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The Politics of a Gesture: The Impact of Nixon's Visit to China on Nixon's Presidency

Samuel Tofte

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Samuel Tofte

The Politics of a Gesture: The Impact of Nixon's Visit to China on Nixon's Presidency

The importance of a symbolic gesture in diplomacy is very difficult to gauge. Diplomats often embark on social functions, meetings and trips to international countries in order to make contact with foreign diplomats and build relationships with governments. This is an effective means of forging political relationships, but how important is it when it comes to international policy and treaty negotiation? In short, it is *extremely important* in the process of policy-making, even without the tangible evidence showing its significance. Establishing contact can be the most difficult and arduous step in the road to good diplomatic relations, a fact that President Richard Nixon found out in his attempt at rapprochement with China. A gesture such as Nixon's trip to China also carries with it a fair amount of good political publicity, and Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were well aware of this. The effect of the trip is evident in the public opinion at the time. Nixon gained a lot of support for the trip with a presidential election right around the corner. Political motivations were at play in foreign relations as well, as both China and the U.S. did not want to see the other becoming too friendly with the Soviet Union.¹ By establishing contact with China, and ultimately making his

¹ Geoffrey Warner, "Nixon and Kissinger and the Rapprochement with China, 1969-1972," *International Affairs* 83 (2007), 764.



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historic trip to Beijing, Nixon was able to complete one of the most significant symbolic gestures in 20th century diplomacy. What were his actual primary motivations? Nixon, although he demonstrated a degree of belief in the improvement of Sino-American relations as an instrument of peace, primarily sought rapprochement with China due to political motivations during a period of waning support domestically and internationally.

The conflict between capitalism and communism controlled the political landscape in the 20th century. Led by the U.S., the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), it was an issue that dominated the international and domestic scene. Wars were fought, such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, throughout the 1950's and 1960's as a result of the pressure applied by both sides. In the Korean War specifically, Chinese and Americans were engaged in battle, caught between the "civil war" of North Korea and South Korea.² In the U.S., fear of war with mainland China was substantial in the 1950's as a result of the Korean War, clashes over Taiwan, and the rhetoric coming out of both governments. Rapprochement with China was not feasible in this volatile atmosphere, and it did not become an option until late in the 1960's, when Nixon took office and Mao brought China out of the Cultural Revolution and out of isolation.

Mao grew up in the small village of Shaoshan in the Hunan province during the last gasp of the Qing dynasty. It was a constant struggle for Mao to continue his education, as both money

² Lin Lin *et al.*, "Whose History? An Analysis of the Korean War in History Textbooks from the United States, South Korea, Japan, and China," *Social Studies* 100 (2009): 225.



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and pressures at home pushed him toward the family profession of farming.³ His education on a wide variety of literature, covering everything from traditional Chinese literature to books on modern western science, was crucial in Mao's philosophical development.⁴ Mao's childhood was a difficult time of transition in China as foreign incursion from Japan and the West, coupled with the ineffectiveness of Qing leadership, laid the groundwork for Mao and many of those in his generation to look increasingly at alternative and revolutionary solutions to the injustice brought against China.

By 1949, the Chinese Communist Party had driven Chiang Kai-shek and the Guomindang to Taiwan and established the People's Republic of China. Without trying to oversimplify the complex nature of Chinese history during Mao's leadership, China went through a difficult time of social and economic upheaval. Mao preached world revolution for the people of different countries, positioning himself as the anti-imperial and a revolutionary leader. He was anti-American, but more specifically, anti-American government. He believed revolution was imminent for the people of America, thus much of his negative rhetoric was aimed toward the American government.

Domestically, there were two major policies he attempted to put in place, with terrible consequences for the Chinese people. In 1958 he proposed the Great Leap Forward, a radical attempt to move China towards industrialization. The Great Leap Forward failed, leading to

³ Jonathan Spence, *Mao Zedong* (New York: Penguin Group, 1999), 2-5.

⁴ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007) 82.



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famine until 1961, with huge casualties.⁵ The major social change that Mao attempted was deemed the Cultural Revolution, beginning in 1966. The Cultural Revolution was characterized by Mao-approved mass chaos led by his “shock troops” the Red Guard.⁶ Student demonstrations and riots filled the cities to root out the adversaries of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and expose Mao’s enemies within the communist ranks. It was a time of international isolation for China as it turned inward causing social upheaval. It was also a brand of isolation that had to end in order for rapprochement between the United States and China to come about. On the eve of Nixon’s first term, that isolation ended.

Nixon is often characterized as a villain in popular media and culture; a representation of corruption in politics. One must look no further than the movie, *Frost/Nixon* (2008), to see the disapproving image of Nixon that still thrives in American culture. The Watergate scandal in 1974, for obvious reasons, was a huge blow to Nixon’s legacy. For many Americans, that *is* Nixon’s legacy. The terms ‘secretive’ and ‘brooding’ can be used to describe the common portrayal of Nixon, and these descriptions are not entirely unfounded. Nixon, by all accounts, *was* a very secretive man.⁷ Through all of this perceived villainy, however, this was a man who was popular enough to be elected to several different political offices, culminating in the presidential election in 1968.

