



Deng and Carter: The Normalization of Sino-American Relations

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HST 401: The Global Nineteen Seventies

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Introduction

“For the first time, because the people of the world want peace, and the leaders of the world are afraid of war, the times are on the side of peace....I shall consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon to the cause of peace among nations.”⁹³ In January 1969, when newly elected President Richard Nixon delivered his inaugural speech, “peace” was the most salient word throughout the whole address. It seemed that America, trapped in Vietnam, was seeking a new order in both domestic and

international affairs. Publicly, Beijing denounced Nixon’s speech as “a confession in an impasse” and demonstrated that “the U.S imperialists...are beset with profound crises both at home and abroad.”⁹⁴ Privately, however, Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, grasped the speech’s subtle message and considered rapprochement with the United States.

Three years later, in February 1972, Nixon met face-to-face with Mao in Beijing.⁹⁵ The dramatic event shocked the world and transformed the Cold War power

⁹³ "The Avalon Project : First Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon." The Avalon Project : First Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/nixon1.asp

⁹⁴ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001): 238.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 239.

balance between Moscow and Washington. Nixon's trip marked the first time a standing American President visited the Chinese mainland. The Shanghai Communiqué signed by Nixon and premier Zhou Enlai underscored the common understanding of the two countries for further recognition and expressing their basic international policies in their own way.⁹⁶ The communiqué symbolized the end of the intensely hostile relations between the U.S. and China and laid the foundation for further improvements.

By the end of the decade, Washington and Beijing established full diplomatic relations. Although Nixon and Mao initiated the thaw, they were not responsible for the fulfillment of Sino-American relations. Instead, Nixon resigned in disgrace, and progress was halted under the Ford administration. A leadership crisis also emerged in China, as Mao and Zhou were ill. Relations did not proceed until 1977, after both Deng Xiaoping and Jimmy Carter assumed office. In this paper, I examine how and why Sino-American relations resumed under Deng and Carter. Drawing on declassified American and Chinese documents, I argue that normalization was the result of a reciprocal process in which both parties were determined to reach the final result. I conclude, however, that China has benefitted more from normalization than the United States.

Historiography

Scholars have examined the opening of relations between Washington and Beijing from both sides. They have emphasized geopolitical and ideological considerations.⁹⁷ Others have discussed the

domestic political implications in the United States, especially for the Republican right.⁹⁸ Drawing on the declassified records of the Ford and Carter administrations, scholars have examined how Sino-American relations were formalized.

Warren Cohen argues in *America's Response to China* that after Nixon's resignation, President Gerald Ford needed the Republican right to ensure his victory in the 1976 Presidential election. Therefore, Ford hesitated to advance relations with China and was restrained politically from abandoning Taiwan. Meanwhile, China's political atmosphere was turbulent. Both Mao and Zhou were in failing health and a leadership succession struggle followed.⁹⁹

Michael Schaller argues that Carter initially delayed the rapprochement with China due to the foreign and domestic policy implications. Schaller explains that Carter feared that the rapprochement would endanger détente with Moscow. The Carter administration also needed bipartisan support in the Senate to secure approval for the Panama Canal Treaty. Thus, Carter had to delay the diplomatic break with Taiwan and the normalization with the PRC.¹⁰⁰

Melvyn P. Leffler asserts that even though Carter prioritized détente with Moscow, he was determined to establish normal diplomatic relations with China. For Carter, better relations with Beijing would provide America with a more competitive position in the "Third World" and also strengthen Washington's negotiations with Moscow on limiting nuclear weapons.¹⁰¹

James Mann argues that Carter selectively applied his human rights policy toward China. After taking office, the

⁹⁶ Ibid, 275

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: Harper, 2007), 201

⁹⁹ Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China a History of Sino-American Relations*. 5th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

¹⁰⁰ Michael Schaller, *The United States and China in the Twentieth Century*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979): 204.

