

Nixon and Mao

By Nina Baker

On its surface, President Richard Nixon's 1972 Visit to the People's Republic of China (PRC) was an effective first step at opening relations between the two states which were previously closed off to each other. But the purpose for both Nixon's insistence to visit Beijing, as well as Mao Zedong's agreement to accept the visit, was for more secret - yet more vital - geostrategic objectives of disrupting Soviet expansionism, ending US involvement in Vietnam, and reunifying the PRC with Taiwan. Through talks between Nixon, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and Premier of the PRC Chou En-Lai, the United States and China took mutually-beneficial steps towards eventually putting each of these geopolitical crises to rest, even if sometimes neither state was wholly satisfied with the bargains made, or with their immediate effects (such as with Taiwan or Vietnam). Additionally, Nixon's visit to China is emblematic of how presidential power and electoral politics can coalesce to produce beneficial effects for the United States when the aims of the president to stay in power align with the nation's foreign policy interests.

From 1949 through the early 1970s, the United States and People's Republic of China held little to no diplomatic talks or meetings, and no exchange of businesses, tourists, or academics. US journalists refrained from reporting on China from within China's borders, instead only from afar - and vice versa. As a result of such little cultural transmission, citizens of both China and the US viewed the other country with increasing misunderstanding and hostility (MacMillan 105). Only in the late 60s and early 70s did US mistrust against China begin to subside in reaction to Soviet military buildup power, particularly as a reaction to the 1968 Soviet

invasion of then-Czechoslovakia (Overholt 709). Additionally, the two decades which had passed since the ending of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 proved to the United States that the PRC was not just a temporary government - but rather a stable and long-lasting state which the US needed to form ties with as the world became more and more globalized.

The lack of communication between the two states was not the only cause of distrust for the US and China; the US's support of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Guamindong in Taiwan led the PRC to alienate the US even further during the 50s and 60s. The United States had supported Chian Kai-shek's government of Taiwan since the outbreak of the Korean War in June of 1950 due to its location as a strategic naval base. By the mid-1950s, the United States was lending Taiwan over \$200 million per year in aid, largely for military purposes. This US support for Taiwan increased dramatically during the Eisenhower administration in order to take a stand and defend Taiwan when the PRC began to critique American military expansion into the Pacific (MacMillan 252). Additionally, in the years prior to Nixon's 1972 visit, the United States had pushed for the United Nations to accept Taiwan as a member in place of the PRC. The PRC, meanwhile, was firm on its insistence that Taiwan be wholly unified with mainland China, and often refused to hold any talks with states which were also acknowledging Taiwan as legitimate. From the PRC's perspective, foreign influencers like the United States had no right to involve themselves in what was, to the PRC, a purely Chinese issue. The existence of Taiwan as a separate state was an insult to the idea of a unified Chinese nation, and must be remedied.

Chinese aid to the North Vietnamese was also a sore spot for the United States. Between 1950 and 1975, the PRC had sent nearly \$20 billion in aid to the North Vietnamese, as well as millions of bullets, shells, uniforms, boots, and even mosquito netting. Many of these supplies were used directly against American troops (MacMillan 265). Yet despite tangible support for

the North Vietnamese, deep historical differences between the two powers caused tension during the Vietnam War. The tension only deepened as the Soviet Union began to become a patron to the North Vietnamese, and by the late 1960s, North Vietnam was favoring its relationship with the USSR over its relationship with the PRC. This division not only drove further disgruntlement with the Soviet Union at the hands of China, but also made China less willing to pledge full support for North Vietnam. Of course, China could not completely withdraw support from the North Vietnamese, but China was certainly more susceptible to US interests on this issue. Additionally, China's weakening commitment towards the North Vietnamese could, in Nixon's view, prove favorable towards the United States and its mission for peace.

Throughout the first two years of the Nixon Administration, Nixon initiated symbolic gestures of recognition towards China through the State Department, but no official visits were conducted, and even Henry Kissinger himself was skeptical regarding Nixon's anticipation towards forming bonds with the PRC. The turning point for when official relations with China began to prove necessary began in mid-year 1969. In June of that year, American Intelligence received reports that the Soviet Union was conducting mock attacks against Chinese targets in Outer Mongolia. In August, the Soviet Union sent delegates to other Asian countries to gauge responses for a Soviet-proposed "Asian collective security system," which was perceived by the PRC to be directed against Chinese power. Later that month, Nixon and Kissinger received a briefing by US Intelligence agent Allen Whiting, who told them that the Soviet Union was positioning itself for a successful attack against the PRC. All of this led to the belief among Nixon and Kissinger that the time for the US to begin talks with China was near; not only would the formation of a peaceful allegiance with China be more difficult if the Soviet Union and China ended up in a war with each other, but US Intelligence also believed that China may be more

likely to accede to US interests if the Soviet Union was acting antagonistic towards the PRC (MacMillan 138).