⁵ Timothy Cheek, *Living With Reform: China since 1989* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2006), 39.

⁶ Ibid, 41.

⁷ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 13.



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Nixon was a prominent lawyer and member of the Republican Party leading up to the election of 1968, and was seen as a counter-balance to President Lyndon B. Johnson. Where Johnson was a stark supporter of the civil rights' movement, Nixon saw it with a lesser degree of importance in light of the turmoil elsewhere in America, and indeed the world. With Vietnam, Nixon criticized Johnson's indecisiveness and called for a stronger war effort and policy. Johnson wanted to contain the war in South Vietnam, whereas Nixon favored extending the war to North Vietnam.⁸

Nixon, following the Republican Party platform, was viewed as a leader of the conservatives, as was seen with the aforementioned issues. He also made no inclination toward normalizing relations with the PRC, or even recognizing the legitimacy of their government. "It would be disastrous to the cause of freedom for the U.S. to recognize Red China or accept its admission in the United Nations."⁹ This was Nixon's stance just eight years prior to his historic trip to China; a stance that conservative Republicans would remind Nixon of once he made clear his intention to visit Mao. Nixon's social predisposition also showed his conservative nature through his dislike of the 1960's American counter culture.¹⁰

Nixon was a major conservative voice in America during the majority of the 1960's—there was a period early in the 1960's in which he felt his political career was through—but his main political interest resided in foreign policy. Historians note his admiration for strong heads

⁸ Stephen Ambrose, *Nixon: The Triumph of a Politician 1962-1972* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 43.

⁹ Ibid, 44.

¹⁰ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 12.



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of state like Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle.¹¹ He was also a President in the mold of Woodrow Wilson, a man who felt that the president should be the chief foreign policy maker. “I have always thought this country could run itself domestically without a President... You need a President for foreign policy; no Secretary of State is really important.”¹² Nixon’s reasoning for this was due in part to his secret and paranoid nature, evident in the seemingly endless hours of conversations that he recorded. He did not trust the U.S. State Department, often to the lament of the Secretary of State of Nixon’s first term, William Rogers. This mistrust stemmed mainly from Nixon’s fear of leaked information within the government. With fewer people being informed about a particular subject or issue, the chances of information being leaked to the media were greatly reduced.

Nixon was not alone in his construction of U.S. foreign policy, as he relied heavily on his National Security Aide, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger was a very intelligent man who Nixon depended upon to act as an extension of himself when dealing with both domestic and international issues. Kissinger arrived in Beijing in 1971 on a secret mission in order to set-up the historic trip and hash out the issues with Zhou.¹³ This showed the extent of trust that Nixon had in Kissinger to get the job done in foreign policy. Nixon’s paranoia over the State Department was embodied by Kissinger, who was often at odds with Rogers. There was also friction between Nixon and Kissinger. “Ford has just got to realize,” Nixon candidly said, “there

¹¹ Macmillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 8.

¹² Anthony Lewis, “The President’s Coup,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1971, p. 23.

¹³ Kuisong Yang and Xia, Yafeng, “Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao’s Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States 1969-1976,” *Diplomatic History* 34 (2010): 406.



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are times when Henry has to be kicked in the nuts. Because sometimes Henry starts to think he's president. But at other times you have to pet Henry and treat him like a child."¹⁴ Kissinger is quoted throughout his memoirs giving similarly ill-mannered comments about Nixon. The friction between Nixon and Kissinger paled in comparison to Nixon's rapport with the United States media.

The relationship between Nixon and the media was naturally a poor one. Nixon, being the secretive man that he was, had no inclination of giving the media any information that was beyond necessary. Likewise, the media was in its investigative golden age with the likes of Tom Brokaw and Walter Cronkite in their journalistic prime. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* were about to solidify their place in journalism history by breaking the Watergate scandal at the expense of Nixon's legacy and presidency. With the trip to China, however, there was an opportunity for mutual benefit for both Nixon and the media to work together. There was a clear emphasis on symbolism as a major proponent of this trip and Nixon needed the media in order to convey the trip to the American people.

The group of journalists sent over by Nixon to cover the trip was some of the only people who actually saw Nixon, and his group, touch down in Beijing on February 21st, 1972. The Chinese government wanted to send a message to the Americans, telling their citizens to disregard Nixon's motorcade as it made its way through Beijing that afternoon.¹⁵ When Nixon

¹⁴ Robert Dallek, "Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power," *American Historical Review* 113 (2008): 226.

¹⁵ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 22.



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exited the plane, he shook hands with Zhou. This was one of the most important events of the trip because in 1954, secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, pointedly refused to shake Zhou's hand during a peace conference.¹⁶ Almost immediately, an invigorated Mao—who nearly died from pneumonia just weeks prior—agreed to meet Nixon on the first day. The meeting consisted of Mao, Nixon, Zhou, Kissinger, Kissinger's aide Winston Lord, and Mao's interpreter, Tang Wensheng.¹⁷ The meeting did not provide any tangible conversation toward diplomacy between the countries, as the two leaders chose to work around the major issues between them. The meeting always had more importance put upon it than anything that Nixon and Mao would discuss during it. It was a truly historic event and many have argued that it altered the landscape of the Cold War. This would be Nixon's only meeting with Mao during this trip.

