



The Sino-American Normalization: A Reassessment

INTRODUCTION

The Carter administration went down in history for its failures in foreign policy, failures that have expanded mysteriously in the collective memory, making the negative outcome seem more and more monumental and final.

How did it happen? One answer is offered by Robert A. Strong, one of the top experts on Carter's foreign policy. Strong believes that the main aims achieved by the administration were either decidedly unpopular, as in the case of the treaties on the Panama Canal, or they dealt with long-term controversies that involved groups with deep vested interests, as in the case of normalization with Beijing.¹ Plenty of enemies, but not much glory. If any mistake was committed, it was mainly one of form: Carter showed himself incapable of communicating to the outside world, with any clarity or conviction, what the White House line of action was, thus leaving the image of American foreign policy in the hands of opposed groups within the executive.

The image of the Carter administration as a "weak" and "divided" administration would have repercussions on what was probably his greatest success: the normalization of relations with Beijing.

Much has been written on the role played by Nixon and by Kissinger in the process of opening discussions between China and the West. Interest in these pioneers, however, has overshadowed the merits of those who transformed the tortuous paths laid during the early 1970s into a broad highway where goods, ideas, and even arms would be exchanged: Jimmy Carter and Zbigniew Brzezinski.

The decisive moment in this transformation occurred at the end of 1978, with the normalization of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC). This was in no way just a simple finalizing of the work carried out previously by Nixon and Kissinger. Indeed, in some ways it was corrective and went towards creating a more balanced compromise that took into account the many interests at stake.

This was made possible by two factors: the remarkable ability of Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in managing the China policy between 1978 and the first part of 1979, and the historic period in which the

1. Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2000), 262.

administration was acting. It was a period that was in some ways quite unique, unique in being a “bridge” between two simultaneous processes: the crisis of détente between the two superpowers and the epochal transition of the PRC from “class struggle” to “socialist modernization.”

The crisis of détente with Moscow and the Soviet operations in the third world, including Indochina, drove Washington and Beijing towards a common strategic interest, laying the foundations for overcoming the obstacles that had so far hindered diplomatic relations between the two sides.

With Deng Xiaoping’s return to the political scene, the relaunching of his policy for reform created just the right conditions for adding the normalization of diplomatic relations to the strategic agenda. The imminence of the Soviet threat and the deterioration of the crisis in Indochina would have compromised the success of Deng’s reform plans. Relations with Washington, then, were practical in helping resolve the security threat in Beijing and in carrying out economic reform.

In a period of struggles within the Chinese Communist party (CCP), such as that following the death of Mao, Deng needed American support to help him achieve results in his foreign policy, which might lend depth and stability to his leadership. The normalization of relations was of key importance in this process.

If it is true, as Michel Oksenberg, the National Security Council (NSC) staff China expert, wrote, that the “enabling factor” of the Sino-American détente, which was begun between the end of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s by Nixon and Kissinger, was “the American accommodation vis-à-vis Taiwan,” during the Carter administration this situation was turned on its head.²

The Carter administration, and especially National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, knew how to exploit Chinese willingness to achieve normalization in order to get the best compromise possible, a compromise that would allow the United States, in fact, to continue selling defense weapons to their old ally, Taiwan.

This compromise proved to be more and more effective as it was adapted to the internal situations of the two countries: on the one hand, it underpinned Deng’s leadership in the CCP, and on the other, it helped the White House not to give the impression to Congress and public opinion that they were abandoning Taiwan to its fate.

The “domestic” effects of the normalization were key issues in how negotiations were closed. The success of Deng’s rise to power in Beijing, and the hard line taken by Brzezinski at the White House, led to an important change in relations between the two countries. Within a few months, Chinese domestic policy became an integral part of administration’s China policy and, at the same time, American domestic policy became a crucial factor within Deng’s strategy.

2. Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, February 4, 1977, Box 40, China Vertical File, Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter JCL), Atlanta, Georgia.

To understand the significance of this turnaround, one needs to analyze the ground covered by the Carter administration right from its first moves, when Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's détente logic concerning Moscow seemed to outweigh Brzezinski's offensive strategy. During this phase, the choices made by the administration in setting out the China policy seemed to be mainly influenced by relations with Moscow and internal debate. As the Carter line shifted to favor the offensive strategy of Brzezinski during 1978, Chinese domestic policy started to be an integral part of the process of constructing the administration's China policy. Deng Xiaoping's victory in the CCP's internal struggles, then, became increasingly important for the achievement of U.S. interests.

During this phase, the deterioration of the conflict in Indochina had a crucial role, which contributed to increasing the need in Deng's strategy for outside support from Washington. Within this context, we will try to draw new conclusions regarding the normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC. To do this, we will try to follow the threads that, from 1977 onwards, were to make up the complex scenario from which normalization would emerge two years later.

KISSINGER'S BLOW TO TAIWAN

When Carter first entered the White House there were numerous matters to be dealt with in order to bring the process of normalization with Beijing to a close. First among these was Taiwan's status.

In the years leading up to Carter's administration, Nixon and Kissinger had given their old ally, Taiwan, a severe blow by gradually clarifying ambiguities in its status in favor of the position of Beijing.³

In their meetings with Chinese leaders, Nixon and Kissinger had secretly agreed to reaching full normalization with Beijing by 1976, using a formula similar to that used with Japan just a few years before.⁴ In 1972, indeed, Tokyo, in order to reestablish official relations with the government of the PRC, had closed its embassy in Taipei replacing it with a nongovernmental office charged with carrying on commercial and cultural relations on the island.

American acceptance of the so-called Japan Formula as a principle on which to found diplomatic recognition between the two countries implied, however, more than simply closing down its embassy. The relationship between the United States and Taiwan had a much larger scope than that which linked the island to Japan, especially because of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) that had linked Taipei's security issues to those of Washington since 1954.

3. James Lilley, *China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage and Diplomacy in Asia* (New York, 2004), 159.

4. Memcons, Chou-Kissinger, February 6, 1973, Box 98, Kissinger Office Files (hereafter KOF), Nixon Presidential material (hereafter NPM), National Archives, Washington, DC (hereafter NA).

Beijing thus, considering Taiwan as an integral part of its territory, set down the withdrawal from all political and military links with the island as a *conditio sine qua non* in the completion of the process of normalization.⁵

It was to be, as ever, Mao who would lay down the guidelines for bargaining with Washington. In November 1973, during a meeting with Kissinger, he said once again that the Japan Formula was the only way of achieving normalization of relations between the two countries.⁶ Mao's *ipse dixit*, by disposing of any room for maneuver in bargaining for all the other Chinese leaders, who were still too politically weak to risk their careers on such a delicate point, blocked each successive attempt by the Americans to come up with a new formula—the so-called Japan Plus Formula—which took into account the special relationship which had characterised dealings between Washington and Taipei until then. When, in November 1974, Kissinger proposed keeping a liaison office in Taiwan while opening an embassy in Beijing, highlighting how the presence of the MDT and strong pressure from the Taiwan lobby in Washington meant that a more flexible approach from China towards Washington regarding what had happened in Tokyo was required, Deng's answer was a definite no.⁷ The time when Deng would be able to make independent decisions regarding such important issues was still a long way off.

Apart from the problem of what status Taiwan would have after the American embassy moved to Beijing, Mao's conditions raised two other issues that were to become more and more relevant to the relationship between the two countries: the continued sale of defense arms to Taiwan by the Americans, and peaceful resolution of unification between the "rebel province" and the mother country.