From 1969 to 1971, Nixon and Kissinger used a secret communication channel through President of Pakistan Yahya Khan to indirectly communicate with Beijing. In October 1970, Yahya visited Nixon and Kissinger in Washington DC, and Nixon asked Yahya to carry word to Mao and Chou that the US was eager to initiate and formalize communications with Beijing. Chou responded with enthusiasm, but was firm that China would only accept a special envoy to negotiate the withdrawal of American troops from Taiwan. Nixon agreed that Taiwan would be discussed, but that the formalization of relations and the reduction of tensions must be discussed as well. The channel went silent for several months until on April 6, 1971, when the Chinese government suddenly invited the American Ping-Pong team to visit China while they were at the World Table Tennis Championship in Japan. This decision to initiate contact through "Ping-Pong Diplomacy" was made at the hands of Mao himself, because he understood that the visit from American athletes was not just spectacle, but rather an important indicator as to how US-Chinese relations could proceed if conducted well (MacMillan 176). By May 1971, a visit to the PRC from none other than Kissinger proved necessary in furthering American-Chinese relations beyond just Ping-Pong Diplomacy.

Kissinger flew from Washington DC for his first secret visit on July 1, 1971 (MacMillan 189). He flew from DC to Bangkok, Thailand, then to India, then to Rawalpindi in West Pakistan. The night he arrived in Pakistan, he complained of a stomach sickness from the previous night in India, and told his aides that he was going to bed early. At 3:30 a.m. the next day, Kissinger snuck off in a disguise to a plane at Pakistan International Airlines, which was headed towards Beijing. Over the course of Kissinger's two-day visit in Beijing, he and Chou En-

Lai spoke for nearly 17 hours with each other. Though many matters of international politics - like Taiwan - were discussed, the most pressing topic of conversation was how Chou and Kissinger could successfully plan a visit between the Heads-of-States of the two countries (MacMillan 198). Kissinger needed to provide secret information to alleviate any concerns Chou would hold about the US eventually betraying China or harming its interests. On his first visit, Chou discussed the then-secret Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT), and on his second visit, presented Chou with copies of various agreements between the US and the USSR (MacMillan 242). Not only was this move to reveal top-secret information strategic because Kissinger gained Chou's trust, but the move also made certain that the Chinese would face future crises with the Soviet Union with the same information as he and Nixon had themselves.

The secrecy of these initial communications was a mystery to Mao, but Nixon and Kissinger believed that any potential political uproar among the American public which may occur if news of these secret communications leaked could be damaging enough to halt what was already tenuous communication (MacMillan 174). Nixon and Kissinger recognized the necessity of talks to be secretive before they became publicized, as historian Margaret MacMillan explains:

"When the only contact the United States had with China was through Pakistan, and when American and Chinese statesmen had no idea of the others' thinking, it would have been very dangerous to allow several weeks of public and potentially damaging speculation before the visits took place. Such opening comment, whether from enthusiasts or opponents, might have spooked the Chinese, worried American allies, and made the trip a domestic liability in the United States" (MacMillan 182).

Luckily, Kissinger interpreted his first visit as a success. During Kissinger's return from Beijing to Pakistan, he told Ambassador to Pakistan Joseph Farland that he "got everything [he] wanted," and that the talks with Chou "were a total success" (MacMillan 201). Given the promising news, Nixon was eager to tell the American press that the talks between Kissinger and Chou En-Lai had occurred in Beijing. On July 16, Nixon gave a televised speech and revealed the information regarding the talks and stated that he himself would visit Beijing in the coming months.

Nixon's eagerness to reveal the news implies the extent by which his political instability shaped his preparation to his 1972 visit. During 1971, Nixon was struggling domestically due to a festering economy, with inflation running over seven percent (MacMillan 202). Additionally, peace talks with the North Vietnamese were going nowhere. Rising unpopularity within the United States for the US's involvement in the Vietnam War necessitated that Nixon do a politically popular act to maintain his re-election chances in the upcoming 1972 election. Luckily for Nixon, talks with China proved beneficial; one month after his announcement, Nixon had risen in the polls against his Democratic challenger Edmund Muskie. With the popularity of talks with China fresh in his mind, Nixon wanted to take full advantage of being the first American official to publicly visit China. Later, he would tell the PRC not to allow any other American politicians to visit Beijing before his own trip (MacMillan 203).