¹⁶ Ibid, 31.

¹⁷ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 71. Photo taken from pictures in *Nixon and Mao*, p. 170.

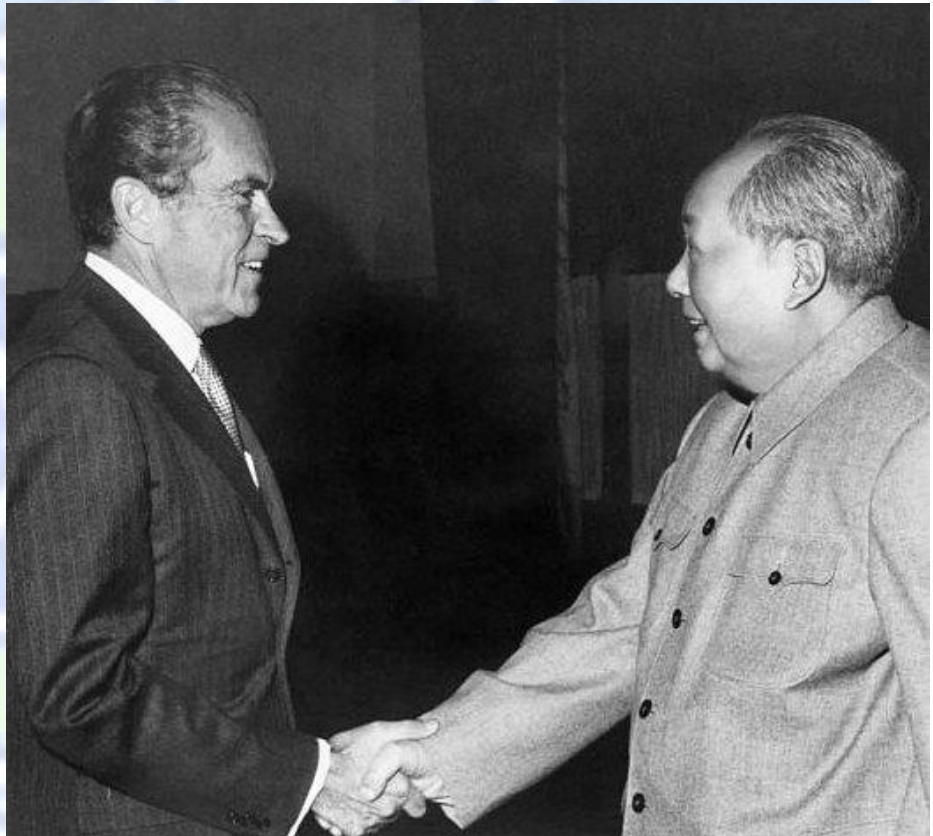


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During his week in China, Nixon visited Beijing, Hangzhou, and Shanghai in that order. On his first night, he attended a banquet organized by Premier Zhou Enlai; it was broadcast live to the U.S.¹⁸ The banquet was an important part of diplomacy and of Chinese culture. It is difficult to find reactions

to the viewing of this banquet broadcast, but it projected a positive image to televisions across America. During the rest of the week, Nixon visited various historic sites like the Great Wall and the Ming tombs, but he was mainly busy in meetings with



Zhou and Kissinger trying to hash out what would become known as the Shanghai Communiqué.¹⁹ He left his wife, Pat Nixon, in charge of handling the bulk of personal appearances during the trip.

¹⁸ *Richard Nixon's Visit to China, 1972*. DVD. National Archives (originally aired February 21-28, 1972).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*



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The joint communiqué, deemed the Shanghai Communiqué, was the statement made toward the end of the trip in which both countries essentially stated their position going forward:

There are essential differences between China and the United States in their social systems and foreign policies. However, the two sides agreed that countries, regardless of their social systems, should conduct their relations on the principles of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, nonaggression against other states, noninterference in the internal affairs of other states, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.”²⁰

This statement is a clear move towards the thawing of relations between the two countries and a hope that they can work together in the future despite the fundamental differences between the societies. There were a few rough areas in the negotiations over what would be included in the communiqué, the main problem residing over Taiwan. The Chinese reiterated that Taiwan was the “crucial question obstructing the normalization of relations.”²¹ The U.S. declared its position favoring a peaceable settlement of the “Two China” issue. The major reason that this communiqué was brought to completion in time for the conclusion of the trip was the shrewd negotiations and wording of the document by Zhou and Kissinger, the main architects of the statement. With a successful joint statement by the two countries, the trip achieved its purpose without any setbacks that were feared by both parties prior to the trip.

The media’s coverage of the trip was essential to the overall success. Nixon needed a steady flow of press bombarding televisions and newspapers in the U.S. in order for the symbolic

¹⁹ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 343.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ James Mann, *About Face* (New York: Random House, 1998), 13-14.



