

Panel 83: *Rethinking Sino-US Rapprochement: Unconventional Forms of Diplomacy*

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A New Sphere of Influence: Table Tennis Diplomacy and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations

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Diplomacy vs. Economics: Examining the Roots of Decline in Sino-U.S. Trade in 1975

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Deng Xiaoping's View of Science: Origins of the Sino-U.S. Science and Technology Cooperation

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Discussant: Norton Wheeler

Panel Abstract:

The panel brings together three scholars who work on different aspects of Sino-US relations. Their papers focus on the unconventional aspects of Sino-US bilateral exchanges during the 1970s. The panel aims to reconsider the widely-accepted narrative of Sino-US rapprochement and highlight important and previously overlooked details of cooperation between the two countries. The panel addresses the dynamic relations between state actors, non-state entities and individuals. It vividly demonstrates the intricacies of conducting diplomacy without officially established diplomatic relations, paying particular attention to cultural diplomacy, economic ties and science and technology cooperation.

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A New Sphere of Influence: Table Tennis Diplomacy and the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations

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Abstract:

Founded in 1966 by prominent China studies academics with the assistance of members of the business and religious communities, The National Committee on United States-China Relations was not built to last. Its leaders foresaw the organization's work as "catalytic," and envisioned that it would be "going out of business as soon as possible." They had every intention of becoming victims of their own success – fostering debate about policy toward Communist China and educating Americans about life behind the Bamboo Curtain at a time when Mainland China was less accessible to official American travel than the Moon. At first, as expected, they faced opposition from older conservatives, who with some justification

viewed the officially nonpartisan non-profit as a thinly-veiled pro-rapprochement interest group. Soon, and quite unexpectedly, they endured criticism from young leftists, who objected to their “Vital Center” brand of Cold War liberalism. In addition, like most such groups, there were chronic worries about funding, and complaints their budget was “sufficient to prevent us from dying, but not adequate to permit us to really live.” By March 1971, with a new era of relations with China on the horizon, its leaders saw little reason to continue operations, and seriously contemplated closing shop.

Circumstances soon turned the curse of their success into a blessing. The Chinese government hosted the U.S. Table Tennis Team in early April, and pledged to have their team make a reciprocal visit to the U.S. the following year. The Nixon administration assented, but believed the matter “too politically charged” for the State Department to sponsor and fund the visit. With the U.S. Table Tennis Association financially unable to do so, the N.C.U.S.C.R. stepped into the breach. The 19-day, eight city tour strained the Committee’s finances to near-breaking point, but it proved a sound investment, establishing the organization as a leader in Sino-American cultural exchange. This visit’s controversies mirrored past ideological divides. Conservative anti-communist protesters briefly disrupted the earliest public events to protest communist persecution of Chinese Christians, but they were soon superseded by antiwar demonstrators, who appeared at later exhibition matches to protest Nixon’s mining of Haiphong harbor in North Vietnam. In College Park, Maryland, students unfurled a banner reading “Tricia Nixon Watches Ping-Pong While Her Father Bombs Haiphong,” while four of the tour’s interpreters – including future China studies luminary Perry Link – boycotted the Chinese team’s visit to the White House.

Despite these pitfalls, the visit on the whole was a great success for both the administration and the Committee. Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs John Richardson thanked the group for its efforts, noting how “the recent trip put considerable strain upon your modest exchequer,” while politely declining its requests for partial government reimbursement for the \$250,000 spent transporting over 100 individuals by chartered jet across the United States – only 13 of whom were Chinese table tennis players, and over thirty of whom were State Department employees. Richardson noted some of the curious misconceptions of the foreign visitors, who “persisted in trying to see American workers and peasants, and when exposed to industrial workers and farm laborers, did not really believe what they had seen,” and “were somewhat incredulous that their efforts at identifying with blacks elicited little more than amused tolerance.” The hope was that this cultural exchange would be only the beginning of a long effort to build mutual understanding, though Richardson did conclude his letter to the Committee by stating “whether these reactions will be taken into practical accounts in future visits remain to be seen, but stereotypes in both countries may well prove to be persistent.”

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Diplomacy vs. Economics: Examining the Roots of Decline in Sino-U.S. Trade in 1975

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Abstract:

In 1975, the explosive growth of the Sino-US trade which had only resumed after 1971, was terminated by a severe decline from 800 million dollars a year to only 300 million. The trade was affected by China's unilateral decision to cancel several orders during the period from late 1974 to early 1975. However, most of the key archival documents about China's foreign trade policy in the 1970s are not yet declassified, and the real motivation behind this decision continues to be debated.

Generally, scholars tend to explain this event in two different ways. First, Beijing was deliberately restraining the size of bilateral trade to punish the Americans for the slow progress on the Taiwan issue. Second, the foreign trade officials of China reluctantly lowered the volume of Sino-US trade to avoid criticism from the radicals in the CCP, and as a way to protect themselves from being labeled as 'compradors'.

