

Were the Enabling Conditions for Sino-US Rapprochement Unique or Could Better Relations Today be Built on Similar Conditions and Foundations?

Dianchen Shen

Department of War Studies, King's College London, King's College London, Strand, WC2R 2LS,
 United Kingdom

Abstract. The relationship between the United States and China has been a topic of great interest and concern for many decades. The history of US-China relations is marked by periods of both cooperation and conflict. A decisive moment in this transformation occurred at the end of 1978 with the normalisation of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Ping-Pong diplomacy was a stunning success that not only paved the way for Nixon's trip but also caused a sensation around the world (CCP Politburo's report on the US-China summit, 1971). However, in recent years, tensions between the two countries have risen significantly. Just as Nixon predicted during this low moment, his biographer, Richard Reeves, recounted how Nixon told him that the interests between China and the U.S. were fundamentally different over the long term and the clash between them "was inevitable" (Nixon, 1978). This essay takes the position that the conditions for rapprochement are unique and that building a stronger US-China relationship cannot be achieved by relying on similar conditions and foundations as those that enabled rapprochement in the 1970s.

Keywords: Sino-american Relations; Favorable Conditions for Reconciliation; Sino-us Détente.

1. Introduction

The essay will explore three key arguments: the changing power of China and the U.S. both economically and ideologically; changes in the dynamics of the triangular relationship between China, the United States, and Russia; and the increased sensitivity to the non-negotiable Taiwan issue. Furthermore, this essay will provide a brief method at the end on how to foster a better relationship between China and the United States.

2. Firstly, it is Evident that the Current Global Power Dynamics between the US and China are Different from Those That Existed in the 1970s.

This shift is apparent both economically and ideologically.

Economically, in the past, the United States viewed China as a potential market for American goods and technologies, while China sought American support for its modernization efforts. During the 1970s, when China was just starting out, it could not catch up with the United States in any aspect. Therefore, it did not pose a direct threat to the US. Specifically, after the Cultural Revolution, China's top priority was economic recovery, and Deng Xiaoping believed that domestic economic development needed the support of the United States. According to Vance (1979), Deng's trip to the United States was intended to help sell normalisation to Congress and the American people and to make China's trade policies look more attractive to American businesses. Therefore, the normalisation of relations was of key importance in this process (Fardella, 2009). It is imperative to acknowledge that the US-China relationship has changed significantly since then. To put it differently, Deng's "reform and opening" policy made the United States realise that China was changing and was moving towards Western values (Chen, 2019). As a result, the US also needed access to China's large market to help China break out of isolation and quickly integrate into the international community. However, China's economy has grown at a faster pace than the US in recent years. And it is widely expected to eventually overtake the US as the world's largest economy. While it is true that the US and China have extensive economic ties and trade between

the two countries is ever-increasing, this phenomenon does not necessarily mean that collaboration outweighs competition. Medeiros (2019) worries that the US economy has become over-reliant on China, with nearly every trip to the store in the US being linked to Chinese products. This level of dependence may leave the US vulnerable to economic disruption if there are changes in China's policies or financial conditions. Therefore, China has become a huge economic competitor with the U.S., which is entirely different from 40 years ago.

Apart from the economic changes, the intensifying ideological competition between China and the US may also deteriorate the relationship, driven by China's inability to satisfy the aspirations of its middle-class-centered social forces and the American political right's focus on countering China. For China, rapid economic growth has not been enough to fulfil the rights demands and social, intellectual, and cultural aspirations of the middle-class-centered social forces, which are unprecedented in China's history (Chen, 2019). This has resulted in the Chinese people being more eager than ever before to shift the international discourse in their favour. This has increased the prominence of ideology in the relationship between the two nations. In other words, the Chinese people are more eager than ever before to shift the international discourse in their favour. On the American side, the attitude towards non-Western political systems has changed dramatically. While during the rapprochement, Nixon initially claimed that not all non-communist Asian governments follow the Western parliamentary democracy model and that Americans should understand that these nations have their unique political systems (Nixon, 1976), this view has evolved. Countering or competing with China has now become a political right, creating incentives to become more hawkish rather than carefully assessing the shape of the challenge and the costs and benefits of different policy responses (Gramer & Lu, 2023). As a result, the increasing prominence of ideology in the relationship will likely continue for the foreseeable future. This ideological competition could further strain the relationship between the US and China. Therefore, it is clear that forging a stronger relationship between the US and China cannot be solely based on the same state power that facilitated rapprochement in the past. This is due to the present economic and ideological dynamics between the two nations and the geographical triangle relationship between the US, China, and Russia. This will be further elaborated in the subsequent paragraph.

3. Secondly, There has been a Shift in the Dynamics of the Triangular Relationship between China, the United States, and Russia

China has become increasingly involved in mediating disputes between the United States and Russia, a role that was previously dominated by the United States.