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aspect of the trip to have its effect, and it was clear that symbolism was Nixon's major goal. "As we have said many times—and so has Mr. Nixon—the purpose of the visit is mainly symbolic. It reflects China's apparent desire to show its sincerity but promises nothing in substantive results."²² Nixon had an upcoming election and his approval ratings were slipping as 1971 came to a close. With the media and the timing of the trip, Nixon had an opportunity to make huge gains in popularity with a successful diplomatic trip to China. Because of this, it can be argued that the overwhelming positive support Nixon received was the most important outcome of the trip for Nixon's presidency and his impending campaign for a second term.

At the beginning of 1972, public approval was waning in regard to Nixon's handling of the Soviet Union and China, along with his overall approval rating. Through most of 1971, his overall approval rating was below 50%, and at the beginning of 1972, it was at a middling 49%.²³ Pertaining to China specifically, a poll by the Chicago Tribune in January 1972 showed that 43 percent of those polled felt negatively about how he handled China, while 39 percent felt positive. Those numbers were drastically down from September 1971, when the approval ratings were 46 percent positive and 36 percent negative.²⁴ A portion of this drop can be attributed to the India-Pakistan war as well as the ongoing struggle in Vietnam, but the public was becoming increasingly wary over the few developments made with the communist powers.

²² *The Associated Press*, "Editorial Opinions in U.S. on Nixon Trip," *New York Times*, February 25, 1972, p. 15.

²³ Louis Harris, "The Harris Analysis; Nixon's Job Rating Improves," *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 1972, p. N24.

²⁴ Louis Harris, "The Harris Analysis: Nixon's Rating as Peacemaker Dips After India-Pakistan Role," *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 1972, p. 26.



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On the eve of Nixon's trip, however, public opinion in these areas rose once more to a very optimistic level. Nixon's overall approval rating soared to 55 percent, his highest rating in nearly two years. Louis Harris, writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, noted that "it is unusual, short of a national emergency, for an incumbent President to regain the higher levels of public support he tends to achieve in the earlier months of his administration."²⁵ His approval ratings in dealing with China were also up to 44 percent positive and down to 34 percent negative, almost a complete reversal of the numbers from just a month prior. Nixon's only poor approval rating in the eyes of the public pertained to the war in Vietnam.

The American people were also warming up to the Chinese people themselves as a result of Nixon's visit. In a Gallup poll in the *New York Times* conducted after the trip, 68 percent of those polled believed that it would have some degree of effectiveness in influencing world peace.²⁶ 68 was the same percent of Americans who "gave their blessing" to the trip in another Harris poll published in the fall of 1971.²⁷ The Gallup poll also compared results to a poll taken in the mid-1960's about the public's views on the Chinese people. The Gallup organization gave a list of 23 positive and negative terms to choose from for the people polled to describe how they viewed the Chinese people. In 1966, "ignorant," "sly," and "treacherous" were among the most chosen terms, as negative terms outweighed positive terms by a ratio of eight to five. A week after the trip, however, positive terms were atop the poll at a ratio of 3 to 1, including the top

²⁵ Louis Harris, "Nixon's Job Rating Improves," p. N24.

²⁶ "Mainland Chinese Have Risen in Favor in U.S., Poll Finds," *New York Times* March 12, 1972, p. 5.

²⁷ Louis Harris, "President's China Journey Raises Hope," *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 1971, p. 20.



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words “intelligent,” “artistic,” and “progressive.”²⁸ It was clear that Nixon was receiving a huge boost in the polls at a very important time, the year of the 1972 election. It is amazing, the impact that a week of news coverage and the opening of dialogue can have on groups that know very little about one another.

The various polls taken before and after the trip give a good barometer of the overall views that the American people had on the trip, but a simple overarching percentage of approval and disapproval is not enough to see into the domestic outlook on Nixon’s trip. Individual and editorial opinions are also essential in order to understand specific concerns and viewpoints. A presidential approval rating of 55 percent was strong, especially in such a divided period in American history. Even with that rating, however, this means that 45 percent of Americans did not give their approval to Nixon, and yet many times, this minority of dissenting voices was buried.

When Nixon announced he would be making a trip to China, there were obvious questions raised. Many of those questions revolved around the Taiwan issue. As the PRC continued to effectively control mainland China, Chi’ang Kai-shek and the Nationalist government’s claim of control over the Chinese people as a whole was losing its luster on the international scene. The biggest worry for many Americans was concern over abandonment of Taiwan. The Chinese Nationalists were already facing removal from a United Nations in 1971 that was increasingly favorable of the PRC holding the China seat. A U.S. driven movement for

²⁸ “Mainland Chinese Have Risen in Favor,” p. 5.



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a seat for both Chinas left the U.N. split on the issue, slightly leaning toward one seat for the PRC.²⁹ In a particularly outspoken manner, the former president of the A.F.L-C.I.O, George Meany, made the comparison between the President's new policy toward China and "the League of Nation's consent in 1935 to the 'rape of Ethiopia' and former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's concessions to Germany in the Munich Pact of 1938."³⁰ Labor unions and liberals were afraid of America pulling support for Taiwan, but for many of them, rapprochement with mainland China was difficult to rail against.