Every part of Nixon's visit to China was politically-calculated so as to make Nixon appear as flattering as possible. Even Nixon's landing into Beijing was timed so as to occur simultaneously as US news primetime. The Nixon Administration negotiated with the PRC the number of journalists allowed on the trip from 10 to nearly 90, and Nixon himself chose the journalists by hand. But the publicization of Nixon's visit was not just for Nixon's political ego,

but also because the more publicized his visit, the more leverage he could draw his newfound relationship with China to use in the international sphere. A publicly-televised visit to China was necessary for Nixon to achieve his objective in driving a wedge between the Soviet Union and the PRC, because only a public visit would make other world leaders, like Soviet Leader Leonard Brezhnev, keyed in to the burgeoning relationship between the the US and China. The overly-publicized event was beneficial for China as well; Nixon's visit to China implicitly led to a legitimization of the PRC within the international arena - especially in the West (Overholt 711).

Nixon and his entourage arrived at Capital Airport near Beijing at 11:30 a.m. local time on February 21, 1972. Very little was spoken about geostrategic issues between Mao and Nixon in their first meeting that evening at the Grand Hall of the People in Beijing. In that Hall, a grand banquet was held between the leaders, elaborately adorned with performances and artifacts celebrating both cultures. Though it wasn't until the following day in which negotiations would begin, this celebration was a symbolic first-step in establishing that positive intentions and a positive regard existed on behalf of both states towards the other.

Nixon's congenial meetings with Mao and Chou the day of his arrival set the tone for Nixon and Chou's talks throughout the next week. Nixon entered his negotiations with Chou with his key objectives, the Chinese objectives, and their mutual interests clear in his mind (MacMillan 234). While Chou and Nixon frequently disagreed throughout their discussions, each did so politely and with a mutual respect for the differences between each nation and a common goal to settle on agreements with each other. Because so many of the details of the United States and China's positions had been laid-out by Kissinger in the two secret meetings beforehand, the talks had no set agenda. Both sides discussed their common adversary, the Soviet Union, at

length. Meanwhile, Chou remained focused on Taiwan, and Nixon kept bringing the topic of Vietnam to the table. No geopolitical issue existed in isolation with the other, and no bargaining tool was used without the potential of being used as leverage for another issue. Nixon even resorted to using his political position to encourage Chou relent on Vietnam, saying that Republicans would struggle in the 1972 elections if Nixon had compromised on Taiwan but did not receive concessions from the PRC in the Vietnam War (MacMillan 270). In doing so, Nixon successfully leveraged the role of US governmental politics in achieving this geostrategic objective of the United States; Nixon himself also recognized that China would rather continue with normalization negotiations with one continuous presidential administration rather than see a shift to a different, possibly more antagonistic US presidential administration.

Reaching an end to the US involvement in the Vietnam War (or at least, beginning the process to ending US involvement) was a key interest for both President Nixon himself and for the United States as a whole. The issue of Vietnam was so prescient for the Nixon Administration that Nixon's White House Chief of Staff Harry Haldeman said that the Vietnam War "overshadowed everything else, all the time, in every discussion, in every opportunity, in every problem" during his service in the administration (MacMillan 120). As such, any possibility that concessions could be granted by the Chinese which would help Nixon de-escalate tensions in Vietnam was a massive draw towards him visiting China. This awareness of the Vietnam War among the administration was not just salient due to the political tumult which was occurring in response to continued US involvement in the War, but also because the administration itself was realizing that the fight for Vietnam was proving futile. It would be irrational for the United States to dig its heels deeper into the fight against the North Vietnamese if the War was a dead-end. Yet, with so many avenues for US retreat from Vietnam closed,

Chinese assistance in ending the War was an extremely promising draw for Nixon and Kissinger, regardless of its unlikelihood.

American Intelligence misperceived the salience of “the Taiwan question” to the PRC prior to Kissinger’s secret meetings with Chou. Originally, the US believed that the importance of Taiwan to the Chinese and the importance of Vietnam to the Americans were on equal parity with each other. This was not the case. From the PRC’s perspective, Taiwan was wholly a part of China on principle, and the recognition of Taiwan as being a part of China was as important - if not more - of an issue for the PRC as relations with the Soviet Union (MacMillan 246). In fact, Chou made it clear to Kissinger throughout his secret visits to China that formal relations between Nixon and the PRC would never until the US relented on Taiwan (MacMillan 256). As a result of Chou’s firm stance, Nixon and Kissinger were completely prepared to relent on the Taiwan question by the time they began negotiations with Chou. However, they hoped to appear as if they were relenting only “as a last resort” so as not to anger the American political right when the US eventually made concessions (MacMillan 254).

