

# A Moment in the History of Realpolitik Diplomacy in the Light of the 1972 Shanghai Communique

## -- Factors from China's and US's Perspectives that Led to the Sino-US Rapprochement in the 1970s

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**Abstract.** 2022 marks the 50th anniversary of the 1972 visit by Richard Nixon to China and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, in which China and the US were able to initiate diplomacy and consequently soften the precarious global relationship at the time, known as the "Sino-US rapprochement" in history. Recently, we have all witnessed the intensity a Taiwan visit by the US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi could bring. Thus, it's essential to reflect on history for modern politics. Many people, even historians, scarcely know much about the Shanghai Communiqué or disregard its significance. The fact that the Shanghai Communiqué exists as literal evidence of the Sino-US rapprochement discloses the realism of the senior leadership from both countries behind the façade of ideology. This paper will examine whether the Shanghai Communiqué in 1972 was a moment of realpolitik diplomacy in history or not. Looking at the history of the Cold War period from a long-term perspective, this paper claims that China has taken on long-term underlying realpolitik standpoints on various issues long before the culmination of this moment. This paper has comprehensively analyzed the domestic and international problems impacting Mao's and Nixon's administrations and the shifting geopolitical relations that altered China and the US's diplomacy in a similar direction to elucidate this matter further. At the same time, this paper also provides historical reflections on the current Sino-American relations and power transfer process.

**Keywords:** Shanghai Communique; Realpolitik Diplomacy; Sino-US Relations.

### 1. Introduction

It all began with Zhou's handwritten letter to Nixon delivered by the Pakistan ambassador in Washington on December 08th, 1970, expressing the president's welcome of Nixon's visit to China, further implying a tendency towards lessening tensions and rapprochement diplomacy, especially suggesting a discussion about Taiwan. Nixon's reply on December 16th mentioned reducing the US's military presence in Taiwan as tensions gradually diminished in East Asia and the Pacific. However, having to juggle the China and Indochina cards simultaneously, Nixon's acceleration of the Vietnamization program led to a halt in the line of Sino-US contact. The offensive of South Vietnamese troops in Laos prompted the Chinese to question if the new US involvement in Laos and Cambodia might lessen the possibility of US withdrawal from South Vietnam. After three months past the deadline, Nixon finally announced that the Laos and Cambodia offensive was not targeted at PRC and further removed restrictions on US passports traveling to China.

Thomas Christenson argued that the rapprochement between China and the US demonstrated the highest spectrum of realpolitik diplomacy in the post-Cold war era since China emerged from its decades-long isolation. This resulted in the famed Shanghai Communique, which cast aside many ideological feuds in that period. For Christensen, this move marked realpolitik diplomacy (Christensen). However, it can also be asserted that looking through a more comprehensive historical perspective, China's decisions prior to this moment were not always simply on the line of ideology. China and the US were willing to engage in the Shanghai Communique not only due to an overall shift to realpolitik concerns within the context of the shifting geopolitical relations between China, the US, and the Soviet Union but also the shifting domestic and international policies within each state.

## 2. China's Perspective

### 2.1 Domestic Issues

#### 1. Social and Political chaos

From China's perspective, Mao's motivations to open up diplomacy were crucial to the rapprochement, and many of the motivations were influenced by China's domestic situation. To begin with, China's internal situation in the 1960s was chaotic. There were very tense relations between leftist and centrist factions in late 1966. To understand why the leftists' wanted reforms, we must backtrack to 1958, when Mao launched "the Great Leap Forward" after the five-year plans to develop the country's industry. From 1956 to 1959, the CCP also launched the Hundred Flowers Campaign to cultivate personal expressions and opinions about the government to develop the country politically and socially. However, that led to increased anti-rightist sentiments, which threatened local officials later during the Great Leap Forward since they were afraid to report any economic consequences of the reforms. Thus, the Great Leap Forward failed to achieve its original intent while simultaneously exacerbating famine and poverty in rural China, which further impeded China's progress and led many to impugn the legitimacy of Mao's leadership (Meng et al.).