The most outspoken opponents of Nixon's trip to China were not his Democrat rivals, but conservative Republicans that gladly threw their support behind him as the warrior against anti-communism in the past. It was a huge shift from Nixon's previous stance on communism and Republicans were not inclined to let him forget that. Accusations of Democrats being soft on communism were an important aspect of Republican campaign strategy throughout the 1950's and 1960's and many feared that Nixon tarnished that strategy overnight by announcing his trip to China.

*Their criticism takes various forms, but the most anguished and spontaneous complaint is expressed by Human Events, the blunt, but candid, voice of the G.O.P. right wing... 'In view of the debacle that occurred at the United Nations, the Republican Party has probably lost forever one of its favorite campaign issues: accusing the Democrats of being soft on Red China. The issue is now dead.'*³¹

²⁹ Henry Tanner, "U.N. Found Closely Split on Eve of China Debate," *New York Times*, October 18, 1971, p. 1, 8.

³⁰ Damon Stetson, "Meany Criticizes Policies on Freeze and China," *New York Times*, October 1, 1971, p. 22.

³¹ Clayton Fritchey, "'Soft on Reds' Issue Wiped Out by Nixon," *Chicago Tribune*, November 28, 1971, p. A5.



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This is the most common complaint among the right wing of the Republican Party and it was an understandable fear from a political standpoint. While Nixon was chiefly concerned with his own reelection in 1972, the Republicans still had to focus on congressional elections as well. The leader of the Republican Party turning away from a huge piece of the party platform creates ammunition for the opposition on the eve of major campaigning.

William Loeb, former editor of the conservative New Hampshire newspaper *The Manchester Union Leader*, was an adamant supporter of Nixon until his announcement to visit China. Loeb was a major conservative voice at the time, although many considered him to have an extreme viewpoint on many issues. Loeb was a “journalist” in a very loose sense of the word, often resorting to name-calling in order to reinforce his point of view. Pertaining to Nixon’s visit to China, Loeb deemed the trip “immoral, indecent, insane, and fraught with danger” and said that Nixon was “too left-wing” now.³² This is obviously an extreme view and one that is in the minority, but it shows the fear brewing among ultra-conservatives due to the trip. It shows an interesting insight that even though the times were changing in regards to politics between the U.S. and the communist superpowers, there was still substantial anxiety over communism with the lingering Red Scare effect.

While it may have been difficult for Nixon to face opposition from those he considered political allies, it was really the only dissent he faced domestically. It was also opposition subdued by other worries inside the Republican party. Newspaper reports in 1971 indicate that

³² Bill Kovach, “Nixon’s too Left-Wing for William Loeb,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1971, p. SM14.



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the G.O.P. had bigger issues on their plate than Nixon's trip to China. Poor economic policies led to fears that businesses, which has always been an ally to the Republicans, could be waning in support.³³ A symbolic trip to China was simply not high up on the list of worries for a party facing losses in the upcoming election.

The overwhelming support from the American public as the trip inched closer also helped quell opposing voices. Shown earlier, the approval ratings were on the rise as a result of the new policies toward the communist powers, and individual opinions supported those approval numbers in the majority of the newspaper articles in the build up to the trip. The term "political coup" is thrown around in several articles, even as a concession by those who do not approve of the trip.³⁴

In the "Harris Survey" in the *Chicago Tribune*, an interesting notion was raised involving the American peoples' willingness to deal with communist powers that were previously feared. The effect of the Vietnam War and other conflicts with communism wore down the American people, and it led to a new sense of compromise and peace by diplomacy.³⁵ This trip would have been wholly rejected by the American public 10 years prior, but it had become apparent that war with the communist powers was not the answer to the problem.

Editorial opinions shared the same cautious optimism that the polling indicated as well. The Charlotte, North Carolina newspaper, *The News*, showed its support pointing out that the

³³ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "GOP Insiders Hide Worries Behind Mask of Optimism," *Los Angeles Times*, July 30, 1971, p. A7.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Louis Harris, "President's China Journey Raises Hope," *Chicago Tribune*, September 20, 1971, p. 20.



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“risks are well worth taking” even if minimal gains are achieved. *The State Journal* of Topeka, Kansas, went as far as to claim that the trip could be a “turning point in world peace.” The *Philadelphia Inquirer* echoed the hopes of many Americans that Nixon’s trip will breed a “common ground” in the search for peace between the world’s superpowers. This trip was accepted in all different regions and groups across America, and it was supported by the collection of editorials showing varying degrees of approval and optimism.³⁶

Statements made in Congress by Democrats, showed optimism for the trip as well. Democratic Senator Robert Byrd recognized the importance of the trip for establishing relations and for securing the “future security of the United States and the world.”³⁷ Upon Nixon’s announcement of the trip, Democratic leader Mike Mansfield was quoted as being “flabbergasted, delighted, and happy” about the proposed trip.³⁸ It is a rare occurrence in such a politically divided period for a president like Nixon to earn such strong support from the opposing political party.

While Nixon was no doubt pleased with the domestic support he garnered for his trip in 1971, the level of importance he placed upon foreign policy also created a level of importance for the international opinion of the trip. International support for the trip was much more mixed than on the home front.

³⁶ *The Associated Press*, “Editorial Opinions in U.S. on Nixon Trip,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1972, p. 15.