¹⁰¹ Melvyn P. Leffler. *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007): 204

Carter administration emphasized human rights considerations in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy. However, Mann writes that when Carter criticized the Soviet Union's oppression of dissidents, the same standard was not applied to China's repression of democratic movements. Thus, human rights were subordinated to the normalization of Sino-American relations.¹⁰²

Daniel Sargent argues that it was actually Deng's success as a reformer that revived and catalyzed the normalization of Sino-American relations. He writes that normalization reintegrated China into the world economy and also constructed a strategic partnership against the USSR. Meanwhile, Sargent explains that Washington loosened its restrictions on technological and intelligence exchange and was willing to normalize relations with the PRC in order to strengthen its strategic position against the Soviet Union¹⁰³

Michael Schaller also emphasizes Deng's succession and his pursuit of pragmatic policies that led to Sino-American rapprochement. The disastrous Cultural Revolution launched by Mao led to a deterioration of the economy, education, and internal security. Deng abandoned Mao's revolutionary rhetoric and advocated for modernization and reform. He implemented a new "Open Door Policy" by which foreign investment and trade was allowed and increased in order to stimulate China's economic growth.¹⁰⁴

Steven E. Lobell contends that China was also trying to use America for

leverage against Moscow. Deng wanted to boost National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's hard line position against Moscow. Deng feared that America's detente policy would ease the threat on the Soviet Union from Western Europe and empower the Kremlin to concentrate on policies against China.¹⁰⁵

Thomas Borstelmann writes that after Deng assumed power, he realized that China was decades behind the developed countries in science, technology, and education. Therefore, he prioritized the modernization of China's economy and adopted some capitalistic approaches, including a market-oriented economy and experiments with private property in some regions. Meanwhile, better relations with the U.S. could offer China more advanced technology after being isolated for decades. Overall, China was eager for American help to modernize and reduce their perceived geopolitical threats.¹⁰⁶

Paul Coyer contends that a shift in Congressional attitudes also affected Sino-American rapprochement. Coyer writes that after Deng initiated his reforms and appealed for American help, previously skeptical members of Congress were more amenable to support improving relations with China.¹⁰⁷

However, Robert G. Sutter contends that the Carter administration intentionally bypassed Congress when dealing with Beijing. According to Sutter, key members of Congress were shocked and agitated about the sudden announcement of Carter's secret progress

¹⁰² James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China from Nixon to Clinton*. (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1999) : 100.

¹⁰³ Daniel J. Sargent, *A Superpower Transformed: the Remaking of American Foreign Relations in the 1970s*, (Oxford University Press, 2015)

¹⁰⁴ Schaller, 196.

¹⁰⁵ Steven, Lobell, E, "Great Powers in a Restrictive International Environment." *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* (2011)

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 2012): need page numbers.

¹⁰⁷ Paul Coyer, "Congress, China and the Cold War: Domestic Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement and Normalisation, 1969-1980" , *The London School of Economics and Political Science*, (2013): 300.

with China. Sutter writes that in order to avoid Congressional opponents and “the China lobby” who might block initiatives with Beijing, the administration avoided involving Congress. They asserted that a successful policy toward China could not have been reached without bypassing key Congressional opponents from the secret negotiations.¹⁰⁸

I will demonstrate how final normalization was accomplished under Deng and Carter, and how it benefited China.

Hindering Normalization

When Nixon assumed office in 1969, his administration was immediately challenged by the increasing anti-war movement and also the deteriorating war in Vietnam. In his first year in office, Nixon announced a new foreign policy to facilitate Asia’s future without massive U.S troop deployments. One significant implication was to end the U.S.-backed containment of China. Nixon put great effort into initiating secret communications with Beijing.¹⁰⁹ When Nixon adopted the new strategic policy, the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute had deteriorated to the point of war. With millions of Soviet troops deployed at China’s borders, the Soviet Union had become the severest threat to China’s security. Meanwhile, China had to be vigilant about the threat from Taiwan in the east and the threat from North Vietnam as well. At this point, China was at its worst strategic position since the establishment of the PRC. Beijing recognized that only the United States had the ability to alter China’s strategic disadvantage in the face of Soviet intimidation and threats. Mao was finally determined to ameliorate Sino-

American relations in order to deal with the Soviet Union.¹¹⁰

As a friendly gesture to Beijing, Nixon decided to remove all remaining passport restrictions on travel by Americans to China. The Chinese immediately responded by inviting an American Ping Pong team to compete in China, ending the blockade which limited communications between the two countries since 1949.¹¹¹ In early July 1971, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger secretly flew to Beijing and informed Premier Zhou that America was willing to establish diplomatic relations with China. When Nixon flew to Beijing seven months later, he privately told Zhou that he would break ties with Taiwan and establish full diplomatic relations with China in his second term.¹¹² Full diplomatic relations were expected to soon after Nixon won the 1972 presidential election.