In 1969, Mao's speech expressed: "we should unite together for one purpose, that is, to consolidate the proletarian dictatorship." He noted that China was under the dictatorship of the proletariat, whereby the post-revolutionary PRC state seized the means of production and compelled the implementation of direct elections on behalf of and within the confines of the party, which established an unequal wealth distribution system. The leftists maintained that the means of production should be in the workers' hands. They argued that the society's structure currently is in the interest of the bureaucrats, which was built up on the opposite principles of the people. According to Shen Wulien, "the masses could achieve democratic control over production and distribution only through "a new political power of the Paris Commune type (Shen)." This showed that the leftists intended to abolish the control of bureaucrats in the state through universal salary and armed citizenry with a revolution. One of the most famous strikes took place in the summer of 1966, known as the "Red August." There were many violent attacks on school campuses where students attacked teachers. Those students were mobilized by the new youth organization – "Red Guards," which was vastly praised and reported throughout most media and newspapers in China then. The violence was exacerbated after Mao issued the "Resolution on Withdrawal of the Working Groups from Colleges and Middle Schools," where the "red guard" exploited the power vacancy and implemented large-scale aggression against teachers. Later, the violence expanded outside schools as artists and literati also came under fire. For example, the famous writer Lao She committed suicide on August 24th after he and his peers were brutally beaten by students (Wang). According to the Beijing Daily, around 1772 people were killed within a month. Therefore, it can be seen how the domestic chaos severely threatened China's social stability, which corresponded to Mao's intention of diffusing tension with Nixon's visit as a rightist.

#### 2. The Significance of the Chinese Leadership

To help diffuse the tension within Chinese society, Mao considered opening up diplomacy with the US. In his 1969 speech at the First Plenary Session of the CCP's Ninth Central Committee, he said, "some people may have different opinions from ours, but that is not a relationship between the enemy and us." He argued that China needs more people and alliances from all cultural backgrounds to achieve victory and develop the nation. Thus, it can be argued that though the Cultural Revolution significantly reinforced ideological camps and division in China, Mao still held a mindset of realpolitik diplomacy that sought more partnerships to facilitate his personality cult and central leadership by justifying his legitimacy (*Digital Archive International History Declassified*). For example, Mao initiated the Ping Pong diplomacy in 1970 as a political opportunity to invite the US team to make an all-expense paid visit to China (Andrews). This short-term spark paved the way for Nixon's visit in 1972, proving Mao's long-term contemplation of the Sino-US partnership. More evidently, in how he spoke about Nixon's visit, "we must let him come because only Nixon, not the leftists or the centrists, can solve the problems we are now facing." Mao expressed his concern about

the internal situation in his conversation with the American journalist Edgar Snow in 1970. He mentioned that diplomacy with the US could lessen the current tensions. As a foreign rightist, Nixon's visit could potentially open new perspectives to the many people who are part of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and governing bodies to alleviate the pressure from leftists and centrists. Furthermore, Mao also expressed a personal preference for the Nixon administration. In his conversation with Edgar Snow, he revealed to Snow that he disliked the Democratic Party and preferred the Republican Party because of their honesty, as per his negative view of Nixon's democratic predecessors. Nixon inspired Mao, so he allowed strikes in China's current constitution, adding the freedom to strike beside the "Four Freedoms" to punish the bureaucrats (Center).

Premier Zhou Enlai also played a substantial role in the Sino-US rapprochement. He built a significant personal rapport with Kissinger while they talked for 7 hours before the actual Communiqué. He also had Kissinger's assurance his stance on the Taiwan issue, the US withdrawing from Indochina, and the US-Japanese alliance was not meant to threaten Chinese Sovereignty. When Nixon and Kissinger decided to re-establish contact with China in 1970, they first met with Pakistan leader Yahya Khan since Pakistan had acted as an intermediary before, in 1969. This process accelerated with an important message from Zhou delivered through the Pakistani channel, which expressed his and Mao's interest in Nixon's visit (Burr). Kissinger states, "On my first visit to Peking, Zhou En-lai accused us of tempting Japan into traditional nationalist paths. It took me some time to convince him that the U.S.-Japan alliance was not directed against China; indeed, the surest way to tempt Japanese nationalism would be to set off a competition for Tokyo's favor between China and the United States." In "The Selected Works of Zhou Enlai," Zhou maintained this façade of China's ideological opposition against the rapprochement; however, in actuality, he held very pragmatic concerns about China's situation. (Foreign Languages Press) On the surface, Zhou Enlai and Mao opposed US imperialism according to the articles they published criticizing the anti-Communist banners flaunted by the US, yet they still took extremely pragmatic standpoints. According to Kissinger, Zhou Enlai was sustained by and disciplined by ideology, but his concerns shaped an accurate picture in action to achieve political equilibrium. The ping-pong diplomacy, as well as Nixon's public statements expressing his interest in visiting China, all signaled the visit where ideological slogans are put as a façade only.

