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The Change in America’s China Policy:

American Motivations behind the Sino-US Rapprochement of the 1970’s

Introduction

In February 1972, President Nixon—Republican, conservative, and staunchly anti-Communist—stepped into the Beijing study of Chairman Mao, leader of the Chinese Communist revolution and the head of the People’s Republic of China[[1]](#endnote-1). The two men were aware that this meeting was historically unprecedented[[2]](#endnote-2). For over two decades, Communist China had closed itself off from most of the Western world, and the Cold War rhetoric from both the US and the PRC had long been hostile and derisive[[3]](#endnote-3). There were times when both sides had threatened the other with nuclear attacks[[4]](#endnote-4), and the horrors of their proxy war in Korean, in which the fledgling PRC had lost over a million men, still dominated the mutual memory[[5]](#endnote-5).

Personally, Nixon had vehemently and vocally supported Jiang Jieshi, the leader of Mao’s opposition during the Chinese civil war, just twelve years prior, in his 1960 election campaign. The Chinese state-run media, had, in turn, condemned Nixon as a “chieftain whom the capitalist world had turned to out of desperation”[[6]](#endnote-6) upon his 1969 inauguration. And yet, despite the animosity, both ideological and personal, between the individual leaders and their countries, this meeting between Mao and Nixon had long been zealously and carefully sought after by both governments.

Why was it, then, that despite the anti-Communist rhetoric and capitalist stance the US took in the Cold War, the president and his advisors had simultaneously been attempting a rapprochement with the largest Communist force in Asia? Why was the US executive branch willing to overlook a history of mutual antagonism and proxy war with the PRC and attempt to normalize relations despite the glaring difference in the two countries’ ideological and political positions?

This essay will examine the reasons behind the US move to a rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China starting in the late 1960’s. The executive branch began to seek reconciliation with Communist China because of pressures from Congress, considerations over public opinion in relation to domestic politics, and national security and containment concerns.

On the domestic side, foreign policy elites influenced both Congress and the general public to change its views on how the US should deal with the PRC. As a result, rare Congressional pressures and implications for reelection persuaded the executive branch to advocate policy change.

On the international side, the softening of relations with the PRC was a tactic to, first, improve US image abroad in the shadow of the Vietnam War and, second, to further US containment against Soviet Communism.

Domestic Factors: The China Hearings

In the mid-1960’s, a series of events regarding the People’s Republic of China—including France’s recognition of the Communist government as the legitimate rule of the country[[7]](#endnote-7), the PRC’s successful detonation of its first nuclear bomb, and heightened awareness of China’s role in the aid of North Vietnamese fighters—prompted the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific to turn their attention to Sino-American relations[[8]](#endnote-8). In 1966, Senator Fulbright, who would later conduct the Vietnam War hearings that scrutinized US involvement in Vietnam, prepared for the Senate China hearings[[9]](#endnote-9). He believed that there was real danger of war with the PRC, and wished to provide both himself and the public, both of whom knew very little about the region, information on Communist China[[10]](#endnote-10). All through March, 1966, the Senate invited twelve China scholars—some with conservative view and others with more moderate stances on China—to testify and present their opinions on the US policy towards the PRC[[11]](#endnote-11). Though the scholars differed on their opinions about the Vietnam War and PRC involvement with the North Vietnamese, the overwhelming consensus of and central message that emerged from the hearings was that the US should pursue a policy of “containment without isolation” in regards to China[[12]](#endnote-12).

Foreign Policy Elites and Congress

The consensus amongst scholars had a profound effect on Congressional attitudes towards the US China policy, an effect that illustrated the influence foreign policy elites can have over politicians who have little knowledge on a region and rely on the knowledge of experts to shape their viewpoints. An examination of three senators from both parties reveals the bipartisan impact of the China hearings.