Although Nixon was reelected by a large margin, he was forced to resign from office 18 months later due to the Watergate scandal. By 1975, China had waited three years for full normalization. Even though Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger were determined to continue Nixon’s policies toward China, they struggled to avoid conservative challengers of the Republican president who were opposed to normalization. Ford and his advisers worried about attacks from Ronald Regan and others. He needed the support of conservative Republicans to win his party’s nomination and the general election.¹¹³ Normalization was then subordinated to domestic political concerns. At the same time, the waxing power struggle in the wake of the feebleness and death of Mao hindered normalization as well. He was preoccupied with severe domestic

¹⁰⁸ Robert G. Sutter, *The China Quandary: Domestic Determinants of U.S. China Policy, 1972-1982*. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983)

¹⁰⁹ Sutter, Robert G. *U.S.-Chinese Relations Perilous Past, Pragmatic Present*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010): Chapter 5

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Mann, 94

ideological struggles during the last years of the Cultural Revolution. Power struggle in the wake of his death became acrimonious and blatant.

Deng the Reformer

For many years, the power struggle between moderates and radicals determined the direction of the PRC's policy making. Moderates like Deng advocated for the importance of higher education, rapid industrial growth and technological modernization. In contrast, radicals stressed the primacy of ideological purity and criticized reliance on foreign technology and ideas. Borrowing foreign ideas or methods, such as material incentives, they argued was deviation from pure Communism. Radicals had a strong antipathy towards the outside world.¹¹⁴ The so-called "Gang of Four," who typified radicals and partially gained control of government policies during the later stage of the Cultural Revolution, reprimanded the rapprochement with the United States.¹¹⁵

After the Gang of Four was purged in July 1977, Deng eventually resumed his posts as the Vice Chairman of the Communist Party of China, the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, and the Vice Premier. However, Deng still had to contend with Hua Goafeng, the Chairman of the Party. Hua was a loyal advocate of Mao's radical leftist ideology and he implemented policies that upheld the "Two Whatevers," which proclaimed that "We will resolutely uphold whatever policy decisions the Chairman made, and unswervingly follow whatever instructions Chairman Mao gave." This extreme policy did not help

China recover from the disastrous Cultural Revolution. Instead, it goaded the Chinese people into further class struggle and neglected economic reform.¹¹⁶

In July 1977, in a speech made at the Third Plenary Session of the Tenth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Deng implicitly challenged Hua, stating that "in saying that we should use as our guide genuine Mao Zedong Thought taken as an integral whole, I mean that we should have a correct and comprehensive understanding of Mao Zedong Thought...only in this way can be sure that we are not fragmenting Mao Zedong Thought, distorting or debasing it."¹¹⁷ *Guangming Daily*, an influential newspaper run by the CPC Central Committee, published an article named "Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth" which followed Deng's permission. The article censured and countered the "Two Whatevers," arguing that it had betrayed the authentic Marxism that had overlooked the scientific laws, constrained people's mind and would only hamper the progress of the society.¹¹⁸ It produced heated discussion and gained support from many veteran cadres in the party. From this point, radically leftist ideas started to abate, and Deng's pragmatic approach started to prevail and laid the ideological foundations for further reform.

Deng stressed pragmatic solutions to material problems and insisted the primacy of economic growth and the modernization of industry, national defense and science and technology.¹¹⁹ In a talk with two leading comrades, Deng emphasized that "the key to achieving

¹¹⁴Schaller, 196

¹¹⁵ The "Gang of Four" included Mao's third wife, Jiang Qing, and Wang Hongwen, Zhang Chunqiao, and Yao Wenyuan. They were the radicals who almost took power after post-Mao era

¹¹⁶ Gong, Li, and Jingqing Zhou. *Deng Xiaoping Zai Zhong Da Li Shi Guan Tou*. Di 1 Ban. ed. (Beijing Shi: Zhong Gong Zhong Yang Dang Xiao Chu Ban She, 2000), 103

¹¹⁷ Deng Xiaoping, *The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping, Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2006), *Thought Must be Correctly Understood as an Integral Whole, 1977*

¹¹⁸ Hu Fuming "Practice is the Sole Criterion for Testing Truth" *Guangming Daily*, May 11, 1978.