Thus, while the Chinese public and the majority of the political officials still engaged in ideological struggle at the time, Chinese leaders such as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai were able to put aside the ideology and re-establish relationships with the world since it was shown that behind the scenes, they were carefully engaged with Nixon and Kissinger to develop this rapprochement. Still, their ultimate goals of establishing the balance of power within the Communist bloc and self-reliance drove their actions in the postwar era, which led them to shift their foreign policies according to the shifting global relations and thus pushed for a Sino-US rapprochement (Keith).

## 2.2 International Issues

China had concerns about world politics prior to the rapprochement, and it adopted a strategic realpolitik approach in the 1960s. Despite its internal affairs, it has already held a pragmatic and strategic perspective as it starts to participate in world politics. This can be seen in 2 instances: China's evaluation of soviet hegemonic expansion in the 1960s and its stance on Taiwan.

In the world politics of that time, it can be argued that China's long-term goal of seeking a balance of powers overrode its ideological standpoints in its diplomacy. Hence, the rapprochement was not an exclusive realpolitik move; the realpolitik nature of the rapprochement had been a long-term strategy by China from the start. In the past, China was relatively isolated from the world. In the 1960s, the Sino-Vietnamese relationships were also deteriorating. As premier Zhou Enlai hinted, China opposed having one country dominates Indochina. Vietnam has been seen as a significant threat to China, given its closer alliance with the Soviet Union. (Yahuda) At the end of 1961, the CCP leadership faced numerous concerns with the Soviet Union, especially involving Soviet Union's premier Nikita Khrushchev. Since China has been experiencing repercussions from its cultural and

economic reforms in that period, the Brezhnev Doctrine increased the CCP's fear of such applications of force to themselves, which further exacerbated potential conflicts with the Soviet Union. (Office of the Historian) Thus, the fact that the US and China were contacting and the secrecy of the diplomacy can cultivate immense caution for the Soviet Union. Khrushchev failed to understand that China was never a country that depended on any foreign countries, and his efforts of tearing up contracts and withdrawing Soviet experts didn't achieve their aim but further led to China's change of foreign strategy, namely opening up to the US. Mao's long-term contemplation and views of the trends of international conflicts constructed China's foreign policy guidelines. China observed these shifts in politics as Soviet social imperialism. The main idea involves Soviet social-imperialism pushing for a hegemonistic approach that targets three different worlds from the Chinese perspective: the first world is the US, the second world involves industrialized nations such as Japan and Western Europe, and the third world countries.

Within the tense context where China is concerned about the Soviet hegemonic expansion, The USSR's invasion of Czechoslovakia finalized the sino-soviet split. The Czechoslovakia ruler Alexander Dubcek launched a liberal reform called the Prague Spring, which began on January 05th, 1968 but was met by 600,000 Warsaw Pact troops launched by the Soviet Union on August 20th, 1968, to curb its reforms. The Soviet Union aimed to secure its control over its Eastern bloc and directly prevent Western intervention through this measure (Onion, Sullivan, & Mullen, Prague Spring begins in Czechoslovakia). This is also related to the "linkage" policy between US and USSR (MAKINDA). The linkage policy was an agreement between the US and the USSR during the détente, which aimed at restricting revolutions in the Third World. The soviet leadership justified its use of the military in Prague with a document known as the Brezhnev Doctrine, which stated that the Soviet Union could intervene in any threat to the Communist rule in the Eastern European sphere to prevent any soviet satellite states from gaining independence. (Onion, Sullivan, & Mullen) This had severe consequences, especially in finalizing the Sino- Soviet split. Since the Ussuri River incident of March 1969, China's northern border had become increasingly intense with Soviet threats, especially attacks on China's nuclear installations.