Mike Mansfield, a staunch Democrat, had always argued for a softening of the isolationist policies the US held towards the PRC after the Communist takeover. However, prior to the China hearings, he had only advocated for a flexible China policy that could adjust to changing circumstances[[13]](#endnote-13). It was not until after the hearings, in June 1966, that he began to explicitly suggest American reconciliation with the PRC. He concluded that the PRC was not going to be overthrown, that its power would continue to grow, and that the US needed to work “face-to-face” with the Communist government[[14]](#endnote-14).

Jacob Javits, a liberal Republican senator, had viewed the Communist Chinese government with suspicion and distrust prior to the China hearings[[15]](#endnote-15). He was part of the U.N. committee that sought to prevent PRC admission to the organization, and supported a tough American trade policy towards China[[16]](#endnote-16). After the China hearings, however, he became one of the first Republicans to recommend changes to the US China policy[[17]](#endnote-17). Influenced by the scholars’ testimonies, he began to argue that, to achieve peace and stability in Asia, the US government needed to take the more realistic route of “containment without isolation[[18]](#endnote-18). He distanced himself from the U.N. committee, citing the China hearings for his decision[[19]](#endnote-19), and sought further consultations with China experts to increase his understanding of the PRC as he continued to modify his approach to the US China policy[[20]](#endnote-20).

Clement Zablocki, a conservative Republican house member, was born in Soviet-controlled Poland, and was unsurprisingly staunchly anti-Communist. During the 1950’s, he had supported the efforts of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and authored the 1959 House Concurrent Resolution 639, which voiced Congressional opposition to PRC admission into the U.N[[21]](#endnote-21). Following the China hearings, however, his opinions on US policy towards China underwent a complete transformation. He began to recommend cultural exchanges between the US and the PRC[[22]](#endnote-22) and urged the Johnson administration to relax the American trade embargo on mainland China.

The examples of these three congressmen reflected the shifting opinions of many of their colleagues. Liberal democrats, liberal Republicans, and moderately conservative Republicans, all with various opinions on the PRC and the US China policy before 1966, were convinced by the China hearings to adopt a flexible view on how the US should proceed with its relationship to the PRC. As Fulbright had noted, most of his colleagues and the American public had very little knowledge about the PRC prior to the China hearings. The Congressional consensus was, therefore, brought about by academic testimony as proof of the influence foreign policy elites can have on politicians’ views.

Foreign Policy Elites and the Mainstream Effect

Public opinion polls in relation to the China hearings showed that, influenced by East Asian scholars and the attitudes of their Congressional representations, the public was eager for a new American approach in dealing with China. Through the 50’s and into the 60’s, there had existed a Cold War consensus, in which, on the surface, an ardent and unanimous anticommunist sentiment pervaded the public mentality[[23]](#endnote-23). Especially in the area of Communist China, the public, which lacked information and knowledge, was either indifferent or looked to members of Congress and the president for how their should feel on the subject. As Congress, too, was uninformed, it looked to the president, and this consensus about the hardline US policy towards the PRC in the 50’s caused the mainstream effect; that is, because political elites of both parties, in both Congress and the executive branch, agreed on the policy of containment and isolation towards China, the public accepted it as the best approach.

Public opinion changed in the mid-60’s, concurrent with scholarly testimony at the China hearings. Political scientists have found that, in matters of foreign affairs, scholars and research institutions are much more effective in influencing public opinion than the government[[24]](#endnote-24). As a result, academics, the foreign policy elite, were able to reach and convince the general public about the need to increase contact with China and adopt flexibility in the US China policy[[25]](#endnote-25). Despite presidential reluctance to change the China policy, the public was warming to the idea of increasing diplomatic contact and reconciliation with the Communist government[[26]](#endnote-26).

Rapidly changing poll numbers during 1965 and 1966 showed both the shift in the public’s opinions on China during 1966 and the impact the China hearings and the Congressional consensus had on this shift. In December 1965, 67% of Americans opposed admitting the PRC into the UN. In June of 1966, this number had dropped to 43%[[27]](#endnote-27). As the administration was still hesitant to change its China policy[[28]](#endnote-28), this shift was clearly an indication that the public paid attention to the hearings and that scholarship convinced them of the need for more moderate treatment of China.