¹¹⁹ Schaller, 196.

modernization is the development of science and technology.”¹²⁰ He further explained the motives for the reform in a March 1978 speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science that “unless we modernize our country, raise our scientific and technological level, develop our productive forces and thus strengthen our country and improve the material and cultural life of our people...our socialist political and economic system cannot be fully consolidated.”¹²¹ He also stressed that, “the more...we are modernized...the more our people will support the socialist system.”¹²² At the same time, in order to stimulate the economy, Deng also recognized that modernization needed to utilize and adapt some components of capitalism such as market economy. When asked whether the adaption of market economy betrayed Communism, Deng later argued that “It is wrong to maintain that a market economy exists only in capitalist society...similarly, taking advantage of the useful aspects of capitalist countries, including their methods of operation and management, does not mean that we will adopt capitalism...we use those methods in order to develop the productive forces under socialism.”¹²³

Due to China’s economic stagnation, Deng and his reformist comrades concluded that modernization could not be achieved without expanding economic relations with the rest of the world. A new “Open Door policy” could give China more modern technology and capital needed for the modernization. When some people still vacillated between Mao’s notion of autarky and Deng’s advocacy for

opening, Deng argued that, “how can a new theory be evolved if it is not based on a summation of the practical experiences of both past and present generations of scientists, both Chinese and foreign?” He further castigated and warned people who withheld advanced western technology from compatriots.¹²⁴ When told about the development of China’s own creativity and persistence in the policy of independence and self-reliance, Deng stressed that “independence does not mean shutting the door on the world, nor does self-reliance mean blind opposition to everything foreign...every people or country should learn from the advanced science and technology of others.”¹²⁵

In October 1978, Deng quipped that “for a certain period of time, learning advanced science and technology from the developed countries was criticized as ‘blindly worshiping foreign things’. We have come to understand how stupid this argument is...”¹²⁶ He asserted that “China cannot develop by closing its door, sticking to the beaten track and being self-complacent.”¹²⁷ Deng, at the first day of assuming of power, had been determined to open China to the outside world. As the most powerful country in the world, the United States undoubtedly became the main target of his aims.

Carter’s Final Determination

While Deng was preoccupied with reform, Jimmy Carter also showed great interest in normalizing relations with China. Shortly after taking office, Carter met with Chai Zemin, the Head of the PRC’s liaison office, and explained that “I

¹²⁰ Deng, “Respect Knowledge, Respect Trained Personnel,” May 24 1997.

¹²¹ Deng, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science,” March 18, 1978.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Deng, “We Can Develop a Market Economy under Socialism,” November 26, 1979

¹²⁴Deng, “Some Comments on Work in Science and Education,” August 8, 1977

¹²⁵Deng, “Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the National Conference on Science,” March 18, 1978

¹²⁶Deng, “Carry out the Policy of Opening to the Outside World and Learn Advanced Science and Technology from Other Countries. October 10, 1978”

¹²⁷ Ibid.

hope we can see a strong movement toward normalization and are concerned about increases in the Soviet Union's strength...to the extent that Western Europe, Japan, the U.S. and China can cooperate, can be friends, and exchange ideas and share mutual purposes."¹²⁸ It seemed that after the succession crises in both countries, normalization could finally be back on track. However, according to Chai's memoirs, the normalization was not even the primary goal for the new administration.¹²⁹ Progress towards normalization was still on hold.

Pursuing detente and a new arms control agreement with the Soviet Union was one of Carter's most important foreign policy priorities. He sought to maintain cooperative relations with Moscow and believed that it would ameliorate tensions around the world.¹³⁰ Secretary of State Cyrus Vance argued that China was still not a powerful country economically or strategically. In contrast, stable U.S.-Soviet relations could generate an international environment which would facilitate the accomplishment of other American foreign policies. Normalization with Beijing, Vance warned, could "create unnecessary fears on the part of other Asian friends...and invite paranoid reactions from the Soviets...we must not slide into believing that we can somehow play a 'China card' against the Soviet Union."¹³¹

Relations with China were linked to other priorities. Carter later recalled that "the most difficult political challenge" he

ever faced was "to negotiate and have the U.S Senate approve a new agreement with Panama."¹³² During the first few months of his term, Carter made a great effort to win Senate approval to return the Panama Canal to Panama. Carter also understood that normalization with the PRC meant the termination of U.S.-Taiwan diplomatic relations and would incense the conservative senators who regarded Taiwan as the only China. He recalled in his memoirs that the effort to secure the, "final few votes necessary for treaty ratification...working on SALT II negotiations with the Soviet Union... did not leave much time for us to pursue the China question."¹³³ At this point, Carter had not made a decision on relations with the PRC.