In the complex organization of relations between Beijing and Washington, these two issues appeared to be closely linked to each other. The abolition of the MDT, as a condition set down by Mao in 1973, forced the White House to come to a more or less explicit agreement with Beijing regarding the continued sale of arms to Taipei, which would guarantee the island's security and avoid accusations from Congress of having abandoned their old ally to its fate in the claws of the Communists. According to Kissinger's staff, if Beijing was openly committed to finding a way of achieving peaceful reunification with the island, Washington would be able to gradually reduce the sale of arms to Taipei and, eventually, stop them altogether.⁸

5. See Kissinger-Nixon, "My Talks with Chou En Lai," July 17, 1971; see also Memcons, Chou-Kissinger, July 9, 1971. Both cited in Rosemary Foot, "Prizes Won, Opportunity Lost," in *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations: An International History*, ed. W. Kirby, R. Ross, and Gong Li (Cambridge, MA, 2005), 101.

6. William Burr, *The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York, 1998), 186.

7. *Ibid.*, 294-97.

8. "The more forthcoming a statement from the Chinese the more limited our sales program might be": in Habib, Gleysteen, Lord, Solomon to Secretary Kissinger, July 3, 1975,

Initially, when talks began between the two sides in 1971 and 1972, the United States tried to link gradual withdrawal from the island with Beijing's commitment to "peaceful reunification" with Taipei.⁹ However, during the years that followed, Washington's dedication to this point weakened, gradually moving towards an agreement that would mean, when diplomatic normalization was achieved, they would no longer have a clear and public statement of intent from Beijing, but just nonopposition to an American statement in favor of peaceful reunification.

On the Chinese side, as well, opposition on this point was connected to the question of Taiwan, which, as has been said, represented a question of internal order for Beijing, something that no other country had the right to interfere with. An explicit promise on Beijing's part would mean recognizing Washington as interlocutor-actor in the solution of the Taiwan question and, thus, would go against its own policy with regards to Taipei.

It is clear how America's position for negotiating with Beijing had already been weakened in the years before Carter entered the White House by repeated promises from Kissinger, Nixon, and Ford to the Chinese.

The Japan Formula—in the version set down by Mao in 1973, which included breaking off diplomatic relations with Taipei, the end of MDT, and the withdrawal of American troops from the island—had by then become the negotiating basis for diplomatic normalization with Beijing. Initial efforts, made to link the withdrawal of American troops and a firm avowal from Beijing of its agreement to peaceful resolution of reunification with Taipei, had disintegrated into a simple "request" made that Beijing should not oppose any American statement in this direction. In the meantime American withdrawal from the island was going ahead at a top rate—from 10,000 soldiers present in 1972, it went to 1,250 in 1977—making any attempt at linkage between this and Chinese commitment to peaceful reunification even more fragile. Nor had it been possible to come to an agreement with Beijing regarding the sale of arms to Taipei after the abrogation of the MDT; quite the opposite, as officials from Carter's administration were to discover in 1977 when charged with studying the papers from previous administrations regarding negotiations with Beijing, this point had never been dealt with systematically by either side.¹⁰

National Security Affairs Temporary Parallel File, Kissinger-Scowcroft West Wing Office File, Box A1, GRFL; in Rosemary Foot, "Prizes Won, Opportunity Lost," 104.

9. The Shanghai Communiqué itself seemed to imply this idea: "[The United States] reaffirms its interest in a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves. With this prospect in mind, it affirms the ultimate objective of the withdrawal of all U.S. forces and military installations from Taiwan."

10. Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, February 4, 1977, Box 40, China Vertical File (hereafter CVF), JCL.

VANCE'S TRIP TO BEIJING: THE FIRST HINTS
OF DENG'S FLEXIBILITY

In the months between Mao's death in September 1976 and the beginning of the Carter administration, Chinese standpoints regarding Taiwan became rigid once again. During the first official meeting with Carter, the ambassador Huang Chen, in charge of the PRC Liaison Office in Washington, once again threatened the use of force to solve problems with Taipei.¹¹

The harshness of the Chinese ambassador's words could have been due either to home or foreign affairs. The uncertainty of the Chinese political scene after Mao's death had made both extremely orthodox and extremely radical positions more politically expendable within the party. At the same time, however, Huang intended to express harsh criticism of positions of appeasement towards Moscow taken by Carter in his first few months.

The climate of détente with Moscow did indeed seem to influence the choices made by the Carter administration in the first few months of 1977, giving normalization with Beijing secondary importance.

In Carter's opinion too sudden an opening towards Beijing meant the risk of blocking dialogue regarding the control of armaments and could annoy Congress at a time when the White House was involved in delicate battles like that of the treaty on the Panama Strait.¹²

Carter's positions reflected those of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, who had initially been charged with managing the administration's China policy. Vance believed that the safeguarding of Taiwan's security and welfare was of utmost importance and needed to be given a great deal of weight in negotiations with Beijing, to reassure other allies, such as Israel, who were keeping a careful eye on Washington to see what stance would be taken on this issue.¹³

During his visit to Beijing in August 1977, the secretary of state tried to put forward once more the "maximalist" formula—a repetition of the Japan plus Formula proposed by Kissinger in 1974 that Deng Xiaoping had refused at the time—which included American governmental staff remaining on the island. To this he added the continuation of the sale of arms to Taipei and the request for a statement of peaceful intent from the Chinese.¹⁴

A month before Vance arrived in Beijing, during the Third Plenum of the Tenth Congress of the CCP, Deng Xiaoping had made his comeback on

11. Memcons, Carter-Huang, February 8, 1977, Box 40, CVF, JCL. From 1973 onwards, when the Liaison Offices were opened in Beijing and in Washington, the diplomats who were put in charge of these structures were ambassador level even if they were not formally recognized as such.

12. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington DC, 1994), 764–65.

13. Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices: Critical Years in American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1983), 75.

14. *Ibid.*, 79.

the political scene, taking all the positions that he had occupied at the time of the last purge of the radical part of the CCP back on: vice president of the party, vice president of the Military Commission, vice premier and general leader of staff for the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Given his position at the top of the party ranks, Deng was able to meet with Vance.

The Chinese vice premier sent the secretary of state's proposal back, but surprisingly made no comment on the issue of arms.¹⁵

Deng's "loud silence" on this issue was taken with a certain degree of optimism by National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, the main advocate of an agreement with Beijing within the administration. On August 25, Brzezinski wrote to the president:

Secretary Vance's meeting with Deng Xiaoping went very well from our standpoint. The Chinese evidently are interested in a serious negotiation of the Taiwan issue, as indicated by Deng's expression of *patience*, his willingness to discuss the details of the Vance proposal, his suggestion that we resume the discussion after Vance has had an opportunity to reflect on his (Deng's) remarks and discuss them with you, subsequent changes in the atmosphere at the ensuing banquet . . . of *greater significance is the fact that the Chinese apparently offered no comment on our resolve to preserve Taiwan's access to supplies of essential defence equipment*.¹⁶

On his return to America the secretary of state found the president there to welcome him, enthusiastic about the "important step" that had been taken towards normalization, without risking the freedom of the people of Taiwan. Carter in staging this act had several audiences in mind. On one hand, he wanted Moscow to believe that the mission had led to rapprochement with Beijing, so as to gain more room for negotiations regarding the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) II. At the same time, it was an attempt to silence voices from the far right, like Barry Goldwater, who had accused the administration of wanting to abandon Taiwan.

