

# The Power of One: The Emperor Responsible for the 1972 China-US Relations

Written by Matthew Krnich

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MATTHEW KRNICH, NOV 4 2013

From 1949 to early 1972, the United States of America and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were bitter rivals. For twenty years, America refused to acknowledge that the Chinese Communist Party represented China's interests, preferring to back Taiwan, even though the PRC controlled the majority of the territory. However, everything changed on 21 February 1972, when President Richard Nixon, the Leader of the Free World, shocked the globe by visiting China to negotiate diplomatic relations. While the normalization of talks between China and the U.S. occurred due to a combination of factors, it would have been impossible without Chairman Mao Zedong's permission. The levels of analysis on the formation of international policy, consisting of three major factors – the individual, the state, and the international – on this vital agreement were highly influenced by the Chairman's obsession with his legacy.

### The Individual Level

Charles Kegley and Shannon Blanton noted that individual actors are pivotal in the formation of international policy decisions.[1] In many circumstances, especially in democracies, a leader's approval for a policy is largely determined by various external conditions, such as state and global aspirations. In China's case, though, which abides to an authoritarian regime, the Chairman's mighty opinion was all that was necessary to put the action into motion.[2]

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officially took command, Chairman Mao refused to tolerate limitations to his influences. After all, he was at the first official CCP meeting in July 1921 and was deeply involved in all major movements, including the collaboration with the Nationalists, the Long March, the Xi'an Incident, the Sino-Japanese War, and the civil war.[3] Since 1943, Mao had been the prime leader of the entire organization, and strongly believed that his knowledge and expertise had been essential to the victory against the Nationalists.[4] Therefore, when the PRC was officially formed, he had no doubt that his visions were the solutions. By 1961, after magnificent failures and mass persecutions, top Party officials started to openly defy the Chairman's wishes.[5] With the aid of the CCP majority, boundaries were placed on Mao's authority due to the recognition that this individual was guiding the nation down a destructive path.

Mao responded by strategically promoting his importance to the populace, who had been raised to regard the Chairman as infallible, through his Little Red Book. While it is true that the Chinese Communist Party promotes itself as knowing the "historical best interests of the people", it was never their intention for a single person to contain all the power.[6] In addition, Mao developed factions to divide the Party, and he publicly claimed high leaders had been infiltrated by greedy capitalists, thus starting the Cultural Revolution that hurtled the country into anarchy.[7] To this day, the Chairman continues to be revered as one of the greatest men in China. Due to holding such a status, all it took was "the one-minute handshake" between Mao and Nixon that "symbolized the end of hostilities between China and the United States" for the majority of Chinese to accept the new relations.[8]

There are various beliefs on why Mao considered diplomacy with China's once most hated enemy a worthy option. He Di pointed out that the Chairman actually had been a strong supporter of the U.S. during his youth but had publicly turned against them in order to protect Communist ideology.[9] After all, the United States support for the Nationalists and the long history of Western imperialism contradicted the values of Mao's leadership. Yet despite

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Mao's public hateful statements, within "his inner circle and in-talks with foreign guests", the Chairman continued to portray Washington in a positive fashion, admitting at one point that "we ought to study them and find out how we can make China rich and strong".<sup>8</sup> After "the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, loneliness from betrayal by his associates, and frustration from nearly two decades of mistakes", the idea of diplomatic talks with Washington brought "a tremendous sense of fulfillment", a dream the Chairman had since childhood.<sup>8</sup>

Jonathan Spence noted that Mao's motivation was mainly out of concern of political rivals' ambitions and the need to "reassert some orders after the ravages of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Lin Biao"[10]. Li Zhisui, Mao's personal physician of twenty years, agreed with this assessment, stressing that the Chairman's irrational suspicions and fear of losing power was a driving factor in all his actions.[11] Even during the Long March in 1934, Mao was viewed as a cautious political opportunist, utilizing real and false accusations to advance in the Party's hierarchy to achieve his goals.[12] In fact, the CCP's culture had been built on the realist ideals that "people are by nature selfish and driven to compete", as evident by the constant internal persecutions against Party members from 1927 to 1976.[13]