Just as the mainstream effect had been the reason the public had accepted a hardline policy to China in the 50’s, following the China hearings the mainstream effect likely played a part in influencing public desire for more diplomatic contact. As mentioned above, both Republic and Democrat members of Congress showed changes in their views on the PRC and advocated more communication with China following the hearings. Public support for government policies is likely to be higher if there is agreement on the policy between conservatives and liberals, and so the consensus in Congress on the need to reform the China policy likely prompted public opinion to support it as well.

Domestic Politics and the Shift in Presidential Attitude

Though today, Nixon is given credit for opening up relationships with the PRC, his motivation to do so was an inheritance from his predecessor Johnson[[29]](#endnote-29), who, while in office, changed the entire attitude of the executive branch on the China issue. For his first two years in office, Johnson maintained the conservative and hardline policy of containment and isolation towards the PRC that his Kennedy and Eisenhower had taken[[30]](#endnote-30). However, in 1966, Johnson’s middle-level staff members, some of whom had been pushing for years for a more moderate China policy, were, with the China hearings, suddenly given a voice. They convinced Johnson’s senior staff, and eventually the president himself, to take on a less confrontational attitude towards China[[31]](#endnote-31) in accordance with public demands and congressional pressures. In July 1966, Johnson observed in a speech that peace could not be achieved if the US continued to isolate China, and looked forward to future cooperation and reconciliation with the PRC[[32]](#endnote-32). In a rare case of bottom-up policy making, aligned public and Congressional opinions convinced the executive branch to adopt their preferred stance on the China policy.

Nixon, though staunchly conservative and anti-Communist[[33]](#endnote-33), adopted the Johnson administration’s change in attitude upon his election in 1969 and followed through with a rapprochement with the PRC partly due to domestic politics. As early as his inaugural address, Nixon marked his presidency as an era of “negotiation” “after a period of confrontation.”[[34]](#endnote-34) Aside from national security concerns, Nixon pursued this conciliatory attitude towards China because of concerns over public opinion and reelection, both for himself and the Republican Party. Nixon was able, and indeed encouraged, to pursue this attitude towards China because a significant number of conservatives supported it[[35]](#endnote-35). Aside from the extreme right wing, most of his party urged the reconciliation with the PRC and the replacing the Republic of China with the People’s Republic in the U.N., and saw these moves as necessary for American benefit[[36]](#endnote-36). That the hawkish hardliners in the Republican party held these conciliatory views was, no doubt, the result of expert testimony during the China hearings.

By taking a relatively dovish stance on the China policy, Nixon also appealed to the liberals who had always held more flexible views on the PRC. The consensus between hardliners and accommodationists on the China issue allowed Nixon a way to appeal to both sides and pave a road to his landslide reelection in 1972. In addition, should he become successful in courting the PRC, the public would credit the Republican party with the success, thereby boosting his own public support and support for his party[[37]](#endnote-37). It was therefore in Nixon’s best political interest to pursue a rapprochement with the PRC.

International Factors: Vietnamization and the National Interest

The dwindling down of US involvement in Vietnam contributed greatly to both Johnson’s and Nixon’s decision to seek reconciliation with the PRC. Despite initial widespread misconceptions that Communist China provided much of the support for the North Vietnamese in the Vietnam War[[38]](#endnote-38), towards the end of his term Johnson had become aware of China’s unenthusiastic attitude towards continued support for North Vietnam[[39]](#endnote-39). By the time of Nixon’s inauguration Henry Kissinger had managed to convince the new president’s senior staff members that China was a realist power that would act in its own national interest[[40]](#endnote-40). Having been historical enemies with Vietnam, the PRC government only provided minimal and reluctant aid to the North Vietnamese forces, and, as Kissinger and other members of Nixon’s staff concluded, Mao and Communist China would have been willing to seek alignment with the US and forgo aid to Vietnam should that further the Chinese national interest[[41]](#endnote-41).