In Beijing, however, the show put on by the White House did not go down too well. It was a very delicate phase in Deng's rise to the top, and that episode risked providing his enemies with a precious card to play. On September 6, Deng, taking advantage of the fact that a delegation from the Associated Press were visiting Beijing, declared that Vance's mission had been

15. Memcons, Vance-Deng, August 24, 1977, in "Cooperation and Normalization: The Sino-American Relationship from Ford to Carter, 1973-1980," CD-ROM, in *Transforming the Cold War: The United States and China, 1969-1980*, International Conference (Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Washington, DC, September 25-27, 2006).

16. Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, "Vance-Deng Meeting," August 24, 1977, Box 4, Armacost Chronological File (hereafter ACF), Staff Material Far East (hereafter SMFE), JCL (emphasis added). See also Handnote, Rick Inderfurth to Hamilton Jordan, August 29, 1977, attached to Dennis Chapman to Rick Inderfurth, "Secretary Vance's Trip," August 29, 1977, Box 34, Chinese Normalization (78), Chief of Staff-Hamilton Jordan, JCL.

a step backwards in the process of diplomatic normalization between the two countries.¹⁷

Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke, after having read the Chinese leader's statement, commented that "Deng was holding a carrot in an iron grip." Indeed, despite the seemingly accusatory tone Deng continued to ignore or not to condemn the United States' position on selling arms to Taiwan and even added a few veiled hints of a possible peaceful resolution to the Taiwan issue.¹⁸

Deng had to take into account the delicate political balance within the country, but at the same time he could not afford to let negotiations break down with the United States. He knew that China needed to open up to the West in order to modernize itself, introduce more advanced technology and more modern methods of economic management, which would allow the country to come out of underdevelopment and acquire more economic power and security. The relationship with Washington was a means to this end. On one hand, it would provide the country with greater security, counterbalancing the Soviet threat, and, on the other, it was the main resource for innovation—together with Japan and Europe—that Beijing could draw on in relaunching its economy. Normalization of diplomatic relations had therefore become a necessity in creating a favorable international context for internal reconstruction of the country.

The increased flexibility that Deng had begun to show regarding the Taiwan issue must be read in this light. If Taiwan was the main obstacle on the road to diplomatic normalization between Washington and Beijing, the pressing economic needs of the country dictated a more flexible approach to this problem.¹⁹ It was, however, an approach that Deng had to develop cautiously: Taiwan was still a sore point for the Chinese.

A few days later, in a meeting with George Bush, ex-head of the American Liaison Office in Beijing—after the usual criticism of the U.S. policy of appeasement towards the Soviet "polar bear"—Deng reaffirmed Chinese interest in achieving normalization as quickly as possible. Vance's visit was already a thing of the past, he said: "China needed the West."²⁰

17. Notes from the meeting between Deng Xiaoping and the AP delegation, cited in Li Jie, "China's Domestic Politics and the Normalization of Sino-U.S. Relations, 1969–1979," in *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations: An International History*, ed. W. Kirby et al., 84.

18. Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, "Analysis of Deng's Interview with AP officials," September 6, 1977, Box 8–10 China (PRC), Zbigniew Brzezinski Country File (hereafter ZBCF), Records of the Office of the National Security Advisor (hereafter RONSA), JCL. As Oksenberg noted, Deng's words had a perfect timing for the White House. By reaching the American public one day before the signing of the Panama treaties, they showed that the new administration was much stiffer on Taiwan than the previous ones.

19. Li Jie, "China's Domestic Politics and Sino-U.S. Relations," 84–85.

20. Tao Wenzhao, *Zhong mei guanxishi, vol. 3, 1972–2000* (Shanghai, 2004), 38; for an American point of view, see also CIA, "National Foreign Assessment Center," May 5th, 1978, Box 38, Folder 4, Brzezinski Material-Trip File, JCL.

THE FIRST STEPS OF A NEW CHINA POLICY: BRZEZINSKI'S
MANEUVERS AND THEIR EFFECT ON BEIJING'S POSITION
TOWARDS WASHINGTON

Deng's veiled openings did not fall on fertile ground in Washington. During October and November, nothing seemed to move in the relationship between the two countries. The State Department was buying time to dedicate to other issues seen as being more urgent, such as ratifying the Panama treaties.²¹

This stalling was not to Brzezinski's liking; he aimed to settle relations with Beijing as quickly as possible to work against the Soviets. His objective was basically a strategic one: to work against Soviet expansion in crucial areas of the globe, like the Horn of Africa, through the link with the PRC.²²

Brzezinski considered the best way of reinforcing this link was to first of all create solid relationships with some of the factions within the CCP, to reduce relations with Taiwan, and to expand trading with Beijing, especially in the "security-oriented technology" sector: "of the kind that would contribute to greater stability in the Chinese military establishment (e.g. control and command systems, communications, etc.)"²³

If, according to Carter's adviser and most of the NSC, the relationship with Beijing was to be read from a geo-strategic point of view, normalization seemed useful but not fundamental to achieving American interests.²⁴

Beijing had to be helped into understanding that a more "subtle" approach would be useful in allowing the White House to manage the opposition that normalization with Beijing would raise in the United States; a more subtle approach in terms of managing Taiwan's security problem would allow Washington to maintain the social and economic relations that it had with the island.

If a strong leadership ready to compromise on this point was to emerge in Beijing from the struggle going on between warring factions in those months, it would be easier to achieve normalization in a short time; if the opposite were to happen, there was still the option of reinforcing the strategic relationship between the two countries, postponing diplomatic normalization to better times.²⁵

Deng Xiaoping's return to the political scene and his statements following Vance's visit were promising.

21. Vance, *Hard Choices*, 83.

22. "Events in Africa can also be seen as a part of a broad East-West struggle, with pro-Western regimes being challenged by the pro-Soviet regimes. This dictates resistance to Soviet efforts . . . we should press the Soviets to desist, but do so outside of Africa . . . not through direct involvement in Africa per se," in Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, April 1, 1977, National Security Council Weekly Reports (hereafter NSCWR) 7, Box 41, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection (hereafter ZBC), JCL.

23. Brzezinski to Carter, November 25, 1975, "US Policy towards China and Taiwan," Box 133, Records of the 1976 Campaign Committee to Elect Jimmy Carter, 1976, JCL.

24. Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski, Washington DC, January 30th, 2008.

25. Memorandum, Armacost to Brzezinski, "East Asia: Where Do We Stand? Where Are We Going?," April 7, 1977, Box. 1, ACF, National Security Advisor- Staff Material (hereafter NSASM), JCL.

The real hindrance to an agreement between the two countries was at that time the common view points of Carter and Vance, who, as has been said, were pushing the government to deal with issues that were seen as being more pressing, like the Panama treaties and the talks with Moscow about armaments, neglecting the veiled advances coming from Beijing.

In order to reverse the trend of foreign policy in the administration, Brzezinski began subtly maneuvering to take over the handling of China policy. Thanks to the help of the NSC's expert on China, Michel Oksenberg, he began to put out feelers in China regarding a visit to Beijing. The Chinese leaders knew Brzezinski well and shared both his critical judgment and his firm stance regarding Soviet foreign policy. Thus, on November 3, during Chinese Ambassador Huang Chen's leaving lunch (he was going back to Beijing), Brzezinski was officially invited to visit China.