As a realist, Mao masterfully utilized the practice of self-help "to deter potential threats" by attacking his victims first along with heavily endorsing personal propaganda.<sup>13</sup> For example, when the Chairman met Nixon, he congratulated himself for being brave enough to conduct the encounter regardless of strong "reactionary groups"; a promotional tactic to win America's affection. He went on to compliment Nixon as a man of "high moral principles" that did not "engage in sinister intrigues", unlike the majority of global politicians – an ironic statement to say the least.[14] Even more tellingly, the Chairman allowed the event to be filmed and then broadcasted through China's national television; a complete "reversal of normal Chinese practices".[15] The next day, the People's Daily promoted a spread of stories about the occasion, with the front page portraying a large photograph of "Mao greeting Nixon".[16] Mao was so invested in the negotiations that he ignored classic traditions to assert to the world and the Chinese people his greatness.

## State Level

On a state level, the Mao/Nixon talks were driven by necessity to reaffirm the CCP's capabilities after enduring long internal strife caused by significant domestic and international failures. Although the CCP's authority remained dominant, the government's political structure had been fractured by the Cultural Revolution.[17] A major victory needed to transpire to prevent total anarchy for both the individual and the state. The following section explores the initial design of the CCP and examines the PRC's history to reveal the impact the failures had on the nation and why the Communist Party was unable to prevent it.

The CCP is an authoritarian regime that highly supports the realism theory. The Party strictly believes that it is impossible for an ordinary citizen to understand their own needs and therefore a guardian is required with the focus being on the "historical best interests of the people" and not "the preferences of the majority".<sup>6</sup> In accordance to realism, the Party perceives the world as being in a constant power struggle: national objectives being the ultimate priority, one's global position being based on power, and stability only arising through dominance.[18] The government relies heavily on a bureaucratic layout, consisting of the National Party Congress, the Central Committee, and the Politburo. From 1949 to 1976, the position of Chairman represented the central figurehead of the system, but originally the role was to be more collaborative with the Party in the decision-making process. Allowing Chairman Mao to acquire full control of the CCP was a significant mistake that threw the nation into a never-ending revolution that abided to his whims.[19]

The CCP promised China's populace a fair and equal state that would overcome 500 years of imperialist exploitation.[20] Immediately, the United States was denounced as the worst of the imperialist countries that was trying to undermine China through "a spiritual invasion".<sup>9</sup> From 1949 to 1957, China's emphasis was on cementing the Communist's regimes powerbase; accomplished through persecutions against anyone deemed a risk, such as individuals with Western ties, former Nationalists, "intellectuals", and landowners.[21] In 1956, the CCP announced the Hundred Flowers Campaign to encourage the citizens to express their thoughts about the regime's policies. Yet when the citizens responded with criticism, the Anti-Rightist movement imprisoned hundreds of thousands of

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people.[22]

Under the supervision of Chairman Mao, the Great Leap Forward was initiated in 1958, a large-scale economic and social reform plan designed to “prove that Chinese self-reliance could speed the country’s development of nuclear weapons, and end China’s recurrent fuel shortage”.<sup>[23]</sup> Thousands of communes were developed throughout the nation, each holding up to 5,000 people, as a means to pool resources and better control the population’s movement, thus making the state the sole provider. The policies failed miserably, causing the deaths of 40 to 50 million people within three years.<sup>[24]</sup> Afterwards, the CCP attempted to limit Chairman Mao’s control but he fought back by exploiting his popularity to convince the populace that “capitalist imperialists” had infiltrated the inner circles of the government.<sup>[25]</sup> Violent factions spread throughout the military, urban workers, and CCP leaders, bringing forth public humiliations, imprisonments, torture, and executions to millions of innocent people. By December 1970, six months prior to serious negotiations in U.S./China relations, Mao demanded political criticism against Lin Biao, his chosen successor, out of fear of losing influence. The mysterious death of Lin Biao in September 1971 merely added fuel to the fire.

