationship.²⁰

The two countries that emerged from that week in February 1972 had evidently changed for the longer term as well. In short, Nixon had cleared a major hurdle, and became closer to achieving his vision of national security and foreign policy. As the rift between China and the Soviet Union deepened, China clearly became more and more receptive to American efforts of diplomacy and cooperation after a gesture of genuine goodwill (i.e. the visit to China) from Nixon. However, Moscow, deeply concerned by the improving Sino-American ties, started to become more receptive to American efforts for arms control and other issues. Détente with China had indirectly helped détente with the Soviet Union as well, and the SALT I was signed later that year.²¹ While it probably would have gone through regardless of Sino-American relations, it is impossible to discount the effect of a rapprochement on Nixon and Brezhnev's minds. In June 1972, Kissinger reported privately to Nixon that "the Chinese have moved ... from an adversary ... to [a] tacit ally,"²² going as far as stating that "with the exception of the United Kingdom, the PRC might well be the closest to us in its global perceptions."²³ This was an extraordinary statement. It confirmed the astounding closeness between the US and China after Nixon's visit, which had an overt and clear implication on the Cold War balance of power. Moreover, to the US foreign policy establishment, Kissinger's remarks were undisputable confirmation that ideological and moral considerations in foreign policy had been subordinated

²⁰ Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From "Red Menace" to "Tacit Ally"*, 223.

²¹ Zelizer, "Détente and Domestic Politics," *The Journal of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*.

²² Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From "Red Menace" to "Tacit Ally"*, 223.

²³ Ibid.

by realpolitik: aligned pragmatic worldviews did more to unify than ideological difference - extreme during even Nixon's tenure as Dwight Eisenhower's vice president - to divide. It was a clear triumph of the Kissinger school.

In this “quasi-alliance” (as Goh describes it²⁴) state fostered by Kissinger between China and the US, leaders from both sides began to act in ways unthinkable to them only decades earlier. Zhou Enlai and Ye Jianying took a overt interest in the domestic politics of the US, inquiring about the likelihood of defense budget cuts, and even praising Defense Secretary Melvin Laird as he called for increasing military expenditure.²⁵ Mao himself even began to push for an “anti-Soviet axis”²⁶ with the US, and subsequently supported actors on the periphery like Japan and Pakistan if the US-backed them against the Soviets. To reciprocate, Kissinger assured the Chinese that “we may be prepared to do things with the People's Republic that we are not prepared to do with the Soviet Union.”²⁷ It was not all talk, either – the Nixon administration went even as far as ensuring the British supplied China with Rolls Royce technology, when the Chinese attempted to procure it.²⁸ Kissinger was sometimes, in MacMillan's words, even “obsequious”²⁹ in catering to Chinese wishes. In the coming years, China and the US found themselves often in the same boat. They both backed the same side, the FLNA, in the 1975 civil conflict in Angola,³⁰ and colluded in China's 1979 offensive into Vietnam.³¹ They were almost

²⁴ Ibid, 252.

²⁵ Ibid, 224.

²⁶ Ibid, 225.

²⁷ Ibid, 234.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World*, 373.

³⁰ Cohen, *The New Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations: Vol. 4. Challenges to American Primacy, 1945 to the Present*, 193.

always motivated by a common concern over Soviet influence, the very same reason that drove Nixon's visit in 1972.

Ultimately, Sino-American relations would never quite be the same after 1972. Indeed, détente did suffer to some extent after Nixon's Watergate disaster – but they would also improve, especially when Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter cemented the Sino-American relationship with the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1979. The rapprochement was a unique and significant turning point that, almost overnight, eroded longstanding ideological and geopolitical tension between a Communist China and a liberal, capitalist US; Kissinger deftly redefined this relationship based on the acknowledgement that China's rising status would significantly swing the Cold War balance of power. As our analysis demonstrated, it is immensely fruitful to understand the causes and effects of the 1972 rapprochement in the scope of a changing world order, from a bipolar to a tripolar one, redefining old alliances and creating new friends. Yet also, diving into the foreign policy minds of Kissinger, Nixon, and their teams, we realize that simultaneously, a paradigm shift was occurring in the US foreign policy outlook: the moral, idealistic, struggle against “evil” regimes had been supplanted by a realpolitik-inspired precedence that could extend the olive branch as well. From these two perspectives, both causes for, and the effects of, the 1972 rapprochement can be effectively contextualized. At the end of the day, though, there is little doubt that the monumental shift in Sino-American relations from 1972 continues to guide the relationship between the present-day two largest world hegemonies, and no doubt will carry its effects many years into the future.

³¹ Ibid, 203.

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