So, from China's perspective, she believed the main threat to her came from the north. Thus, she aimed to safeguard world peace by aggregating all countries and peoples to unite and oppose Soviet expansionism and hegemonism. (Xiang) Therefore, China's loss of a significant ally in its international politics pushed Mao to seek other partners since China had just experienced its reform, and its economy hadn't reached stability yet. Hence, an ally like the US with a developed capitalist market and global trade was very much needed.

In addition to the Soviet Union's influence, another factor that influenced China's international politics was Taiwan. Due to the Sino-Soviet split, the Taiwan factor, which threatened the one-China principle and Mao's preference for the Nixon administration, incentivized improved China-US relations; thus, China's international politics further shifted towards the Sino-US rapprochement. Mao wanted to diffuse the situation and make it less tense because he tried to influence Nixon's approach toward Taiwan by improving China-US relations. Taiwan's significance can already be seen in the Shanghai Communique. The Communique addressed the situation centrally since it was a primary issue discussed by Mao and Nixon (Center). The central concern is Mao's worry about how the US would deal with the Taiwan situation. There is also rising concern about Taiwan's status according to Mao's conversation with Edgar Snow, where he expressed his trepidations over Nixon's stance on the Taiwan situation as he worried that Nixon might be influenced by the work of the former leadership, such as Truman, Acheson, and Eisenhower (Center). According to linguist analysts in China, the language change played an essential role in ensuring the CCP leadership of the US's tendencies. This can be shown by Nixon's correction of the label to China, which recognized the People's Republic of China and implied a step toward the Taiwan issue to the CCP leadership (Brinkley & Nichter).



### 3. US Perspective

#### 3.1 Domestic Issues

##### 1. Nixon's Leadership

For the US, the shift in diplomacy influenced by the postwar consequences and global situation impacted the US's domestic politics and international relations with Nixon coming into administration. Thus, the Nixon administration inexorably influenced the Sino-US rapprochement, including Nixon himself and his security advisor Kissinger. According to Nixon, he deals with China for long-range reasons (Brinkley & Nichter). So even though domestically, the state department opposed this move towards rapprochement, he insisted on his realpolitik diplomacy from a longer historical perspective - his contemplation on the China issue. In 1967, he wrote, "We simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations (Andrews)." For example, ping-pong diplomacy marked a major breakthrough in Sino-US relations as they opened up through soft power. During the World Table tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan 1971, the US player Glenn Cowan and the Chinese player Zhuang Zedong shook each other's hands, communicated through an interpreter, and even presented each other with gifts. Although according to Nixon, there were plans before the Pingpong diplomacy of the rapprochement to China, the diplomacy definitely also played a crucial role in softening Sino-US tensions and opening up relations and trade from both sides. For example, Nixon modified the long-standing embargo on trade with mainland China.

According to Nixon's report to Congress in 1970 about US's foreign policy, it can be seen that his incentives were more based on practical stands since, in the postwar era, the US as a significant superpower started to realize that the meaninglessness and dangers of wanton war, thus, ideology loses its standpoints in foreign policy. As Nixon implied, the US is shifting its aims in the postwar era to peacekeeping which involves negotiations, partnerships, and strength. This aligns with the ambitions of the Nixon Doctrine, which states the US's role in the defense and development of allies and friends. Nixon directly expressed the significance of a realistic assessment of each nation's interests in the postwar era in order to secure the US's leading role and global influence more effectively (Nixon). Thus, there were practical standpoints raised before the Communique as Nixon's motivation to open up, which shows that the rapprochement is not an entirely new realpolitik idea.