From that moment on Brzezinski began to exploit every opportunity at his disposal in his attempt to convince the president to accept the Chinese invitation.²⁶

At the same time he began to push for the expansion of bilateral relations so as to create a vast bureaucratic "constituency" within the administration in favor of reinforcing the relationship with Beijing, thus making the process practically irreversible.²⁷

The first step in the strategic relationship with Beijing was made through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In November, Brzezinski, in order to exploit the general interest of the Americans and Chinese in the reinforcement of NATO as an anti-Soviet measure, decided to back the defense secretary in his plan to start creating a consultative relationship between PRC and NATO by a series of briefings in Brussels between members of the NATO staff and Chinese officials.²⁸

Another success reached through Brzezinski's maneuver was achieved in the field of transferring military technology to the Chinese. The Chinese had begun

26. See Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, February 9, 1978, NSCWR 46, Box 41, ZBC, JCL. See also Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, December 9, 1977, NSCWR 39, Box 41, ZBC, JCL.

27. An important step in this direction was the approval on Carter's part of a series of initiatives for scientific and technological collaboration with the Chinese, which would have converged in July 1978 during the visit to Beijing of Frank Press, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), leading the most important and imposing scientific delegation in the history of the United States. See Memorandum, Press to Carter, "An Approach to the People's Republic of China Through Science and Technology," January 23, 1978, Box 6, U.S.-China Science and Technology, Subject Files, JCL.

28. Memorandum, Brown to Brzezinski, October 4, 1977, in *Cooperation and Normalization: The Sino-American Relationship from Ford to Carter, 1973-1980*, CD-ROM. "This will not be a low key event," noted Brzezinski in a memo. The briefing had in fact the same level of those provided for the Australia-New Zealand-United States Security Treaty (ANZUS) and Japanese allies. See Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, November 11, 1977, *ibid.* According to Brown's plans, the Chinese would be able to help in the REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) trials, but Vance's veto stopped this project from happening.

to search for supplies of technologically advanced military equipment and arms in various European countries, technology that the United States had refused to supply to regimes like those of Moscow and Beijing until that moment. When, however, in 1978 Carter visited Europe, the French President Giscard D'Estaing took advantage of his visit to ask his opinion on this matter. Carter told the French that he would not interfere with their decisions and that, in any case, he would have no objections if Paris decided to agree to Beijing's requests.²⁹ This was an important step: Carter's go-ahead to D'Estaing was the beginning of a dramatic reversal in administrative policy that gradually led to Beijing occupying a better position than Moscow in terms of having access to American technology.³⁰

Brzezinski's maneuver had immediate effects in Beijing. Although between October and November the apparent disinterest shown by the White House towards Beijing had led the Chinese to criticize Washington's foreign policy harshly, between December and January their tone changed drastically.³¹

It seemed like something was moving. Until then Beijing had always linked any move forward in the relationship between the two countries to the normalization of diplomatic relations and therefore to the solution to the Taiwan question. Now, however, it seemed that the future of Taiwan was becoming less relevant, whereas the importance of the strategic relationship regarding Moscow was emerging.³²

What had happened? The Chinese seemed to be comforted by what they saw as a new sense of solidity in Washington's policy regarding Moscow. And not just that. Most probably, according to sources from the CIA, the report that Huang Chen had presented on his return to Beijing in mid-November had also had a certain effect. In his report, the Chinese ambassador had described to the leader of the CCP the complex relations that linked American internal policy and normalization; showing them how the hesitations of the Carter administration on this issue were not so much the fruit of wholehearted opposition, but the product of other impelling priorities, such as Congress's approval of the Panama

29. Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China 1969-1989* (Stanford, CA, 1995), 117-18.

30. It would seem, however, that the PRC often managed to get around the restrictions imposed by the White House regarding the exportation of new technology using alternative channels rather than direct importation. See Memorandum, Michel Armacost to Brzezinski, February 24, 1977, 1-2/77, Box 8-10 China (PRC), ZBCF, RONSA, JCL, regarding Beijing's use of Japanese companies as agents for buying American products subject to embargo (Large Scale Integration Test System).

31. In January, Beijing began a long series of official contacts with the United States on a military level, giving the go-ahead to some American officials for visiting some military installations. See CIA, "National Foreign Assessment Center," May 5th, 1978, Box 38, Brzezinski Material: Trip File (hereafter BMTF), JCL. Beijing's invitation to Michael Pillsbury is particularly noteworthy; Pillsbury was the author of Memorandum L-32 of the RAND Corporation, reference point for all those in Washington who were in favor of strengthening the strategic relationship with Beijing. By a strange coincidence the date of Pillsbury's trip to Beijing coincided with that of Brzezinski.

32. *Ibid.*

Treaties, which made the circumstances wrong for dealing with the question. It became clear to the Chinese from this that the question of Taiwan had more of a “political” weight than a “diplomatic” one for Washington. As experts from the NSC pointed out, quoting the Huang report:

Beijing believed the United States would “have difficulty in accepting” Chinese conditions for normalization. . . . Carter administration “has too many major problems on its hands already and cannot afford to take on the controversial issue of normalization.” . . . Such analysis can be read into the characterization of the Taiwan issue as a ‘political’ and not a ‘diplomatic’ problem for the United States, a line Chinese leader took in expressing renewed ‘patience’ on the Taiwan issue to recent US congressional delegations.[. . .] there is little doubt that China’s leaders want to demonstrate their positive approach to bilateral relations with the United States.³³

“Flexibility means that we can wait,” said Deng during the visit of a delegation of members of the American Congress to Beijing.³⁴

Another element that definitely contributed to improving relations with Washington was the gradual increase in Deng’s influence within the CCP. Thanks to the nomination at the beginning of 1978 of Xu Xiangqian, one of Deng’s close associates, as minister of defense, Deng took over control of the army, the main power base in China. Soon after, on March 15, during an important meeting with the Politburo, Deng created a group for managing imports of foreign technology into China, marking another step forward in the opening up of the country, at a time when Brzezinski had made the United States ever more likely to respond to Chinese requests in this field.³⁵

Deng’s rise had been accompanied by a press campaign, which emphasized the work that the new government had put into correcting the abuses carried out during the Cultural Revolution and in updating the laws. As Washington also noted, this campaign was not aimed only at maintaining order on a domestic front, but it seemed to be aimed at a wider foreign audience.³⁶

Deng’s speeches on the opening up and modernization of the country, together with this press campaign on the importance of the law, showed external

33. Memorandum, “Sino-U.S. Relations: Better Vibrations from Beijing,” February 28, 1978, attached to Memorandum, Far East to Brzezinski, Weekly Report, March 2, 1978, Box 1, Armacost Weekly and Evening Report File (hereafter AEWRF), SMFE, JCL.

34. Zhonggong, Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, ed., *Deng Xiaoping sixiang nianpu* (Beijing, 1998), 53.

35. Li Jie, “China’s Domestic Politics and Sino-U.S. Relations,” 80. For an American version of the contents of the meeting, see Memorandum, Far East to Brzezinski, Weekly Report, March 23, 1978, Box 1, AEWRF, SMFE, JCL.

36. “[It] seems to be aimed at a wider foreign audience, and seem to be trying to stress that China is making efforts to restore orderly forms of government and ‘normal’ legal processes. The comments probably reflects Beijing’s concern about China’s vulnerability on human rights issues,” in Memorandum, Far East to Brzezinski, Weekly Report, March 16, 1978, Box 1, AEWRF, SMFE, JCL.

observers, the United States the first among these, that something was changing in China and that that country, considered an enemy until just a short while before, was gradually moving towards Western values. One of the first people to realize this, obviously, was Brzezinski who shared his enthusiasm over Deng with Carter in a memorandum:

Deng Xiaoping appears to share with Western theorists of modernization the view that development requires specialization, hierarchy, and urbanization. After 20 years in search for a distinctive path to modernity, the Teng-administered regime appears to be joining the rest of the world.³⁷

The “curious harmony” that seemed to be pushing Washington and Beijing towards each other was directly proportional to the deterioration in the reciprocal relations with Moscow, deterioration that helped to finalize Brzezinski’s plans.