For these reasons, when the possibility of peaceful talks with the United States arrived in 1971, the CCP and Mao became very interested in the opportunity. Even though, for the previous 23 years, China had been constantly dismissing America, deliberately shaping “a distorted image” for “the consumption by the Chinese people” to inspire fear, they were no longer in a position to ignore the potential of such a partnership.<sup>9</sup> The CCP required a success to offset their mountainous failures on domestic and international levels.<sup>[26]</sup> The PRC had “presided over the destruction of historical vibrant and international-connected economic sectors”, murdered and exiled thousands of talented citizens, and thrown their agricultural foundation into ruin.<sup>[27]</sup> Compared to their neighbours, China was socially and economically stagnant in many aspects. So in January 1970, during the thirty-fifth Warsaw meeting, China acknowledged the U.S. earlier interests in the possibility of an alliance.

Ultimately, the state’s position on influencing the China/U.S. talks were the weakest point in the levels of analysis because Mao had combined most of the state and individual powers into the same entity by that time. He had managed to avoid being overthrown due to his masterful ability in promoting the self and strategically creating factions within the Party to serve his purpose.<sup>[28]</sup> There are scholars who argue that China would have followed the same path even without Mao in the absolute leadership role. As noted earlier, the CCP had been built upon a “revolutionary” culture 30 years before the PRC, which highly endorsed the tactics of persecution and political espionage against external and internal competition. Many Chinese political leaders utilized such skills to survive during the civil war and it was only natural they would bring the ideals with them into the functions of the new state.<sup>[29]</sup> Mao further amplified the behaviour by pursuing such actions regularly as the head of state. If not Mao, then someone else would have led the nation down a similar path based off this cultural ideology.

Yet to counter the argument, one needs to only look at China in its current world position. After Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping, who had been involved in the revolution for almost as long as the Chairman, took reign. However, instead of accepting the Chairman role, he officially retired the title. Deng realized the dangers that could occur with one individual having unlimited authority, deciding it was better to disperse control throughout the main political leaders.<sup>[30]</sup> Although the Party elders – the oldest members that were not in official ruling positions – still held great authority on decisions, Party associates had acquired a stronger sway in the everyday process on domestic and international policies. This in turn provided greater flexibility for China in adapting with the changing times, which led to an economic boom that transformed them into the second largest annual gross domestic product nation.<sup>[31]</sup> Chairman Mao’s paranoia had hampered his flexibility in pursuing interests not pertaining to his legacy.

## International Level

There were several key factors on the global scale that inclined China to reconsider its relations with the United States. Kegley and Blanton defined the analysis on global influences as the interaction of state and non-state actors that “ultimately shape the international political system and the levels of conflict and cooperation that characterize world politics”.<sup>[32]</sup> Even with such dismal failures on the state level and the dominance of a single individual, diplomacy would have been unlikely without two global dilemmas: the unease with the USSR and the independence

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of Taiwan.

The United States and the PRC talks were partially motivated as a defensive measure. Di considered the new alliance “the wheel of history coming full circle”, as the U.S. became China’s “most respected enemy” and the USSR its “most hated friend”.<sup>[33]</sup> In fact, the friendship between the Soviets and the Chinese had soured fairly early in the relationship.<sup>[34]</sup> For the first eight years of the PRC, China cautiously accepted assistance from the USSR out of necessity, still recalling Moscow’s indecision in providing full support during the civil war. Even after the CCP’s triumph, the Soviets only offered limited aid, specifically in educational opportunities, technical expertise, and new equipment for rebuilding the industrial and agricultural sectors.<sup>[35]</sup> Meanwhile, the Soviets refused to assist China in the development of nuclear weapons, were reluctant to liberate Taiwan, disagreed about the Korean War response, and endowed insufficient financial support.<sup>[36]</sup> In 1956, Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin’s successor, antagonized the situation by denouncing many of his predecessor’s policies.<sup>[37]</sup>