However, along with the passage of the Panama Treaty and a massive unprecedented Soviet intervention aimed at helping Ethiopia's communist regime against Somalia from July 1977 to March 1978, the Carter administration became more willing and eager to establish relations with the PRC. Carter explained that "some of the senators known to be doubtful about a [Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)] II treaty with the Soviet Union had expressed the hope that we would develop stronger ties with China."¹³⁴ Carter determined that normalization could help him in the U.S. Senate with the SALT II treaty because it could attract some anti-Soviet senators.¹³⁵ In early spring 1978, Carter finally decided

¹²⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Document 5, February 8, 1977, *Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter FRUS), 1977-1980, Volume XIII, China.*

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d5>

¹²⁹Chai Zemin, *Zhong Mei Jian Jiao Feng Yu Lu: Jian Zheng Li Shi Gongheguo Dashi Jiangshu.* (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe): 68

¹³⁰Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969-1989,* (Stanford University Press, 1994): 126

¹³¹ Vance, Cyrus R. *Hard Choices: Critical Years in America's Foreign Policy.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983)

¹³² Jimmy Carter, *Beyond the White House : Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope.* (New York : Simon & Schuster, 2007)

¹³³ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President.* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1982), 197.

¹³⁴ Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 198.

¹³⁵ Mann, 96

to proceed with the normalization with the PRC.

In 1978, Carter delegated National Security Advisor Brzezinski to visit China and present the idea of normalization. Before Brzezinski's departure, they discussed some potential outcomes of normalization. They believed that "all would consider the resulting enhancement of political and military stability in the Western Pacific a benefit."¹³⁶ For Korean problems, Carter and "South Korean President Park wanted the Chinese to help prevent any military moves by North Korea and to help reduce existing tensions in that peninsula."¹³⁷ One significant benefit that Carter and Brzezinski discussed was the, "ability to quietly sway some third-world countries with whom it was very difficult to communicate...most revolutionary governments did not naturally turn to the United States...we saw our cooperation with China as a means to promote peace and better understanding between the United States and those countries."¹³⁸ Normalization, they believed, could endow America with a more competitive position in the "Third World" in order to challenge Moscow.

On May 20, 1978, Brzezinski arrived in Beijing and was first met by Foreign Minister Huang Hua. Brzezinski expressed that his primary mission was to "first of all reaffirm [Carter's] commitment to the full normalization process...to show our determination to move forward with the process of normalization." Brzezinski added that "the United States has made up its mind on this issue."¹³⁹ Brzezinski also brought gifts. The Carter administration

had secretly permitted China to gain advanced arms, military equipment, and technology from the West. Brzezinski told Chinese officials that Washington would allow China to obtain some American technology which was withheld from the Soviet Union.¹⁴⁰

Brzezinski later met with Deng. Deng reiterated China's three conditions for normalization: the severance of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the withdrawal of American forces from Taiwan, and the abrogation of the U.S.-Taiwan mutual defense treaty. Brzezinski, accepted the three conditions on behalf of the president.¹⁴¹ Even though they still had disputes on how to solve the Taiwan problems after normalization, the meeting generated positive momentum, and both sides agreed to start the formal negotiation as soon as possible. According to Carter, Brzezinski's visit was very successful because Deng and other leaders knew more about America's determination and the goals of his administration. Carter believed that China's interest in improving relations with the United States was increasing and they were prepared finalize normalization.¹⁴²

China's attitude towards America became more hospitable. The content and tone of official newspapers has always been an effective way to perceive China's attitude towards other countries. When Washington requested that Beijing cease their public criticism of America's policies, the Chinese responded immediately. Carter recalled that "In June, their official newspaper even published the full text of my address on U.S.-Soviet relations to the

¹³⁶ Carter, 193

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹Memorandum of Conversation, Document 108, May 20, 1978, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d108>

¹⁴⁰ Mann, 98

¹⁴¹Memorandum of Conversation, Document 110, May 21, 1978, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d110>

¹⁴² Carter, 194

Annapolis graduates and commented favorably on its sentiments.” He added that “the newspaper even editorialized about the Cubans’ ridiculous claim that their country was nonaligned...and China would explore joint ventures with United States oil companies and characterized Brzezinski’s visit as positive and useful.”¹⁴³ Although Brzezinski’s visit did not begin the formal negotiation with China, it had brought Sino-American relations to an unprecedented level. Huang Hua and Woodcock Leonard, Chief of the U.S. Liaison Office in Beijing, would represent PRC and the United States in the formal negotiations held in Beijing two months after Brzezinski’s visit.