Both Nixon and Chou ended up compromising and moved to a middle-ground in their bargaining regarding Taiwan. The PRC abandoned insistence on complete reunification with Taiwan in order to secure the removal of American troops from the Island and an overall improvement on US-Chinese relations. The PRC also recognized that the United States would be unable to turn away from Chiang Kai-Shek overnight, and granted the US leeway in their gradual retreat from Taiwan. In return, the US officially recognized that dealings with Taiwan was fundamentally China's prerogative (Overholt 712). Additionally, Kissinger made three promises to Chou. First, that the US would end all support for Chiang Kai-Shek. Second, that the US would refrain from supporting any independence movement by the Taiwanese. And third, that

the United States would immediately remove American forces which were stationed in Taiwan because of the Vietnam War once the War was through (MacMillan 257-258). This deal implicitly put the Taiwan issue to rest, and allowed the United States and the PRC to move forward on negotiations regarding Vietnam.

In exchange for US recognition of Taiwan as being part of China, the Nixon administration wanted Chou to use Chinese influence over Hanoi to encourage the North Vietnamese army to relent in the war. Because Nixon knew that the alliance between North Vietnamese and the PRC was disintegrating, he believed that Chou may be willing to bargain against the North Vietnamese. Yet Nixon misunderstood the extent by which the PRC would be willing to intervene on behalf of the US. Chou refused to make promises to Kissinger and Nixon, instead stating that the PRC cannot "meddle into their affairs" and that the PRC has "no right to negotiate for them," but Chou did urge the United States to remove American troops from Vietnam as soon as possible (MacMillan 271). Nixon responded by stating that the stagnating negotiations were caused by the North Vietnamese alone, who were refusing to negotiate with the United States amiably, hence why Nixon wanted Chou's help with Hanoi. Ultimately, Chou refused to commit to pressuring the North Vietnamese to surrender to the United States, but did assure Nixon and Kissinger that Chinese support for the North Vietnamese would not escalate further.

The US wanted to bring in China as an ally against the Soviet Union in the Cold War to tip the global balance of power towards the US's favor. If the United States was always situated as a counterbalance between the Soviet Union and China, then each side would be incentivized to deal constructively with the US so as not to cause the US to potentially align with one state against the other (MacMillan 122). Additionally, the United States could play their newfound

“China card” when dealing with Brezhnev because the United States could now threaten Chinese retaliation on the USSR’s eastern front if the Soviet Union did not accede to US demands (Goh 476). Or at least, this was Nixon and Kissinger’s hope going into negotiations with Chou.

Just how the US wanted to leverage its relationship with China against the USSR, the PRC did as well. In December 1971, Chou En-Lai said that a more benevolent relationship between China and the United States would "act as a brake on Soviet expansionism" (MacMillan 124). However, Chou En-Lai did not want a united Sino-American front against the USSR like Nixon and Kissinger did; rather, Chou merely hoped for peaceful relations between the two powers. Chou was firm in believing that belligerent relations between the Soviet Union and the US would eventually descend into war, and that peaceful relations between the two Cold War adversaries would be far better for both the global order and China itself (MacMillan 237). Though these two perspectives on the Soviet Union were different from each other, both Nixon and Chou had a unified interest in constraining the Soviet influence in the global sphere.

On February 28, the last day of Nixon's visit, the United States and the PRC jointly issued the Shanghai Communique: a diplomatic declaration of the agreements and disagreements between US and the PRC, and a commitment which laid out the intentions of each state to begin formal normalizations for the future. Kissinger and Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua negotiated the wording of the document in an intense series of meetings throughout the week-long visit. After all, the document would be read and studied by world powers for years, and so every minute issue was heavily debated between the two bargainers. In fact, to ease the difficulty in the drafting process, both sides agreed to have two subsections, in addition to the common statements, written entirely by each respective state, with their own wording. Despite the difficulty of creating a unified declaration between such radically different states, issuing the

Communique was rational and necessary for both the United States and China. Though the document was non-binding, the Communique ensured that the opposing power would not falter on its agreements due to the international uproar if those agreements were broken once made public (MacMillan 303).

The Communique was a culmination of the successes and failures, and the agreements and disagreements involved in Nixon's visit. Additionally, the document had clear anti-Soviet undertones throughout, such as a commitment on behalf of both states to not only refuse to seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, but also to oppose the efforts of any other states which may attempt to do so. Such a line, Kissinger wrote later, suggested that "a tacit alliance to block Soviet expansionism in Asia was coming into being" (Goh 484). After all, even in the midst of Nixon's detente strategy against the USSR, any ally in the US's negotiations with Brezhnev could prove helpful achieving US objectives.