During the Cold War, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union was marked by tension and conflict. This ultimately led to the United States playing a critical role as a mediator in the triangular diplomacy of the 1970s. The relationship between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s was marked by a rapid deterioration in their bilateral ties, culminating in the border conflicts of 1969 (Minami, 2022). It can be said that the United States played a key role in guaranteeing Chinese security against Soviet aggression, as was feared by many experts (Goh, 2004). Meanwhile, President Nixon faced significant challenges during his first year in office. This was because the Soviet Union was expanding its military, foreign aid, and naval power, creating tensions with other nations, particularly in the West. Additionally, the Soviet Union was expanding its influence in other regions of the world, such as Africa and Latin America, by sending thousands of advisers to radical Arab states (MacMillan, 2008). These actions raised concerns that the Soviet Union was gaining a dominant position worldwide. As a result, China emerged as a communist counterbalance to the Soviet Union, similar to Yugoslavia in Asia (Qing, 2007). Although tensions existed between the US and the Soviet Union, they were not as severe as those between China and the Soviet Union, leading the United States to serve as a mediator in triangular diplomacy, which was seen as the best course of action under the circumstances (Goh, 2005). According to Kissinger, it was believed that the United States sought to improve the possibilities of accommodation with each country by increasing its options towards both, ultimately paving the way for the normalisation of diplomatic ties between China and the United States, although this was not without challenges (Kissinger, cited in Goh, 2005). Overall, the role of the United States as a mediator between

China and the Soviet Union in the 1970s can be considered crucial. This is because it used a combination of political, economic, and strategic initiatives to manage tensions and promote stability in the triangular relationship, which was challenging. This effort ultimately led to shared strategic objectives between Washington and Beijing and paved the way for normalising diplomatic ties between the two nations.

Although it is now still a triangular relationship, China currently plays more of a role as a mediator between the U.S. and Russia. China's role in international conflicts, such as the ongoing crisis in Syria and the discussions over the Iranian nuclear programme (Mark, 2022), has increased significantly. However, the limits of China's relationship with Russia have been exposed by the latter's war in Ukraine, as China has not defended Russia on the battlefield (Maizland, 2022). Thus, Liik (2022) persuasively argues that the worsening of China's relations with Russia could somehow improve its relations with the United States. Alternatively, both Maizland (2022) and Sun (2022) strongly claim that this is not necessarily the case. This is because China's relations with Russia are not reciprocal. Therefore, any improvement with Russia is unlikely to lead to a significant improvement with America, at least in the short term. In other words, China's strategic goals remain focused on managing its relationship with the United States, given their substantial disagreements and confrontations in multiple areas, including trade, technology, human rights, and geopolitical influence (Zhang, 2020). Therefore, China's increased involvement in mediating disputes between the United States and Russia underscores its growing role as a major player in international affairs. This is why forging a stronger relationship between the US and China cannot be solely based on the same triangle relationship that facilitated rapprochement in the past. In addition to the external elements, it is critical not to overlook the Taiwan issue as a crucial factor in the past and current state of bilateral relations, which will be the focus of the next paragraph.

4. The Taiwan Issue was once a Negotiable Factor in Sino-US Relations but has become a Highly Sensitive and non-negotiable Issue for China in Recent Years, Posing a Significant Challenge to Sino-US Reconciliation for the Foreseeable Future

Deng Xiaoping's pivotal role in China's compromise on the Taiwan issue during the 1970s was motivated by his pragmatic approach to improving US-China relations to drive economic development (Millwood, 2019). This compromise included a one-year hiatus on arms sales to Taiwan. However, this decision wasn't solely Deng's; the US strategically leveraged China's willingness for normalization, resulting in the recognition of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government and the cessation of official diplomatic ties with Taiwan (Fardella, 2009). Despite this, the US maintained ambiguity on Taiwan's security, continuing arms sales, leading to criticism (Bush, 2005). The compromise acted as a tactical concession, granting China room for normalization, and deferring the issue of arms sales to a later, potentially more favorable time (Fardella, 2009). Overall, the compromise facilitated normalization between China and the US, bolstering Deng's leadership and alleviating US concerns of abandonment regarding Taiwan.

Now the story has changed. The Taiwan issue is now a non-negotiable matter of national pride and sovereignty for the Chinese government and its people. China views Taiwan as an integral part of its territory and has reiterated its commitment to reunify with Taiwan, even by force if necessary. To illustrate, Xi warned last year that "no one should underestimate China's resolve and ability to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity (Yi, 2022). As a result, China has increased its military presence around Taiwan, conducting regular military drills and increasing its naval presence in the Taiwan Strait. In contrast, the US has continued to support Taiwan militarily and diplomatically. According to the Guardian (2022), the recent announcement by the Biden administration of a \$1.1 billion arms sale to Taiwan has further intensified the situation. On the one hand, China views any US involvement in Taiwan as a direct challenge to its sovereignty. The US, on the other hand, sees Chinese military posturing as an escalation of the conflict. This has resulted in an unstable security situation in the region, with both sides increasing their military presence and conducting military exercises. Unlike the Taiwan issue in the 1970s, which was resolved through diplomatic efforts, the current situation is likely to remain a significant challenge to Sino-US reconciliation for the foreseeable future.

5. Conclusion

The conditions for rapprochement between the United States and China in the 1970s were unique, and it is not feasible to rely on similar conditions and foundations to build a stronger relationship between the two countries today. There are three major reasons for this. Firstly, the global power dynamics between China and the U.S. have changed significantly. Secondly, the dynamics of the triangular relationship between China, the United States, and Russia have changed, particularly regarding the role of mediator. Third, Taiwan has become a highly sensitive and non-negotiable matter for China recently. However, China and the United States, as the world's two largest economies and as people with high moral expectations, should work together on global issues of tremendous consequence. These issues concern both countries' vital interests and the basic welfare of humanity. By coordinating their efforts, they could play a leading role in dealing with essential threats such as climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and a possible resurgence of global terrorism. Therefore, finding more effective ways of engagement, searching for common ground, and creating opportunities for compromise is the greatest challenge for both Chinese and Americans alike.

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