Turbulent Negotiations

The Carter administration hoped to reach a new SALT treaty with the Soviet Union and bring it to the Senate before the spring 1979. The White House determined that it was better to obtain a normalization treaty with China before submitting SALT II because it would be politically risky and almost impossible to fight congressional battles for two significant treaties at the same time. Meanwhile, if both sides delayed, the Carter administration would be preoccupied by the presidential campaign. Therefore, Carter aimed to finish and announce the normalization by December 15, 1978.¹⁴⁴ U.S.-Taiwan relations and arms sales were the core issues during the negotiations.

However, the first five sessions of negotiations from July to September were actually unproductive due to opposite strategies used by each side. China laid out all its conditions for normalization at the beginning of the sessions. First, Taiwan was the only issue that impeded the normalization between two countries. After

normalization, the United States would have to terminate its diplomatic relations with, withdraw troops from and abrogate a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan. Third, the United States could still maintain trade and cultural contact with Taiwan except to sell arms. Fourth, no country would be allowed to intervene in China’s internal politics toward Taiwan’s liberation.¹⁴⁵ The United States intentionally set the meetings every ten days, only addressed one outstanding issue at each meeting and preferred to incrementally state its position. Because China’s strategy was to respond after America had stated all its conditions, the negotiation was actually one-sided and did not address core issues, especially arms sales to Taiwan.

When the negotiation was hindered in Beijing, Chai Zemin, the head of the PRC liaison office at the time, was also negotiating with his counterparts in America. When he met with Brzezinski, Chai restated that China would never accept arms sales to Taiwan. Brzezinski argued that America would only sell defensive arms so it would not threaten the interests and security of the PRC.¹⁴⁶ Arms sales had become a huge obstacle to the normalization process. Each side was not willing to compromise its own position.

On September 19, President Carter privately met with Chai and emphasized that America was still eager to normalize with China. He hoped that China would understand his insistence to sell defensive arms to Taiwan after the normalization because of America’s domestic connections with Taiwan. And if America could also see a peaceful settlement of the Taiwanese issue, there would be no obstacles to the normalization.¹⁴⁷ However, the dispute on Taiwan impeded normalization. When Chai restated that

¹⁴³ Ibid, 196

¹⁴⁴ Mann, 89

¹⁴⁵ Chai, 84

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 85

¹⁴⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, Document 135, September 19, 1978, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d135>

China would handle the Taiwanese liberation its own way, Carter was not willing to accept this claim and insisted on a peaceful settlement.¹⁴⁸ By early October, even though the United States had accepted China's three conditions and showed willingness to normalize, the liberation of Taiwan and the arms sales were still the most obdurate obstacles to normalization. A normalization treaty seemed impossible by the end of 1978.

Nevertheless, the normalization had not totally halted. During Deng's visit to Japan in October, he signaled that normalization depended on the determination of President Carter. If Carter was willing to move forward, Deng asserted that China would follow. On the other hand, Carter also met with Brzezinski and instructed him to prepare a draft communique for Woodcock to demonstrate America's determination to continue negotiations.¹⁴⁹ The draft also included the date of normalization. The president changed the date from January 15, 1979 to January 1, 1979 as a final push toward normalization.¹⁵⁰ On October 30, during the meeting with Chai, Brzezinski advised that any time before January 1979 would be the best time to reach the normalization because Congress would discuss SALT II and other issues in early 1979. Unless China could grab this last opportunity for normalization, it would have to be delayed until late 1979.¹⁵¹ No one could promise the normalization could be reached by then since the presidential campaign would be in full swing and the opponents from the Senate and Congress might impede normalization. Perceiving America's seriousness and eagerness for normalization, Deng, on November 2, indicated to the party that China should

grab this chance and try to make early achievement of normalization.¹⁵² On the same day, Woodcock presented the one-page draft normalization communique calling for a January 1, 1979 announcement. Normalization was finally back on track.