The combined effect of the SS-20 crisis in Europe and the situation in the Horn of Africa at the beginning of 1978 drastically lowered the opinion that President Carter had of Moscow and made him more amenable to the hard line proposed by his adviser.

Thus, after months of uncertainty, on March 16, 1978, Carter authorized Brzezinski to visit China, marking the beginning of the administration’s new China policy.

THE RISING TENSION BETWEEN HANOI AND PHNOM PENH:
A CRUCIAL FACTOR IN SINO-AMERICAN RELATIONS

In the months before Brzezinski’s visit, the tensions in the Horn of Africa were added to by those in Indochina.

The strategic change carried out by Mao at the end of the sixties and Nixon’s visit to China had profoundly altered the “brotherhood” between Beijing and Hanoi in the anti-imperialist struggle. The Vietnamese, whose main enemy was still the United States, felt deeply betrayed by Beijing’s choices.³⁸

After North Vietnam’s victory, with the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the tension that already existed between Beijing and Hanoi was becoming more and more evident.

Vietnam desperately needed economic help to rebuild the country, but China expected it to behave like a “grateful client” and to loosen its ties with the Soviet Union without any extra investment on its part.³⁹ Moscow, on the other hand,

37. Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, April 7, 1978, NSCWR 53, Box 41, ZBC, JCL.

38. “They [the Chinese] vigorously traded with the Americans and compelled us to serve as a bargaining chip in this way,” said the Vietnamese leader Lê Duẩn. “Speech by Comrade B (Le Duan) regarding the plot of reactionary Chinese clique against Vietnam,” People’s Army Library, Hanoi, 1979, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 12/13.

39. Andrew Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge, 2003), 26.

appeared to be willing to support Hanoi's plans, attracted by the idea of increasing its influence in an area which had, until then, been out of its reach.⁴⁰

Moscow also showed its disrespect for Vietnam's independence by linking aid for development with entry into the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).

Vietnam's increasing disillusionment with Moscow pushed Hanoi to play the "American card," and at the beginning of 1977 the Vietnamese began a series of talks with the American Department of State for normalization of diplomatic relations.

In May 1977, the negotiations ran into trouble and Vietnam found itself forced to "sacrifice" its independence in order to get help from the Soviets.⁴¹

In the last years of his life, Mao had begun to look for another ally in the region, one that would be useful in counterbalancing unified Vietnam, and he found one in Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. When the Khmer Rouge had come to power in Cambodia in 1975, it had carried out strong acts of repression against the Vietnamese population present in the country, and, from 1977 onwards it began to put Hanoi's security at risk with increasingly frequent attacks on the border. It would seem that it was then that Hanoi understood that the only way to remove the threat from the Khmer Rouge was to eradicate Pol Pot's delirious regime.⁴²

Hanoi interpreted the link between Pol Pot and Beijing as an attempt on Beijing's part to surround and conquer them. But if the Chinese moves in Cambodia were destabilizing for Hanoi's security, so in Beijing's eyes was the ever more solid connection that was being created at that time between Hanoi and Moscow. Beijing was also worried that it might find itself surrounded by the Soviets, and Hanoi's overtures to Moscow increased its fears.

When, at the beginning of 1977, the Carter administration renewed talks with Vietnam, the Chinese seemed to approve.⁴³ At the time Beijing saw, in a potential strengthening of the links between Hanoi and Washington, an opportunity to reduce the scale of Soviet influence in the area.⁴⁴

With the crisis in negotiations between Hanoi and Washington in May 1977 and Vietnam's move towards the Soviet Union—with the first step for Hanoi

40. Anne Gilks, *The Breakdown of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance, 1970–1979* (Berkeley, CA, 1992), 136.

41. Robert Ross, *The Indochina Tangle* (New York, 1988), 121. "Independence is expensive," said a Vietnamese official at the time. "Every time we demonstrate independence, we have to tighten our belts. The volume of aid by 'fraternal' countries diminishes in proportion with our critical stance." Cited in Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (New York, 1986), 188.

42. C. E. Gocha, "Vietnam, the Third Indochina War and the Meltdown of Asian Internationalism," in O. A. Westad and S. Quinn Judge, *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972–1979* (London, 2006), 154.

43. "We think this is good" said Huang Chen, ambassador for the PRC in Washington, during his first meeting with President Carter. Memcons, Vance-Huang, February 8, 1977, Box 40, CVF, JCL.

44. Ross, *The Indochina Tangle*, 127–28. See also Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, 1982), 194.

towards entry into COMECON through its participation in the International Bank for Economic Cooperation (IBEC) and in the International Investment Bank (IIB) sponsored by Moscow—Beijing’s policy regarding its neighbor took on an antagonistic stance. From that moment onwards, Chinese leadership repeatedly showed its hostility towards attempts on the part of the State Department to reopen negotiations with Hanoi.

The NSC had a completely different outlook than the State Department and seemed more concerned about Beijing’s sensitivity to the Vietnamese question.⁴⁵ Furthermore, according to the experts at the NSC, Hanoi’s unpredictability also threatened the countries belonging to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the United States’ strategic interest in them was far greater than it was in Vietnam.⁴⁶

Following Hanoi’s transborder attack in December 1977, which was a response to provocation from the Khmer Rouge, the NSC’s analysts repeatedly warned Brzezinski of the strategic importance that conflict in the area could have for the United States. Given the conditions at the time, according to the analysts, the only party who would benefit from such conflict would be Moscow:⁴⁷

The Vietnamese seem aware that a protracted conflict will be costly to them and could very well make them more dependent on the Soviets than they would choose to be. The Cambodians probably have become aware of their military vulnerability. The Chinese are aware that a protracted conflict could either cost them their effort to cultivate Cambodia as a viable counter to Vietnamese hegemonic aspirations in Indochina or lead them to have an intensely adversarial relationship with Vietnam. The only interested party which conceivably could benefit from the conflict is Moscow.⁴⁸

Brzezinski saw the Soviet maneuvering as just another attempt at exploiting the détente in order to extend its influence in the third world, just what was happening at that time in the Horn of Africa. To counter the Soviet move, Brzezinski believed that the United States should strengthen its strategic links with Beijing. This would seriously hamper Moscow in its plans and would weaken its chances of being able to increase its influence in the third world and Eastern Europe.

Brzezinski’s ideas were in perfect agreement with those of Deng. According to the Chinese leader, Moscow’s hegemonic push from Africa to Vietnam was

45. Memorandum, Armacost and Oksenberg to Brzezinski and Aaron, February 18, 1977, Box 1, ACF, NSASM, JCL.

46. Memorandum, Armacost to Brzezinski, “East Asia: Where Do We Stand? Where Are We Going?” April 7, 1977, Box 1, ACF, NSASM, JCL.

47. See, for example, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, Weekly Report, “Far East,” January 5, 1978, Box 1, AEWRF, SMFE, JCL.

48. Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, Weekly Report, “Far East,” January 12, 1978, Box 1, AEWRF, SMFE, JCL.

creating dangerous tension in the international system and risked unleashing large scale conflict. The gradual strengthening of the agreement between Moscow and Hanoi was a direct threat to Beijing's security; Deng was worried that China was being surrounded. This put Deng's primary objective at risk, which was that of economic reform and modernization of the country. In order to guarantee the peaceful context that he needed, Deng decided to establish a strategic agreement with Washington and its NATO allies against Moscow. The agreement with the capitalist world was also useful in that it allowed Beijing to reconnect with the international market and accumulate the capital and technology necessary to relaunch the economy.⁴⁹

If reform was what Deng was aiming for, there were two paths he could follow in his foreign policy that would lead to achieving it: normalization with the United States and the solution to the Vietnamese problem.