³⁷ Robert Byrd, “President Nixon’s Journey For Peace,” U.S. Senate Congressional Record, Remarks in the Senate, February, 18, 1972, p. 4578.

³⁸ Ian McDonald, “Mr. Nixon’s Surprise China Visit Seen as Opening Way to Vietnam Peace,” *London Times*, July 17, 1971, p. 1.



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American allies in the Pacific were worried as to what effect American rapprochement with the PRC would have on the power dynamic in the Pacific. Some Australians echoed the concerns in the Pacific as to the future of the region. “The [Australian] conservatives argue that the U.S. is not only an unreliable ally but also an ‘unpredictable one.’”³⁹ Although this was a period of diminishing U.S. power, many countries still followed the lead of the U.S. in order to determine what future international diplomacy would hold. This is a valid concern of non-communist Pacific allies, because for many of them, the U.S. was their biggest communist deterrent. Japan had similar concerns over this new U.S. foreign policy. Former ambassador to Japan, Edwin O. Reischauer noted to a U.S. House of Representatives committee that the U.S. actions with China was a complete departure from “Dulles-style inflexibility” but that it was so unpredictable that it was “possibly a sign of emotional instability on our part.”⁴⁰

The Soviet Union was very uneasy over the visit to China, as Sino-Soviet relations had deteriorated dramatically since the PRC took control of the government. The Soviets and the PRC differed on the details of the correct way to follow Marxist-Leninist doctrine, and war became a possibility between the bordering nations. Rapprochement between China and the U.S. was a threat to Soviet power and they believed it would tilt the balance of power in favor of the Chinese in the Pacific region. It was this Sino-Soviet dispute that actually created the urgency

³⁹ “Nixon Policies Upset Allies in Australia,” *Los Angeles Times* October 7, 1971, p. B6.

⁴⁰ *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs*, “New China Policy: It’s Impact on the United States and Asia.” U.S. House of Representatives, May 2-17, 1972, p. 7.



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toward improved Sino-American relations.⁴¹ While the Soviets were understandably uncomfortable over Sino-American cooperation, they were not the most outraged group on the world scene.

Taiwan expressed nothing short of disgust over the proposed visit, and for good reason; Taiwan was essentially being abandoned by its strongest and most influential ally in the international scene. One historian contended that Nixon was so ambitious toward Sino-American rapprochement that he gave up far too much to achieve it.⁴² This includes the traditional American stance on Taiwan.

Despite Nixon's assurances that the U.S. would not turn its back on the Republic of China, Taiwan made its opinion known. After Nixon made his announcement of the trip, Taiwan expressed an "overwhelming frustration" to their ally's new found interest in improved relations with the PRC. They had to balance their negative opinion on the trip with the reality that they still depended on the U.S. for aide.⁴³

After Nixon's trip and the joint communiqué was issued, Taiwan did not back down from their disapproval of the trip. An anonymous high-ranking member of the Nationalist party said "People here have had great faith in the leadership of the United States up to now, but the

⁴¹ Geoffrey Warner, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Rapprochement with China," 764.

⁴² Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Taiwan Expendable? Nixon and Kissinger go to China," *Journal of American History* 92 (2005): 110.

⁴³ Donald Bremner, "U.S. Peking Overture Brings Frustration to Taiwan Regime," *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 1971, p. 1.



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confidence of the people of the whole Western Pacific will now change.”⁴⁴ The Nationalist Party itself issued a statement shortly thereafter condemning any agreement “involving the rights and interests of the government and people of the Republic of China.”⁴⁵ There was mass condemnation of the communiqué throughout Taiwan and many predicted that this would signal the abandonment of Taiwan by the United States.

European countries, mainly the allies of the U.S., showed their support for the rapprochement as their citizens echoed the same hope for diplomacy through peace that the majority of the American people were calling for at this point. The most interesting country that showed its support for the visit was the communist-led Poland. In an official communist party newspaper, Nixon’s move to improve relations with China was deemed an “overdue reversal” of U.S. policy.⁴⁶ The most impressive aspect of Poland’s support is the fact that at this point, they were very closely tied to the Soviet Union. This positive response from a Soviet bloc country showed the extent that Nixon’s “political coup” would benefit him in the upcoming election.

Whether it is the international support from a Soviet-influenced state or the enormous out-pouring of approval from the American public, Nixon clearly benefitted from the positive view of his trip. How much credit does Nixon deserve for making this trip happen though? It is a difficult question to answer at any point in history for a president because of the multiple factors both with the American system and with other governments abroad. It is hard to imagine

⁴⁴ Tillman Durdin, *Taipei is Bitter*, *New York Times* February 28, 1972, p. 1.

⁴⁵ “Taipei’s Statement on the Communiqué,” *New York Times*, February 29, 1972, p. 16.

⁴⁶ James Feron, “Polish Newspaper Lauds Nixon Move,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1971.



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Nixon, the communist combatant, putting much effort into breaking down barriers with a major communist country. Above all else, the timing of the trip was the most influential factor on making this trip a reality, and Nixon just happened to be the man in charge when the opportunity arose.