It was imperative for China to normalize with America as early as possible due to the changing international situation. A successful and consolidated U.S.-Soviet detente might threaten China's strategic position because the two superpowers might isolate China. Meanwhile, since September, the Soviet Union had transferred large amount of weapons to Vietnam against Cambodia, and they even signed a Soviet-Vietnamese treaty on November 3.¹⁵³ If China deliberated whether to send troops to help Cambodia, they now had to take into account Soviet forces as well. Therefore, an early accomplishment of normalization could reduce the geopolitical threats to China. After the unproductive November, China was ready to move forward.

On December 4, Han Nianlong, the Vice Foreign Minister of the PRC who substituted for a sick Huang, told Woodcock that China agreed to issue a joint communique on January 1, 1979. The negotiations were finally in the last stages.¹⁵⁴ Although other issues like how to settle Taiwan were still in dispute, Deng decided to take charge of the negotiations. From December 12 to December 14, Deng personally accepted America's demands that China would not counter their unilateral statement which advocated for a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue and America would maintain its economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. He acquiesced that Washington would terminate its mutual

¹⁴⁸ Chai, 87

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Chai, 88

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ross, 137

¹⁵⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Document 159, December 14, 1978, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d159>

defense treaty with Taiwan in one year when it expired, and suggested to add an anti-hegemony statement in the communique which reaffirmed Sino-America opposition to the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁵ However, the night before the scheduled date for announcing the formal communique, a dispute on arms sales almost hampered normalization once again. China seemed to believe that America would terminate arms sales to Taiwan. However, Washington insisted that it would continue the arms sales a year after the normalization. Outraged and shocked, Deng saw this demand as a humiliation that he could not accept.¹⁵⁶ Woodcock privately reminded Deng of the importance of processing the normalization agreement. Compelled by China's worsening strategic position, Deng decided to follow the original schedule for normalization and leave the dispute to the future. Finally, on December 15, both sides announced the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of the Diplomatic Relations and officially established diplomatic relations on January 1, 1979.

The Aftermath

Normalization opened a new page for Sino-American relations and brought them to an unprecedented height. From January 28 to February 5, 1979, Deng made his celebratory tour in the United States and became the first PRC leader to visit the United States. Normally, American officials only welcomed their guests in Washington. However, Carter delegated Woodcock and Jones Dobelle, the Chief of the Protocol, to welcome Deng when the plane arrived for a short layover in Alaska. On the next day, Deng was welcomed with

a 19-gun salute and almost an unprecedented ceremonial honor in Washington.¹⁵⁷ In the public statement, he praised the United States and verbally criticized Soviet hegemony. Meanwhile, he also visited Atlanta and Texas, leaving a famous photo in which Deng wore a ten-gallon hat at a Texas rodeo. At the Kennedy Center, after Deng put his arms around the American performers and kissed children who sang a Chinese song, many in the audience wept.¹⁵⁸ Deng had left an extremely amiable impression on the American people.

However, the visit was not just about feasts and touring. Deng's priority was to gain America's moral support for China against Vietnam who invaded China's ally, the Khmer Rouge of Cambodia in November 1978. In the wake of the Soviet-Vietnam treaty and deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations, when China decided to attack Vietnam, it needed America's support for such an aggressive action. During his meeting with Carter, Deng warned that Vietnam was the "Cuba of the East," and if China did not teach them a lesson, Vietnam would exceed Cuba due to its larger population and military force.¹⁵⁹ He further described the invasion of Vietnam as an extremely grave matter and stated that some members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) even criticized China as being too soft. Since there had been constant boundary problems between China and Vietnam, and Vietnam had totally allied with the Soviets, it was necessary for China to teach the Vietnamese a lesson.¹⁶⁰ Deng promised that the lesson would be limited to a short period of time and would

¹⁵⁵ Chai, 89

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 91

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 121.