Brzezinski's visit to China was to give the Chinese leader a useful platform for putting his plans into action.

BRZEZINSKI'S TRIP TO CHINA AND THE AMERICAN EXTERNAL SUPPORT TO DENG XIAOPING'S STRATEGY

When Brzezinski landed in Beijing, he came with a special gift: a piece of lunar rock accompanied by a note, "symbolic of our joint quest for a better future." In traditional Chinese culture, the moon is associated with femininity and the West, whereas the sun represents the male and the East. With his "moon" Brzezinski was bringing the West to China to create the agreement so desired by the Chinese.⁵⁰

The instructions given to Brzezinski by Carter in view of his visit to China—instructions written by Brzezinski himself with Oksenberg's help—seemed to be in line with Deng Xiaoping's expectations. Brzezinski had the job of resolving the two crucial issues in the relationship between the two countries: the problem of normalization of diplomatic relations and that of a strategic relationship to work against the Soviets.⁵¹ These issues, as has been seen, were very closely linked.

Normalization with the United States would allow Deng to strengthen his position within the party and consolidate the beginning of economic reform, whereas the strategic relationship with Washington was functional in defending the country's security when faced with Soviet expansionism.

For Washington, on the other hand, and above all for Brzezinski, the primary objective was that of creating a strategic agreement with Beijing.

49. On Deng's views about these issues, see Memcons, Carter-Deng, January 29, 1979 (1st Meeting), Box 41, China Vertical File, JCL.

50. Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols* (London, 2006), 193–94. The metaphor of the moon seems in fact quite popular in the conversations among American and Chinese leaders since Kissinger's trip and it is always used with quite an allusive meaning.

51. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977–1981* (New York, 1983), Annex I.

Normalization was obviously an important step, but in that phase it was more so for Deng than for Brzezinski. This does not alter the fact that in order for Washington's strategy to be successful, it was essential that Deng manage to consolidate his position and power within the party: achieving normalization quickly would help Deng to become stronger, and making Deng stronger meant making the agreement with Beijing vis-à-vis Moscow stronger, as well as aiding Communist China's integration with the international system led by Washington.

On the other hand, as has been seen, Taiwan had already in part been sold off by previous administrations, and even if the issue of arms sales had not yet been resolved, the urgency of strategic cooperation against Moscow, especially in view of the degenerating conflict in Indochina, put the whole arms issue in a different light.

Brzezinski's trip was "a decisive milestone in Sino-American relations," as was written in *Le Monde* at the time.⁵²

The perfect understanding between Deng and Brzezinski sealed the beginning of strategic cooperation between the United States and China, that "division of labour"—as the then leader of East Germany, Erich Honecker, called it—which saw the United States more involved in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, and the Chinese mainly concentrating on Indochina.⁵³

The regional hostilities in Indochina began to take on more international importance. The fronts gradually established themselves with the United States and their allies from ASEAN next to the Chinese and the Khmer Rouge, and the Soviet Union ever closer to Hanoi.⁵⁴

In reality the process was not exactly straightforward. The Vietnamese, indeed, by irrevocably committing themselves to one of the two sides, were afraid of being squashed in the competition between the superpowers. Immediately after Brzezinski left Beijing, Hanoi tried once again to play the "American card," sending new signals to Washington for talks to be restarted regarding the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The State Department responded positively to Hanoi's advances, convinced that concurrent normalization with Beijing and Hanoi would considerably increase Washington's influence in both countries. Brzezinski and most of the NSC disagreed, convinced that this more could negatively influence negotiations with Beijing:

This [State Department] willingness comes at the wrong time and in the wrong context. It will reinforce Chinese concern, and thus needlessly compli-

52. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 219.

53. "Evaluation by the CC of the CPSU of the Normalization of US-Chinese Relations," August 30, 1978, found at <http://www.php.isn.ethz.ch/collections/colltopic.cfm?lng=en&id=19464&navinfo=16447>.

54. According to Nayan Chanda, a few weeks after Brzezinski's visit the leadership of the CCP decided "to teach Vietnam a lesson." The beginning of hostilities had however to be postponed since the leadership wanted to strengthen first the relationship with the West and ASEAN. Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 261.

cate the more important task—normalizing with Beijing. You need to choose: Vietnam or China, and China is incomparably more important to us.”⁵⁵

Carter, although he was closer to the State Department’s position, decided to take time.⁵⁶ Talks for normalization between Hanoi and the State Department thus went on parallel to those conducted in secret in Beijing between Leonard Woodcock, head of the American Liaison Office, and Chinese Foreign Minister Huang Hua.

When, at the end of September, the opportunity for a definitive solution to negotiations with Hanoi seemed to emerge, Brzezinski managed to persuade Carter of the destructive effect that this move might have on negotiations with Beijing, and on October 11, the president decided to suspend talks with the Vietnamese.⁵⁷

At that time Carter made another important decision regarding the negotiations with Beijing. As has been said, the stickiest issue in negotiations was that of America continuing to sell arms to Taipei, something that no Chinese leader could “openly” permit.

On September 19, during the first meeting between Carter and Chai Zemin, the new Chinese ambassador in Washington, the president had tried to raise the issue once more, reiterating America’s firm intention of continuing to guarantee to Taiwan “restrained sale of some very carefully selected defensive arms . . . only in a way that carefully does not endanger the prospects of peace in the region and the situation surrounding China.”⁵⁸ The Chinese ambassador had replied that Carter’s position did not respect the spirit of the Shanghai Communiqué. However, as Oksenberg noted, Chai “did not say: arms sales rule out normalization.”⁵⁹

The arms issue was not an insurmountable obstacle in concluding normalization. The important thing was not to place it on the negotiating table since no Chinese leader could accept it as an element in a “formal” compromise with Washington.

After talks with the Vietnamese were suspended in favor of negotiations with Beijing, Carter, in order to show the Chinese how serious his intentions were, established, on Woodcock’s suggestion, that he would no longer bring up the issue of the sale of arms to Taiwan during negotiations and that he would

55. Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, July 7, 1978, NSCWR 66, Box 41, ZBC, JCL. Si veda anche, Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, June 22, 1978, Box 1 AEW, SMFE, JCL. Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, June 23, 1978, NSCWR 64, Box 41, ZBC, JCL.

56. “Zbig I should think that a US-Vietnam relationship would be better for PRC. Worse for USSR. I agree with State, but don’t wish to push any effort now,” he wrote on a Brzezinski memo. *Ibid.*

57. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 195; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 229.

58. Memcons, Carter-Chai, September 19, 1978, Box 41, China Vertical Files, JCL.

59. *Ibid.* See also Holbrooke, Woodcock, Oksenberg to Vance, October 2, 1978, “Your Meeting with Huang Hua,” in *Cooperation and Normalization: The Sino-American Relationship from Ford to Carter, 1973–1980*, CD-ROM.

give the Chinese a draft of the communiqué for achieving normalization by January 1.⁶⁰

Carter's decisions were made during a particularly important and delicate phase in the consolidation of Deng's leadership. In November, the preparatory conference for the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP would be held, a crucial meeting for the political assets of post-Maoist China.