Evidence is mixed as to the extent by which Nixon and Kissinger's trip was successful in improving their bargaining position with the Soviet Union. Though SALT negotiations were successful in the months following February of 1972, many of the key bargains had been made already prior to Nixon's visit. Regardless, Nixon's visit certainly made Brezhnev and the Soviet leadership more cognizant of the need to work with the United States in order to avoid threats by the US-Chinese partnership (MacMillan 291). To what extent Nixon's visit to China also helped ease the rising tensions between the Soviet Union and China also remains unclear. What can be said is that the assurance of agreeable relations with the United States allowed the PRC to focus fully on any remaining threat from the USSR. For example, in response to the promises Kissinger made regarding US troop removal from Taiwan, the PRC decided to deploy troops which had been stationed on the Taiwan Straits area to the Russian border (Overholt 709).

Ultimately, Nixon's visit was only partially successful in holding the Soviet Union at bay for both the United States and China, and only for a short time. The Yom Kippur War of October 1973 strained US-Soviet relations enough to where "the China card" was no longer significant enough to prove effective for the United States (MacMillan 324). While US-Chinese relations did not inhibit Nixon from progressing in his detente strategy with the Soviet Union, the Cold War would still continue to grip US foreign policy until the collapse of the USSR in late-1991.

Despite the US leaving without their primary objective in Vietnam being achieved, the US was left better off in Vietnam due to the visit because the North Vietnamese army was hyper aware that China placed a high value on maintaining benevolent relations with the United States. As a result of that fact, China may be less likely to come to North Vietnamese aid if it would jeopardize their burgeoning relations with the US (MacMillan 271). This tacit agreement also left the US in a better position to mount more forceful, last-ditch attacks against North Vietnam without worrying about Chinese retaliation. And so, in the spring of 1972, the US hit harder than it had before, bombing across North Vietnam and mining Haiphong Harbor in Hanoi (MacMillan 271). With the eventual help of the Chinese encouraging the North Vietnamese to pursue peace talks with the United States, a peace agreement between Vietnamese revolutionary Le Duc Tho and Kissinger was signed in Paris, France, on January 27, 1973 (MacMillan 271). Without the congeniality between the United States and the PRC, the US would have likely taken far longer to achieve its objective of US withdrawal of troops from the Vietnam War.

Though nowadays the normalization of relations between China and the US seemed like an inevitable occurrence in an increasingly globalized world, the reality was that China and the US were diametrically opposed in many of their most prescient foreign policy dilemmas - Taiwan and Vietnam in particular - in the early 1970s, and such a cordial relationship between

Nixon and Mao was not certain. There is little doubt that without the efforts of President Nixon, Kissinger, Chou and Mao that the opening of Chinese-American relations would not have occurred as smoothly or as quickly as it did. Kissinger made two more visits to Beijing, in February and November of 1973, and was granted visits directly with Mao. The relationship between the US and the PRC grew more steady, and each country established liaison offices in each other's capitals (MacMillan 323). Even though many of Nixon's original geostrategic objectives for the trip were not achieved due to bargaining - such as the request for assistance in Vietnam - the visit was successful in shifting the balance of power away from the Soviet Union. For Mao, the visit was arguably more successful than for Nixon. Not only did the Soviet Union step off of China's heels, but the decades-long "Taiwan question" was settled largely in the PRC's favor. As a result, the PRC became viewed as the legitimate, one-true China - implicitly if not legitimately - by the international order. All of this came at little cost for the People's Republic.

Richard Nixon's week-long 1972 visit to China was a visit orchestrated largely by Nixon and Mao (and their respective inner-circles) for the purpose of securing their own geostrategic objectives in Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Soviet Union. Neither China nor the United States was entirely successful in securing their entire objectives in their negotiations with each other, which is itself representative of the ways in which successful bargaining in international politics is reliantant on positive-sum compromise. But despite the two heads-of-states largely acting out of self-interest for their respective states, the visit is emblematic of a shift to a liberal perspective of international relations because of the collaboration and opening-up of relations which the visit brought forth. Now, in the 21st Century, Chinese and American economies are intertwined with each other through exports and imports; nearly one million Americans visit China every year;

and many of today's PRC leaders hold degrees from prestigious American universities (MacMillan 304). Nixon's visit to China, though caused by geostrategic and electoral interests which seem distant in the American cultural imagination today, caused ripple effects which tied both great powers together in ways impossible to untangle. In this way, Nixon's visit to China was not just a positive-sum negotiation *between* Nixon and Mao for geostrategic purposes, but was also a positive-sum interaction for the global, liberal order as a whole.

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