Diplomatic or ideological, it is quite clear that both perspectives mentioned above overstate the importance of high-level politics and ignore the mid-level trade exchanges. In fact, starting from the late 1974, more American businessmen and diplomats were invited to various Chinese trade exhibitions with fewer restrictions than in the two previous years. The exchange of personnel facilitating bilateral trade had by then recovered from a 10-months freeze, and trade delegations were being shuttled back and forth over the Pacific throughout the entire year of 1975, among them the delegation led by the U.S Secretary of Commerce Morton and the delegation of China Council for the Promotion of International Trade. And although in the 1975 China maintained conservative position in the bilateral dialogue, the trade officials were obviously more willing to share their views on wider range of topics including the legal and operational aspects of trade. China, it seems, had no intention of hiding its interest in trading with the US neither from the Americans nor from the radicals in the CCP.

The article argues that real obstacle to trade in 1975 was China's limited ability to purchase American grain in the same quantities as in the last four years. In the mid-1974, Beijing realized that China was facing the biggest trade deficit since the 1960s (1.4 billion dollars) and it wished to minimize all the unnecessary import. At the same time, the indications of future good harvest in China started to emerge by the end of 1974. Finally, in 1975, several weeks after Zhou Enlai confirmed a minimum increase of 3.7% in the 1974 grain output, China asked the Americans to cancel almost all the grain orders for the rest of the year. At the time, China explained this decision with 'port congestion', 'saving foreign exchange reserve' and 'the grain harvest', which was pretty much consistent with the truth. On the contrary, when China's diplomats really tried to put pressure on the Americans through trade, they did not use grain orders, but threatened to stop the purchase of machinery from the US instead. And even that was an empty threat, since in reality the purchases of machinery in 1975 increased by 10 million dollars.

Using the Chinese and American archival materials, the paper shows that rather than diplomatic and ideological reasons, the decline in trade can better be explained by the economic factors. This, in turn, demonstrates that in the last years of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing's economic policy was more pragmatic than expected. Viewing trade as one of the forms of unconventional diplomacy, the paper proves that the Sino-US trade during the reconciliation period was not just a barometer of bilateral relations.

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Deng Xiaoping's View of Science: Origins of the Sino-U.S. Science and Technology Cooperation

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Abstract:

In the late 1970s, after the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution, the policy of the Chinese government in terms of scientific and technological exchanges and cooperation with the United States changed from rejection and exclusion to active participation and promotion. In this process, ideas played an important role. The outlook of the Chinese leadership and particularly Deng Xiaoping on science, redefined the notion of Chinese national interests. It turned the promotion of Sino-US Science and Technology cooperation into an active policy of the Chinese government.

When studying the S&T policy of the Chinese government, current academic research tends to prioritize the influence and the role of traditional factors, like national security or trade. Many scholars have studied how the process of normalization of Sino-US relations and the development of bilateral trade promoted the large-scale scientific and technological cooperation. At the same time, some scholars also focus on the role played by Chinese leaders, Deng Xiaoping in particular, in creation of S&T cooperation mechanism. These studies, unfortunately, neglect the effect that ideas and views, especially Deng Xiaoping's views on science, had on the origins of S&T cooperation. Making use of Chinese and American archival materials, the paper explores Sino-American interactions through the prism of S&T cooperation, it addresses the question of how Deng Xiaoping's view laid the foundation for the S&T cooperation between two countries.

This paper discusses the positive influence of Deng Xiaoping's view on Sino-US S&T cooperation from three perspectives.

First, Deng promoted the change of S&T policy of the Chinese government because of his emphasis on science and technology and his understanding of the direction of China's modernization. In 1977, Chinese government re-established the "four modernizations" as the goal of China's national development and emphasized the importance of S&T development to China's modernization. In terms of S&T exchanges and cooperation, Chinese government was actively negotiating with the US government, expecting to achieve a comprehensive and large-scale cooperation.

Second, another important factor that drove the Chinese government to strengthen its S&T exchanges and cooperation with foreign countries, especially with the United States, was the overseas visits by the top brass of Chinese central and local government officials. Since 1978, during visits to western countries, the Chinese leadership generally recognized the developmental gap between science and technology in China and abroad. The large-scale exchanges and import of technological know-how became the indispensable part of China's rapid development of science and technology.

Third, the Chinese government's S&T policy, in turn, led the US government to treat science and technology cooperation as an important step towards deepening bilateral relations.

During Nixon-Ford period, S&T exchanges became an additional support for the Sino-US relations, and were not more valued than cultural events and the exchange of journalists. Under the Carter administration, however, S&T cooperation became one of the most important bilateral issues after trade. How to promote bilateral relations and influence China through S&T cooperation became the main topic of discussion in the US government. Hence, when the diplomatic relations were established in 1979, China and the United States conducted large-scale intergovernmental cooperation in the field of civil science and technology; two parties signed a scientific and technological cooperation agreement and dozens of MoU and protocols, and finally established a long-term scientific and technological cooperation system in 1979. At this time, the establishment of scientific and technological cooperation and the implementation of projects played an essential part in the development of bilateral relations.