From the close of World War II until the end of the Cultural Revolution, America was gripped with the Red Scare. Senator Joseph McCarthy was leading the crusade to root out communists on the home front and internationally, the U.S. was embroiled in conflicts with communist countries abroad. Tensions between China and the U.S. were on the rise, and there was no inclination from either country that they wished to improve relations.

Once Mao brought China out of the isolation of the Cultural Revolution in 1967, however, the opportunity became much more plausible, if not only for the Sino-Soviet relationship deterioration that China was faced with. As troops increasingly populated the Sino-Soviet border as the 1960's came to a close, China was faced with the possibility of a two-front war. Mao, for obvious reasons, wanted no part in this.⁴⁷ The border clashes that took place between these two nations in 1969 was a wake-up call for Mao as to the danger of a major war with the Soviet Union. Fear of war and the possible use of nuclear weapons, acted as the catalyst for Mao's reluctant agreement to begin negotiating a meeting with the U.S.⁴⁸ Mao understood

⁴⁷ Kuisong Yang and Xia, Yafeng, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," 399.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Warner, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Rapprochement with China," 764.



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that the appearance of improved relations with the Americans would throw off the balance of power in the Pacific and lead to an uneasy and less aggressive Soviet Union.

The idea of nuclear war itself played a large role in actively seeking improved relations on Nixon's part. All-out nuclear war with the Soviet Union was becoming increasingly treacherous if only for the arms race that had been raging since the end of World War II. The U.S. hegemony over nuclear arms was short-lived, and the United States' biggest enemy controlling a massive arsenal of nuclear weapons was a threatening proposition for the president.

In a tape recording concerning the trip to China, Nixon asserted that "getting to know each other better will reduce the possibility of miscalculation and that we established, because we do have an understanding."⁴⁹ It was one thing for the U.S. to loosely talk about the use of nuclear weapons in the Korean War, when there was little danger of a nuclear attack on the U.S., but once China and the Soviets began developing their own weapons of mass destruction, it became a much more dangerous possibility.

After his inauguration in 1969, Nixon understood that the time for a dialogue with the PRC was beginning to present itself. In October the next year, Nixon asked the heads of state of Pakistan and Romania to secretly let the Chinese know that he would like to improve relations.⁵⁰ The timing of this initiation of contact is something to note as it coincides with dipping approval ratings of the Vietnam War and Nixon's approval ratings as a foreign policy maker. Prior to this

⁴⁹ Richard Nixon, "Conversation 92-1," *Third Chronological Conversation Tape Release*, January 26, 1972.

⁵⁰ Kuisong Yang and Xia, Yafeng, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," 403.



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initiation, Nixon made very little effort during the first year and a half of his presidency to make it known that he wanted to work on the relationship with China.

Where Mao openly confessed to his attempt to pit the U.S. and Soviets against each other, Nixon was much more subtle on this front. Nixon was always looking for an advantage against the Soviets and driving home the recent division between the PRC and the USSR seemed a great way to do that. He reiterated through multiple channels that his intentions were *not* to escalate the conflict or damage their relationship, but that was going to be a clear outcome of the trip regardless of what anyone said.⁵¹ The constant reiterations of non-interference indirectly had a reverse effect on the American people as they became much more aware of that facet of the trip.

The very idea of dividing the communist powers would also undermine the symbolism that Nixon wanted to portray on this trip. This was supposed to be a trip for a renewed hope for peace and open dialogue between two world powers. Any politically savvy president would jump at the chance to divide the communist powers, but they would be wise not to let the public in on that notion when it involved a trip like Nixon's. Political motivation would have destroyed that image, and that simply was not Nixon's aim. In short, Nixon's political motivations led him to bury the true political motivations of the trip.

⁵¹ Foreign Affairs Division, *A Comparative Analysis of the President's 1972 Foreign Policy Report to Congress*, Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972.



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Nixon and Kissinger, while playing up the improved relations as a bridge toward peace to the public, were much less excited over this element of the trip in private accounts. Early on in the presidency, Kissinger was content with an isolated China as far as U.S. interests go, and saw no real reason to attempt rapprochement.⁵² They give off a sense of being chiefly motivated by this event being the pinnacle point in the administrations legacy. This was to be Nixon's finest hour as foreign peacemaker, at least for his first term in office which was coming to an end later in the year.

In Nixon's defense, the trip *was* seen as a new beginning toward achieving peace in the Pacific region. American's were war weary at this point due to the Vietnam War. This surprise announcement by Nixon was heralded as a huge development for world peace between capitalist and communist powers, as was seen in the "Harris Analysis" numbers previously mentioned. "These results are clear-cut signs that the American people are highly sensitive to foreign policy development in 1972 and are thirsting for good news and events which promise peace."⁵³ The people were ready for a development like this trip.

This thirst for hope among the American people, coupled with the timing of the trip in regards to the 1972 presidential election could be the biggest indicator as to Nixon's true political motivation. Nixon's approval ratings were falling on the eve of 1972. Nixon's trip to

⁵² Geoffrey Warner, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Rapprochement with China," 764.