Given this conclusion about the realist attitude of Mao’s government, it made sense for Johnson, who felt compelled to begin winding down the Vietnam War in 1968[[42]](#endnote-42), to simultaneously attempt a rapprochement with the PRC. As the US pulled out of South Vietnam, Johnson needed to make sure that North Vietnam would not have China’s backing to launch an attack into the south[[43]](#endnote-43). Also, because of the violent nature of US involvement in Vietnam, Johnson wanted to improve American image in East and Southeast Asia by ushering in a friendlier relationship with China[[44]](#endnote-44). It was also natural for Nixon, who continued de-escalation and promoted Vietnamization, to adopt this attitude and policy stance. This was because Nixon considered a reconciled Sino-American relationship to be crucial to continued stability in Asia after the Vietnam War[[45]](#endnote-45). If South Vietnam was to set up a stable capitalist government and take up the reigns in resisting North Vietnam incursions (i.e. Vietnamization), the US needed to be on good enough terms with China to ensure that the PRC would not interfere.

In withdrawing from Vietnam, the US wanted assurance that the PRC would not take the opportunity to expand Communism into Southeast Asia. It wanted to diplomatically isolate North Vietnam, and, as China was reluctant to help the North Vietnamese to begin with, opening up relations with the PRC would be helpful in this objective. Finally, for the sake of the US image and the reputation of capitalism, the president wanted to send the message internationally that the US was not prepared to engage militarily with another Communist Asian country[[46]](#endnote-46).

Containment and the Mutual Soviet Threat

Finally, one of the main reasons for the change in American attitude towards the PRC was to increase US leverage over the Soviet Union[[47]](#endnote-47) and further the US policy of containment. However, the US also made multiple mistakes in diplomacy with both the USSR and the PRC become coming to this conclusion. The containment of the spread of Communism had long been the official US policy of the Cold War, but it is important to realize that, as early as the Truman Doctrine, the principles of containment applied primarily to Soviet Communism. Of course, at the writing of the Truman Doctrine the world had appeared to be bilateral, but it is also true that the US failed to view China as a rising third party. For some years in the 1950’s, it appeared to US policymakers that the newly Communist China was simply another country within the orbit of the USSR, and was therefore to be treated with the same policies of containment[[48]](#endnote-48).

Then, in late 50’s and early 60’s, the US began to view China as a separate entity from the USSR, but were mistaken about the PRC’s intentions. When the Sino-Soviet split of the late 1950’s came to light in the early 1960’s, for some years the Kennedy administration inclined towards the Soviet side[[49]](#endnote-49). In 1961, US foreign representatives even approached Soviets in Vienna to suggest that the two countries forge an alliance against the Chinese threat. The Korean war and the heavy Chinese involvement in aiding North Korea especially antagonized US attitudes towards the PRC government, especially when compared to the Soviets, who limited their involvement in the support of North Korea[[50]](#endnote-50). In 1964, China’s testing of its first nuclear weapon only added to the US fear of Chinese Communism[[51]](#endnote-51)As a result, the US mistook the different intentions the Chinese and Soviet had for their unique brands of Communism.[[52]](#endnote-52).

What the Kennedy administration missed, and what the Johnson and Nixon administrations slowly came to realize, was that the Truman doctrine was correct in identifying Soviet Communism as the primary target for containment. The Soviet attitude toward proletariat revolution involved a global objective. Lenin had believed in global Communist revolution, and the Soviet Union focused much of its energy on building and expanding its spheres of Communist influence[[53]](#endnote-53) outside of Russia. On the other hand, for the Chinese Communist government, the idea of world revolution was only an abstract slogan. Mao was not nearly as interested in spreading PRC ideology abroad as he was in stirring continuous revolution within China. In addition, Chinese leaders recognized that the newly Communist PRC had no means to challenge the prevailing world order[[54]](#endnote-54).