Although, for months by now, Deng had the initiative for formulating party policy in his grasp, his position was still uncertain due to the opposition of the Hua Guofeng wing—Mao's chosen successor—and of all the young members of the political elite who, with Hua, had benefited from the Cultural Revolution and felt they were being hit by the "revisionist" wave promoted by Deng.

Oksenberg wrote to Brzezinski saying that, to further consolidate his power, Deng needed to accumulate victories:

Deng is looking for, and obviously needs, some easy, generally non controversial victories. Given structural and deep-seated Chinese economic problems, major and unambiguous victories on that front are not likely to be available in the time frame in which he is thinking, and he is likely, therefore, *to look to foreign policy for his necessary success.*⁶¹

Deng, he added, needed normalization but needed to act prudently to avoid risking too much and seeming too eager to reach an agreement with Washington.⁶²

It was a crucial moment in the history of relations between the two countries. With the decisions that Carter had taken in those days in favor of Beijing and Deng, the White House, for the first time since the PRC had been founded, elected Chinese domestic policy as a key element in the process of writing and constructing its own China policy.⁶³ And for the first time, the White House took on an important role as an actor in the internal context of the CCP, an actor whose choices could favor, in a delicate phase of political transition like that going on at the time, the rise of a man like Deng.

Brzezinski had been claiming for a long time that it was necessary to interfere in the process of Mao's succession through the creation of solid links with some of the internal factions of the party.⁶⁴ The project of reform and opening up

60. Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China—An Investigative History* (New York, 1999), 258; M. Oksenberg, "A Decade of Sino-American Relations," in *Foreign Affairs* 61 (Fall 1982): 187; Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 229. See also Telegram, White House to Woodcock, October 19, 1978, "Instructions for Woodcock's Fifth Round," in *Cooperation and Normalization: The Sino-American Relationship from Ford to Carter, 1973–1980*, CD-ROM.

61. Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, "Deng Xiaoping's Exposed Position," August 11, 1978, Box 8–10, China (PRC), ZBCF, RONSA, JCL (emphasis added).

62. *Ibid.*

63. "We are also beginning to get enough feel, after 18 months of watching Chinese internal developments, to crank the domestic element into the formulation of our China policy," in Memorandum, East Asia to Brzezinski, August 10, 1978, Box 1, AEWRF, SMFE, JCL.

64. See note 21 above.

promoted by Deng, together with his anti-Soviet leanings, made him into the ideal interlocutor for Washington at the time. Thus he became the candidate to support:

Deng Xiaoping is clearly on the offensive. We are now faced with a situation where the stakes are high and it is important to us that Deng should win. There are a number of minimal steps we can take—and for the most part are taking—in this context: . . . Normalization: with a leadership struggle in a fairly acute phase, the Chinese may find it difficult to take hard decisions.⁶⁵

“Hard decisions.” The reference is obviously to the issue of the sales of arms to Taiwan. And Carter, at Woodcock’s suggestion, decided, in that phase, which was so delicate for Deng’s fate, to not include it in negotiations. And negotiations went forward quickly.⁶⁶

On November 2, Woodcock delivered the American proposal for an agreement on normalization to Huang Hua. The climate seemed to promise well, according to what Woodcock wrote at the time, and the Chinese seemed to be ready, as they had never been before, to reach an agreement.⁶⁷ “We should seize the opportunity” said Deng in an ad hoc meeting of the Politburo; “it is in our favour if normalization can be achieved early.”⁶⁸

The events in the days that followed clearly show the complexity of the diplomatic plot that held together negotiations on normalization between Washington and Beijing, internal politics in both countries, and the Indochina crisis.

The day after negotiations reopened between Beijing and Washington, Hanoi signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow, whose aim, as some analysts rightly observed, was that of guaranteeing Hanoi, faced with pressure from Beijing.⁶⁹

In reply to the signing of the treaty between Hanoi and Moscow, the Carter administration publicly announced its intention of not opposing the sale of defensive arms to the Chinese by European allies.⁷⁰ It was a position that had

65. Memorandum, Oksenberg to Brzezinski, November 15, 1978, “Rise in the Chinese Political Temperature and U.S. Policy Implications,” Box 8-10 China, ZBCF, RONSA, JCL.

66. Cited in Li Jie, “China’s Domestic Politics and Sino-U.S. Relations,” 86. During one of Brzezinski’s most recent visits to China, the Chinese told him that his trip to Beijing in May 1978 had been the crucial step which had confirmed without a shadow of a doubt the president’s wish to achieve normalization. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 229.

67. Cable, Woodcock to Vance and Brzezinski, November 13, 1978, Box 9, Geographic File, ZBC, JCL.

68. Wang Taiping, ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wailiaoshi*, vol. 3 (Beijing, 1999), 378.

69. Michael B. Yahuda, *Towards the End of Isolationism: China’s Foreign Policy After Mao* (New York, 1983), 229. The sixth clause in the treaty in fact confirmed that signatory countries would need to consult one another immediately if one of them were to be attacked or threatened with attack so as to remove the threat and take effective steps to safeguard the peace and security of both countries. Furthermore, attached to the draft of the treaty were some secret protocols which guaranteed Soviet forces access to air and naval bases in Vietnam. See Chanda, *Brother Enemy*, 321–22.

70. On the same day Carter released PD/NSC 48, entitled “US-China Scientific and Technological Relationships,” which promoted all the most important programs for scientific

already been aired months before during a private meeting between Carter and D'Estaing, but now it had become official and took on new political meaning in the context in which it was expressed, as the unusual vehemence of Moscow's reaction demonstrated.⁷¹

It was, in any case, a significant step, not only for the Washington-Beijing-Moscow triangle, but also for that involving Washington-Taipei-Beijing. In accepting that European allies sold arms to Taipei's main enemy, also Washington's ally, it was as if the United States had sold arms to East Germany in Europe. The fact that they were defensive arms is hardly relevant. Given the peculiarity of the situations in the Taiwan Straits it was difficult to trace a clear division between the defensive or offensive nature of those arms. Deng himself was to stress this to Carter; speaking about the arms being supplied to Taiwan, these were also termed "defensive":

As for whether weapons are defensive or offensive, there is really no clear line of demarcation. Regardless of what defensive weapon it might be, it would not be difficult for them to cross the Taiwan Straits.⁷²

Conceding European arms to the Chinese meant further favoring Deng and his politics of opening up and collaborating with the West. Without mentioning that if, by now, it was clear that the issue of selling defensive arms to Taipei was no longer an insurmountable obstacle to achieving normalization, Carter's choice made a further contribution to redistributing diplomatic weight. By putting European arms at Chinese disposal, Carter was helping to strengthen the PLA and laying the foundations for the neutralization of any future supplies of arms to Taiwan. Obviously this helped Deng and limited the political damage that an agreement with Washington obtained without the solution—or even with the continuation—to the problem that the sale of arms to Taiwan might have on his leadership.

If Carter's choices seemed to take into account the situation on the home front in China, Deng seemed to be doing the same thing. An example of this is the statement given by him on November 14 during a discussion with the president of Burma, Wu Naiwen. When the Taiwan question had been resolved, and the island reunited with the motherland, said Deng, China would take into

cooperation in the main areas of strategic interest for Chinese economic reform, including energy, education, astrophysics, earth sciences, and business.

71. "This was the first time ever that the Soviets had reacted in such an unexpected way and at such a high official level to our announcement," wrote Brzezinski to Carter. Memorandum, Brzezinski to Carter, November 17, 1978, NSCWR 80, box 42, ZBC, JCL.