Chairman Mao was very disturbed by the comments, considering it a clear affront against revolutionary morality of “unswerving loyalty”, portraying weakness to “the imperialist camps”, and acting as an attack against his own legacy.<sup>[38]</sup> Throughout the 1960s, the two nations constantly bickered and created Communist factions against one another.<sup>[39]</sup> The Soviets issued statements about the simplicity in annihilating their enemies and claimed that under the 1968 Brezhnev Doctrine, they had the right to “violate sovereignty of Communist neighbours in order to protect socialism”.<sup>[40]</sup> By the time China had acquired nuclear technology in 1967, the two nations were carefully monitoring one another’s borders, while the CCP constructed mass underground tunnels throughout Beijing to act as a safe haven in case of a nuclear attack.<sup>[41]</sup> Chairman Mao went as far as to call the Soviet Union a “polar bear” that needed to be contained, and an alliance with the United States provided the best option.<sup>14</sup> According to Kegley and Blanton, realists perceive an arms race as inevitable due to the need to promote dominance and protect one’s assets.<sup>[42]</sup> To keep the peace, growing nations must be able to oppose one another equally, although this simultaneously increases tensions easily noted by viewing the erratic relations between the U.S., Soviets, and China during the Cold War.

The recognition of the PRC, as the party officially representing the Chinese people, by the United States and the United Nations was instrumental in the shifting of policies. At the end of the civil war, the Nationalists took command of the small island of Taiwan in order to reorganize a resistance to re-conquer the mainland. The fact that the United Nations, greatly influenced by America at the time, would only acknowledge the Nationalists as the ‘real’ representing party of China created a substantial rift between the PRC and the West.<sup>[43]</sup> According to Nancy Tucker however, the rising conflicts from the Cold War during the next two decades forced the U.S. to reevaluate the “overarching geopolitical significance of establishing a relationship with China”.<sup>[44]</sup> The Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the constant threat of nuclear weapons placement, intensified the pressure on the U.S. to find a better means to maintain the peace. A particular concern was Taiwan’s obsession in restarting the civil war and the constant demand for weaponry and financial support.<sup>[45]</sup> Even when Nixon was the Vice President, from 1953 to 1961, he noted that the Nationalists’ leader, Chiang Kai-Shek, was a liability.

Jay Taylor pointed out that the U.S./Taiwan/China relationship was extremely complex and taxing on America from its beginning in 1949.<sup>[46]</sup> The U.S. could not simply abandon their ally, which would make them appear weak and irresponsible, yet at the same time, they had to distance themselves from Taiwan and China’s aggressive behaviour to avoid being pulled into a potential global catastrophe. In addition, the U.S. realized that an alliance with the PRC could be very lucrative strategically, politically, and economically. From 1968 to 1972, the U.S. slowly made concessions towards China. By March 1970, the U.S. no longer “advocated unconditional exclusion of Beijing” from the U.N.<sup>[47]</sup>

In July 9, 1971, the U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger offered Beijing everything except formal recognition, such as promising the removal of U.S. troops from Taiwan, not demanding China to “renounce force”, and ruling out the two-China solution.<sup>[48]</sup> President Nixon reinforced America’s commitment by admitting, “the whole two-China thing is so really rather ridiculous” and “friendship with China is pivotal”.<sup>[49]</sup> On October 25, 1971, the U.N. General Assembly finally removed Taiwan from their seat and the PRC officially took a spot in the Security Council. The fact that one of the world’s superpowers and previous Western imperialist, the United States, no longer objected to