¹⁵⁸ Carter, 208

¹⁵⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Document 202, January 29, 1979, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d202>

¹⁶⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, Document 205, January 29, 1979, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d205>

withdraw the troops once China's objectives were achieved. However, Carter insisted that the best way to treat Vietnam was to isolate it from the rest of the world since it had been the first time that developing countries in the United Nations condemned Vietnam. The action initiated by China would disrupt the peaceful image just produced in new Sino-American relations and might cause further Soviet involvement.¹⁶¹ Despite Carter's insistence, it seemed that Deng had already made his decision before he visited America. In February, China attacked Vietnam.

In the face of the Sino-Vietnam War, even though America did not directly give support to China, the rhetoric in its public statements actually demonstrated acquiescence to Beijing's action. The administration first stated that America was not informed about China's intention and then urged "immediate withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Chinese troops from Vietnam."¹⁶² This strategy maintained America's role as impartial mediator while reducing China's responsibility by censuring Vietnam. America's statement was rather a nominal demonstration of its position and would neither undermine new Sino-American relations nor explicitly reprimand its new friend. Privately, Carter had even expressed sympathy for the Chinese in this conflict.¹⁶³ Although the Carter administration did not provide material support to China during the war, its statement implicitly demonstrated its

acquiescence. Acquiescence was also demonstrated in the limited way Carter dealt with China's human rights issues.

Human rights was a significant element in the formulation of Carter's foreign policy. However, when dealing with the arrest of dissidents in China, Carter decided to look the other way when the democracy movement initiated in late 1978 was repressed in China. Wei Jinsheng, along with 30 other activists who advocated for democracy and freedom, were put on trial in late 1979. The Carter administration just simply expressed its astonishment and disappointment instead of reproaching China's violation.¹⁶⁴

Moreover, China had benefited more from these new relations. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had exacerbated Carter's distrust of Moscow. When U.S. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown visited China in early 1980, he informed Deng that America would export to China the Landsat Earth Resources Satellite which might be used militarily. Furthermore, in April, the United States moved the PRC from export category "Y," which contained the Soviet Bloc, to category "P," explicitly permitting Chinese access to nonlethal military equipment.¹⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the two countries also signed trade agreements which gave China access to America's textile market and granted China "Most Favored Nation" status. The access to the U.S. market offered China opportunities to obtain advanced technology and foreign currencies needed for international trade, which in turn would consolidate its reform

¹⁶¹ Oral Presentation by President Carter to Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, Document 206, January 30, 1979, *FRUS 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d206>

¹⁶² Backchannel Message From the President's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs (Aaron) and the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Holbrooke) to the Deputy Chief of the Liaison Office in China, Doc 216, February 16, 1979, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII.*

China
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d216>

¹⁶³ Record of a National Security Council Meeting, Document 214, February 16, 1979, *FRUS, 1977-1980, Volume XIII. China*
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v13/d214>

¹⁶⁴ Mann, 102.

¹⁶⁵ Ross, 149.

at home. When the Chinese economy developed more jobs and became more labor-intensive, America would lose some jobs at the expense of the economic cooperation. Unbalanced trade relations would become an important conflict between Washington and Beijing in the future.¹⁶⁶ As the less-developed nation after normalization, China has benefited more than the United States.

Conclusion

During the 1980s, along with increasing cultural, economic and scientific exchanges, China and America entered a new period which was named by some Chinese scholars, “the Sino-American Honeymoon.” Ties between the two countries became closer, and a wide range of agreements for cultural, scientific and technological cooperation and trade were signed by the two countries. The United States quickly emerged as the leading foreign investor in China.¹⁶⁷ Normalization also facilitated the liberalization of U.S. control over exports of advanced technology to China. For China, normalization not only consolidated and facilitated the modernization, but mitigated threats from the Soviet Union. America, on the other hand, was given access to China’s inchoate but potentially huge market. American enterprises like Coca-Cola, American Express and General Foods entered China. The interaction between the two countries has become more frequent and dependent. After thirty years, China has already become the second largest trading partner of the United States, and the cooperation between the two countries is now vital and necessary for facilitating and easing peace and tensions around the world.

Four decades ago, when Nixon’s visit to China shocked the world, few people expected Sino-American relations to play an essential role on the world stage. It was solely geopolitical concerns that brought the two countries closer to each

other. After Deng initiated China’s reform, and Carter was determined to push normalization forward. Although Nixon pioneered normalization, it was actually due to Deng and Carter’s determination that it was accomplished. This was a moment that would forever change the world.

¹⁶⁶ Ross, 152

¹⁶⁷ Cohen, 230