⁵³ Louis Harris, "The Harris Analysis: Nixon's Rating as Peacemaker Dips After India-Pakistan Role," *Chicago Tribune*, January 27, 1972, p. 26.



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China was a huge boost in his ratings and it played a big role in his landslide reelection later that year. He won 60% of the popular vote and all but 18 electoral votes.⁵⁴

If ever there was a perfect storm for the meeting of two enemies, then that storm was created in 1969-1972. Clearly Nixon did not have to do much other than let the Chinese know that the U.S. was ready for rapprochement. He did not even have to say it to the Chinese directly, as the back channel talks were successful in grabbing Zhou and Mao's attention. Mao was finally open to the idea of this trip due to increased tension with the Soviet Union.⁵⁵ It took multiple factors beyond simply the president's willingness to open dialogue with the communists.

Conclusion

Nixon, ever the politician, showed that much of what made this China trip so important to him was the drive for a landmark moment in U.S. foreign relations. The outlying factors creating a compatible landscape for a trip of this magnitude was due to the primary recognition on Nixon's part for making the trip a reality. Nixon just happened to be the President up for election that year who was along for the ride. Beyond Watergate, Nixon's trip to China in 1972 did become the crowning achievement of his Presidential career, as it paved the way for future politicians to build upon the relationship.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Dave Leip, "1972 Presidential General Election Results," Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, <http://www.uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1972> (accessed December 5, 2010).

⁵⁵ Kuisong Yang and Xia, Yafeng, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," 399.

⁵⁶ James Mann, *About Face*, 9.



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To his credit, he did show an extent of compromise—the Taiwan issue—and a willingness to get talks underway after decades of silence. During Kissinger’s secret mission, he made assurances to Zhou that the U.S. would soon be pulling support for Taiwan, which was the major “sticking point” for China’s agreement to a meeting.⁵⁷ Even with the ways in which Nixon pushed the trip toward fruition, it was largely due to other dynamics taking place both domestically and internationally.

In some respects, the course of Nixon’s path toward this trip can be seen as a microcosm of his presidency. While he garnered a majority of domestic support for the trip, he did have his opponents. Some of those opponents even accused Nixon of an abuse of presidential power with how he handled the whole process. As a conservative Democrat, Representative John R. Rarick was wholly opposed to Nixon’s trip to China, accusing Nixon of running his “personal diplomacy” on the American taxpayers’ dime. He also accused the president of staging relaxed relations early in 1971 in order to help get people on board with the idea of rapprochement with China.⁵⁸ He was not entirely wrong with his accusation of relaxed relations, either, as the president did promote less restrictive travel regulations and trade in 1971 prior to his announcement of the trip. The “personal diplomacy” was something that Nixon brought upon himself with the way that he dealt with foreign policy.

⁵⁷ Kuisong Yang and Xia, Yafeng, “Vacillating between Revolution and Détente,” 406.

⁵⁸ John R. Rarick, “Nixon’s Personal Diplomacy with Red China,” U.S. House of Rep., Congr Record, Extension of Remarks, July 20, 1971, p. 26308.



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Secret missions and an uninformed State Department characterize his presidency as well. The State Department did not even know that Kissinger was to visit mainland China in July until after Kissinger made his return.⁵⁹ Transparency in government was the last thing Nixon wanted to see, let alone transparency within the government. This was apparent in the methods he used in the run-up to the China trip.

Nixon's love for total control over a situation was seen throughout the preparation for the trip and during the trip itself as well. In a memo to First Lady Pat Nixon prior to the trip, was a list of questions she may possibly be asked by the American and Chinese media and the answers she should give. There is a clear motive in the memo to move the conversation toward how important the trip was for opening up dialogue between two countries that have had silence between them for so many years.⁶⁰ Whether he was keeping the State Department out of the know, or feeding answers to his wife as to the questions she would be asked, Nixon tried to keep every detail under his thumb.

It is common knowledge that Nixon has been accused of abusing Presidential power by many Americans. It is not outlandish to look at his trip to China as an abuse of power, although it does not carry with it the same obvious signs that the Watergate scandal did. With a poor economy at the time, Rarick's accusations of "personal diplomacy" were not just empty words.

⁵⁹ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 189.

⁶⁰ Patrick J. Buchanan, "Memorandum to the First Lady," *America Since Hoover: Selected Documents From Presidential Libraries, 1929-1980*, February 14, 1972, p. 2-3.



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Nixon and Kissinger's elaborate scheme to send Kissinger through Pakistan in order to discreetly fly to Beijing can be argued to be a misuse of taxpayer dollars.

Regardless of whether or not it was a misuse of Presidential power, Nixon was motivated by political factors in his decision to go through with the historic trip. It was an event that changed the landscape of the international scene, and it altered the power struggle between the USSR, U.S. and PRC. It also helped Nixon close in on his coveted foreign policy title of peacekeeper. No matter how Nixon went about achieving his goal of Chinese rapprochement, it is undisputable the impact this visit had on world diplomacy in the 20th century, but it was also essential in winning a landslide presidential election in 1972.

Samuel Tofte is a graduating senior at UNLV, with a major in history, who currently is applying to Master's programs. He is a Las Vegas native and an active member of Phi Alpha Theta.