##### 2. Kissinger's Leadership

Domestically, Nixon worked close with his national security advisor Henry Kissinger who brought out significantly practical standpoints to US politics. Together they restricted Secretary of State William P. Rogers's interference in the US's diplomacy. They were able to play the China card to pressure the Soviet Union into superpower rivalries. Nixon appointed Henry Kissinger as his national security advisor during his term. Kissinger aimed to reform US's foreign policy by adjusting it to rectify its weaknesses. Kissinger seeks to deemphasize ideology instead to balance power dynamics between the US and the Soviet Union as well as a closer relationship with the PRC from practical standpoints. However, he was disliked by many conservative Republicans in the country for his actions to achieve détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the PRC, which could potentially lose them a longtime ally, the ROC (Arnold & Wiener).

Kissinger also played an essential role in successfully persuading Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai about the US's assurance of the one-China principle and the US-Japanese alliance. He argued that the US-Japanese treaty of 1951 helped China since it prevented Japan from disturbing the peace of security of East Asia. Realistically, there has been a shift in Sino-Japanese relations after the Communique since diplomatic ties were established between China and Japan in 1972 after Kakuei Tanaka became the Prime minister. The ultra-practical standpoint Kissinger took in his building diplomacy with Zhou was mainly based on the common threat, the Soviet Union. Nixon and Kissinger made double standards when dealing with the two Communist powers since the secrecy of the Communique not only posed a threat to the Soviet Union but also assured China as a close ally to the US. Kissinger told Zhou that the US would consider the Chinese's perspective when dealing with Moscow. According to the historian Seymour Hersh, Kissinger's "realpolitik" personality provided

significant assurance to China. For example, on this first visit, he gave Zhou information on Soviet activities derived from electronic intercepts of Soviet communications and from high-resolution satellite photography, intelligence sources protected by the American government by the most stringent security measures (Bundy.). Therefore, the perspective Kissinger presented for the US fit with the perspective of the heads of governments and approaches towards the rapprochement. Thus, it shows that the underlying perspective within the domestic American leadership had practical standpoints in the past before this Communique which led to the success of the rapprochement.

### 3.2 International Issues

For the US, its failure in its containment policies in the 50s and 60s shifted its foreign policy to focus on developing and restoring its global influence instead of continuing to expand its imperialism.

Internationally, a crucial factor impacting the US throughout the Cold war and Post-Coldwar period is the Vietnam War. In the 1960s, US's containment policy in Vietnam has been experiencing failure and consequences. The prolonged conflict caused by the Vietnam War led to a massive outcry within the country. In 1967, protests against US participation in the war grew to 500,000, and the polarized country fell into chaos domestically with protests in peace marches, demonstrations, and acts of civil disobedience (Schultz). Though public opinion was leaning towards de-escalation, Nixon still accelerated the program of Vietnamization initiated by President Lyndon Johnson by gradually withdrawing US troops from Vietnam while supplying the Republic of Vietnam with arms. The consequence of Vietnamization raised concern about US's supremacy in the post-World War 2 era. With the rising economic challenges, the US was facing as well as the deteriorating Sino-Soviet relations, Nixon began to open up diplomacy with China in order to pressure the Soviet Union. In the same period of 1972, at the Moscow Summit, Nixon also signed an arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union leader Brezhnev as another part of the strategy to restrict Soviet influence (Arnold & Wiener). Since the US experienced some failure in its containment policies in the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, such as during the Vietnam War, Nixon wanted to establish diplomatic ties with China to strengthen US's global position. Therefore, China and the US needed to change their policies to meet new global challenges (Xiang). The rapprochement with China was a game played by Nixon to offset the failure of his acceleration of the Vietnamization program.