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China's participation in the U.N., confirmed to Mao that his leadership had transformed the nation into a pivotal world player again.<sup>33</sup> America "knocking on China's door" and promising to meet key demands presented the PRC with "the upper hand" and prestige, solidifying Mao's legacy as "the man that saved China".<sup>[50]</sup>

China desperately required a new method to calm the Soviet threat, and the obtainment of full recognition in representing the Chinese people by the U.N. and the U.S. soothed national and historical pride.<sup>[51]</sup> As a new member of the Security Council, China now acquired the ability to shape global affairs, thus enhancing their stature. Despite all these events, without Mao agreeing to the terms, diplomacy would have been unfeasible. For example, Mao had been convinced that the Soviet Union wanted to control China since 1957, long before the possibility of an American alliance. China and the USSR both invested into the prospect of war with China even building underground tunnels, increasing weapon stock, and Mao regularly challenged the Soviets by stating his country "could afford to lose tens of millions of people".<sup>[52]</sup> The Chairman was fully willing to take China into a battle against the USSR to make his point. As for Taiwan, Tucker noted that China was not in any particular hurry to solve the problem, convinced that through patience, the island would eventually return to their control.<sup>[53]</sup> There were numerous occasions that they could have easily overwhelmed the island but decided against it to preserve the peace. Therefore, the U.S. commitment on both the USSR and Taiwan was more of a sign of good faith.

The most pivotal aspect of the U.S. involvement was their request for peaceful measures first, noted by Nixon announcing to the American public in 1968 "there can be no stable peace" without "the participation of People's Republic of China".<sup>[54]</sup> Always the opportunist, Mao took advantage of the scenario because there was little risk on his end and it opened new opportunities in cementing his power on domestic and international fronts. Through a realist perspective, the alliance was not even considered a contradiction in policies. To maintain a balance of power, shifts in coalitions are necessary to adapted to changing interest and national needs.<sup>42</sup> China was well aware that they could not fully trust the U.S. but at the current moment it was in their best interest to oblige for state security.

## Conclusion

It is vital to comprehend the historical influences of the 1972 diplomacy talks to realize the importance of Mao Zedong on China's decisions. It is absolutely true that massive failures from the state, fear of the Soviet Union, the importance in settling the Taiwan dispute, and acquiring international respect were crucial aspects that led to the negotiations. Yet since Mao had masterfully positioned himself into an emperor status over three decades of persecutions, revolutions, and keeping domestic opponents off balance, the final verdict always relied on him from China's perspectives. This is not to diminish Premier Zhou Enlai and American politicians roles in the success but without Mao's acceptance, China would have refuted the idea completely, making diplomacy impossible at least until after his demise.

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[9] Di 1994, 148

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[13] Kegley and Blanton 2011, 32

[14] Zhisui 1994, 565

[15] Zhisui, 1994 631

[16] Margaret MacMillian. *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World*. New York, NY: Random House, 2007, pg. 93

[17] Spence 1994, 628

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[18] Kegley and Blanton 2011, 32-36

[19] Almond et al. 2010, 410

[20] Spence 1994, 552

[21] Spence 1994, 564

[22] Zhisui 1994, 198

[23] Spence 1994, 581

[24] Spence 1994, 600

[25] Almond et al. 2010, 408

[26] MacMillian 2007, 68

[27] Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, pg. 320

[28] Zhisui 1994, 354

[29] Shuyun 2006, 75

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[41] Spence 1994, 616

[42] Kegley and Blanton 2011, 33

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[43] Taylor 2011, 574

[44] Tucker 2005, 110

[45] Tucker 2005, 115

[46] Taylor 2011, 433

[47] Tucker 2005, 128

[48] Tucker 2005, 123

[49] Tucker 2005, 129

[50] Wenquin 2007, 10

[51] Bao 2011, 3

[52] Zhisui 1994, 206

[53] Tucker 2005, 113

[54] Bao 2011, 4

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