Increasingly, it became clear to the Johnson and Nixon administrations following the Sino-Soviet split that it was primarily the Soviets, and not the Chinese, who posed the threat of Communist expansion. At the same time, the realist Chinese leaders were also becoming ever more aware of the Soviet threat to the security of China’s borders and sovereignty[[55]](#endnote-55). It therefore became increasingly clear to both sides, beginning in 1966, that Sino-US rapprochement would serve as a counterbalance to Soviet aggression. From the Chinese perspective, it would deter physical Soviet threats to China’s border security, and so, despite their anti-Imperialist rhetoric, realist Chinese leaders were eager to pursue diplomatic relations with the US. From the American perspective, rapprochement would deter further Soviet Communist expansions into ideologically capitalist areas[[56]](#endnote-56), because the Soviets would the force with which the China or the US might react once diplomatic ties some sort of mutual interest existed. Therefore, ironically, allying with Communist China would be an important move on the part of the US government to further its policy of containment.

Conclusion

The decision on the part of the executive branch to change America’s China policy during the 1960’s and early 70’s was informed by both domestic and international factors. Domestically, a consensus among China scholars that the US should seek a more conciliatory attitude towards the PRC influenced Congress and the general public to pressure their presidents into a policy change, Internationally, concerns over security in Asia post Vietnam and the threat of Soviet expansion made allying with Communist China the most practical move for the US national interest. Upon examination of the driving factors behind America’s move to reconcile with the PRC, one wonders to what extent individual American leaders and their ideologies can influence historical events. Certainly, in the case of the Sino-US rapprochement, the personal politics of individual presidents were drowned out by the domestic and international trends of the times.

Henry Kissinger, who played a defining and prominent role in the opening of Communist China to diplomatic ties with the US, reflected decades later that necessities of the time dictated that the US and China would have achieved rapprochement regardless of who was in control of the leadership in either country[[57]](#endnote-57). A proponent of the realist view of international relations and a proponent of *realpolitik*, Kissinger believed that leaders do not create the context in which they must operate, but instead are left to make decisions within the existing world order.

He did concede, however, that it was to the credit of individual leaders on both sides that the rapprochement proceeded as quickly and smoothly as it did. It is this point, then, that perhaps answers the question of how much an individual leader influences the outcome of events. In the modern world, the general direction of history is set by domestic and international factors too powerful for any one individual to completely alter. However, individual personalities will determine the ways in which the course of events are perceived and analyzed in the future, and the personal decisions of Johnson and Nixon in relation to the Sino-American rapprochement defined the ways in which we analyze this event today.

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2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2011), 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *The Cambridge History of The Cold War vol. 1*, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 373. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961-1874* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Katherine Klinefelter, “The China Hearings: America’s Shifting Paradigm on China,” Congress & the Presidency Vol. 38, Is. 1 (2011): 62, accessed Dec. 5, 2017, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07343469.2010.528828?src=recsys. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 62. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
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13. Louis Baldwin, *Hon. Politician: Mike Mansfield of Montana* (Missoula, MN: Montana Press Publishing Company, 1985), 32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid, 157-158. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Klinefelter, “The China Hearings.” 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid, 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. M. S. Handler, “Javits Asks Shift in Stand of China.” New York Times (New York, NY), Mar. 21, 1966. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
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20. Ibid, 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid, 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. A Doak Barnett, *China Policy: Old Problems and New Challenges* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institute, 1977), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ralph B. Levering, *The Public and American Foreign Policy, 1918-1978* (New York, NY: William Morrow, 1978), 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Klinefelter, “The China Hearings.” 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: U.S. Relations with China since 1949* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Klinefelter, “The China Hearings.” 70. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Kissinger, *On China*. 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
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37. Ibid, 219. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
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43. Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China*. 95. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Dunbabin, *The Cold War.* 285. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
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