In the Post-Cold War period, the rivalry between the two superpowers US and the Soviet Union, influenced Nixon's shift in diplomacy. The US gradually shifted towards strategic defenses, facing challenges from Soviet expansionism (Xiang). Scholars in the past have understood Nixon's motivations in the way justified by the hyper-realists. The author David presented a hyper-realist approach to this rapprochement. Hyper-realists think the third world does not threaten American interests and that America cannot influence the development of the third world and thus should focus on its internal policies to secure these interests and protect itself, its European allies, and Japan. For hyper-realists analysts, they think that the US shouldn't invest all its resources into the Third world countries because the Soviet Union couldn't secure its position over the third-world countries due to the number of their losses being more than their gains in history (such as Egypt). The US is resifting its resources abroad depending on how it views the Soviet Union to distribute its resources; since the Soviet Union could not invest in the third world, the US thinks it should not divert its resources to the aforementioned nations either. They also have little to offer the third-world countries as they are not economically sufficient. Furthermore, Gorbachev was also concerned about Soviet Third World policy, as shown by his encouragement of the Cuban withdrawal from Angola as well as the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (David). Since the article that brought out the hyper-realist perspective downplays a hyperrealist argument, the author of this article could potentially portray a similar perspective to Nixon's motivations for visiting China at that time with "a week that changed the world." Juggling negotiations with the Soviet Union on a series of ABM treaties such as the SALT summits, Nixon expressed in one of his conversations with Kissinger in "The Nixon Tapes" that one of the ultimate aims of the China card was also to push negotiations with the Soviet Union to maintain the world peace it pursues in the postwar era. This view is also supported by Dr. Litwak's analysis of

American foreign policy in the postwar period, which emphasizes Great Power Détente and the Nixon Doctrine, which pushes for more reflections on the realities of the late 60s and seeking for other powers to be greater assistance to secure its global influence (Litwak).

#### 4. Sino-US Relations

The 1970s marked the fourth new stage of Sino-US relations, ending their 20-odd years of confrontations. They were brought together for a few reasons despite the substantial difference in the social systems of the two countries, including the growing Soviet menace to world peace and security, as well as their common strategic interests. First, they are not a significant threat to each other; Second, they have immense common interests involving nation development; For example, both have excellent geographic conditions, rich resources, and vast domestic markets; Third, since they are at different stages of development, they have little chance of getting into conflict but lots of potential for economic exchanges; Lastly, both countries are encouraged by the success of the "ping-pong" diplomacy as well as the warming message brought through Henry Kissinger's visit to China prior to the Communique in 1971(Xiang). The Soviet ambassador also expressed a similar view during his visit to China in 1972 that the US wanted to use China's anti-Soviet line to pressure the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. He mentioned that instead of the old policy of "containment and isolation" in the 1960s, the US now wanted to reformulate its strategy on China based on the new doctrine, which is "containment without isolation," introduced by Professor Barnett. The Soviet ambassador also thinks that from Nixon's perspective, the underlying Sino-US conflict for the past twenty years could be used as particular leverage to pressure the Soviet Union. He said that Nixon's "policy vis-a-vis China" nurtured the relations between the two countries by demonstrating American military potential in Asia. French Ambassador in China also assured China that US forces would not attack Chinese territory and, in turn, gained Chinese promise not to act outside its borders. The ambassador expressed that the US held more high hopes than China because Nixon's visit to Moscow in 1972 disappointed the Chinese side. However, the Soviet ambassador also inferred that the Americans would not expand their relations with the PRC at the expense of Soviet-US relations. He said that the PRC leadership wanted to present a renewed China to Nixon as excesses of the Cultural Revolution and Mao's personality cults were all eliminated while there was also an increase of anti-American propaganda in press, radio, television, and movies in China (Center).

#### 5. Conclusion

Throughout history, China has pursued its central aim, which is the balance of power, opposing hegemonism. She wants to build up its sovereignty to achieve self-reliance, whereas the US wants détente to fix its strained relations. Therefore, though the rapprochement itself can be seen as a realpolitik move, it can be argued that it is not a sudden realpolitik moment in history since both countries have been exercising realpolitik actions in the past; it's just the shifting global relations that led to their shift in policies which happened to meet in the same direction at the same time, so it justifies the Shanghai Communique – Sino-US rapprochement. 2022 juxtaposes the ironic meaning of the number 50. It is the 50th anniversary of this significant reconciliation and partnership between two long-term enemies in the Cold War period. However, at the same time, it also marks a significant increase in tension between these "allies" that were conducting superpower rivalry in nowadays politics which affected the lives of many around the world. Thus, it would convey significant meaning to readers looking back at this moment as "a week that changed the world" characterized by President Nixon and the realpolitik diplomacy conducted from both countries' perspectives.

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