72. Memcons, Carter-Deng, January 30, 1979, Box 41, China Vertical File, JCL. A few years later Alexander Haig was to say to James Mann, Los Angeles Times Correspondent: "Zbig [Brzezinski] told the Chinese the US would see that they got weapons, and asked them for a list of what they want[ed]. The Chinese, in response to the US initiative . . . provided a list of 47 items. Zbig went through Western Europe with the list, saying 'We can't sell right now, but you do it.'" James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York, 1999), 86–87.

account the existing reality in Taiwan.⁷³ It was the embryo of what was to become a well-known formula of “one country, two systems.” Deng set out his moderation with regards to the Taiwan question. Showing his willingness to respect the social reality existing in Taiwan as well as representing a sort of peaceful statement on reunification, although a veiled one, went towards reassuring Washington about the security and well-being of the people of Taiwan.

There seemed to be total harmony between the two partners, and indeed negotiations proceeded rapidly and without hindrance right up to the final phase, sanctioned by the meetings between Woodcock and Deng in the Great Hall of People in Tiananmen Square on December 13 and 14.

BRZEZINSKI'S DOUBLE BLITZ IN BEIJING AND WASHINGTON

Between 1 December 13 and 14, 1978, Deng and Woodcock reached a final agreement both on the draft of the communiqué and on Deng's visit to the United States, arranged for January 29, and on the exchange of ambassadors arranged for March 1.⁷⁴

Washington confirmed that, after declaring normalization, it would need a period of transition in order to definitively modify their relations with Taiwan and that this period would last no longer than a year. This time lapse would allow the United States to “terminate” rather than “abrogate” the MDT, as established in Article 10 of the treaty.⁷⁵ In the meantime the American government would make sure that every official relationship with Taipei was broken off and they would remove military forces from the island.

Deng was ready to accept that the MDT be “terminated” according to Article 10, despite knowing that this would technically keep it alive for another year, but he asked the Americans to abstain from directly mentioning Article 10 in their official statements and that it would not sell any more arms to Taiwan in that time period, during 1979 that is.

No reference, however, was made to what might happen after 1979. What appears to have been acceptable to Deng was that nobody would realize that the MDT would, in substance, continue to exist for another year, since that would have meant, to those in the party, that he had given in and not obtained the three conditions required for normalization. At such a delicate time, Deng obviously

73. Zhonggong, Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, ed., *Deng Xiaoping sixiang nianpu (1975-1979)*, 91.

74. The date for the release of the official communiqué and that for Deng's visit to the United States were to be confirmed the day after the meeting between Deng and Woodcock. At first the official release was fixed for January 1, but Carter feared a news leak and thought it would be opportune to bring it forward two weeks. Oksenberg, “A Decade of Sino-American Relations,” 188.

75. In Article 10 of the draft of the MDT it was written, “This Treaty shall remain in force indefinitely. Either party may terminate it one year after notice has been given to the other party.”

wished to avoid paying such a high political price.⁷⁶ What Deng tried to do was to present things in such way that they would later reflect favorably on him. He needed to complete negotiations, and he knew that ambiguity was the best diplomatic disguise for both of the parties involved. If things had been any different, he would have been able to push Washington into clarifying what would happen after 1979. But he did not.

Brzezinski wrote to Woodcock that it was unthinkable to avoid a declaration on such a delicate point, and given that the question still had not been resolved, he should call a meeting immediately with Deng to clarify, once and for all, the White House's position on the matter.⁷⁷

It was only a few hours before the normalization declaration when Woodcock faced Deng. Woodcock said that the president wanted to be completely sure that there would be no misunderstanding about America's position regarding supplying arms to Taiwan after 1979. Deng was visibly irritated. "Why are you bringing up this old argument?" he said. Woodcock said that the White House did not want to release any declarations that could be perceived by Beijing as changes to previous agreements.⁷⁸

Faced with Woodcock's blitz, orchestrated by Brzezinski, Deng had to lay his cards on the table: he could neither comply with Woodcock without protesting, nor turn over the negotiating table. Deng repeated that "we cannot agree" since this would make it impossible to peacefully resolve reunification with the island.⁷⁹

As Brzezinski had guessed, Chinese objections would not compromise the conclusion to diplomatic normalization. Deng decided to postpone the discussion on arms to a later date without allowing that to influence the official communiqué, but he invited Carter to be as vague as possible on this issue to avoid counterproductive opposition. Woodcock reassured him by emphasizing the political nature of the problem:

Woodcock: The difficulty is the political climate, and as time passes and we have normalized relations that political climate will change substantially and for the better with relation to this question. . . . I think over time this problem will be solved. I believe that China will be unified and it will be done in the manner expressed by the vice-premier himself.⁸⁰

Immediately after the meeting between Deng and Woodcock in Beijing, Brzezinski summoned Chinese Ambassador Chai Zemin to the White House. Brzezinski confirmed to Chai that the United States would not issue a formal

76. Cable, Woodcock to Vance and Brzezinski, December 15, 1978, "Full Transcript of December 15 Meeting with Teng," Box 40, China Vertical File, JCL.

77. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 232.

78. Cable, Woodcock to Vance and Brzezinski, December 15, 1978, "Full Transcript of December 15 Meeting with Teng," Box 40, China Vertical File, JCL.

79. *Ibid.*

80. *Ibid.*

declaration regarding arms sales to Taiwan but that they would not be able to avoid answering questions regarding this. Then, he went through a draft with Chai that American government representatives had prepared to use as answers the press on this issue:

Within the agreement to normalize, the United States has made it clear that it will continue to trade with Taiwan, including the restrained sale of selective defensive arms, after the expiration of the defense treaty, in a way that will not endanger the prospects for peace in the region. The Chinese side does not endorse the United States position on this matter, but it has not prevented both sides from agreeing to normalize relations.⁸¹

In reality, this draft does not appear in the memorandum of the conversations that took place that day; there is an empty space where it should be. The only place where the draft is cited is in Brzezinski's memoirs. He said that he ordered Woodcock to mention this to Deng, but there is no evidence of this in the documents. The draft is mentioned neither in the instructions he sent to Woodcock nor in the report of the conversation between him and the Chinese leader. Is there any special reason for such an omission? Let us take a look at how the conversation went between the two.

When Brzezinski read the declaration, Chinese Ambassador Chai seemed to be wrong-footed. Chai said that he knew that the United States had already said that it did not intend to sell arms to Taiwan after normalization:

Brzezinski: No. Vice Premier Teng specifically asked for no sales in 1979, during the year we will have terminated our diplomatic relations and would be terminating the Treaty in accordance with its provisions. But if we were to agree to a blockade of Taiwan the normalization would collapse here. Ambassador Woodcock has met within the last few hours with Vice Premier Teng. This is what was said: [empty space]

I have given you a formula for working this problem out. You have one position, and we have another position, and we will see what happens (Dr Brzezinski gestures with his hands and raises his eyebrows).

Chai: The day before yesterday, we got a message on the joint communiqué. We also got a message that the U.S. will not sell arms after normalization. But after that we are not very familiar with the course of discussions in Beijing.

Brzezinski: Well, I could show you the draft, but it is of no use or importance for me to do so here. What we are now trying to do is to work out a way to reach an agreement. . . . We do not want an immediate problem in our relations twelve hours from now. . . . We are not trying to get you to change your position but we will not change our position. Mr Ambassador, let us not be formalistic. Let us be political. . . . *now this problem is in a new context.* And we may be able to work it out. . . . *We can count on the flowering of our relations during*

81. Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 231.

the visit of Vice-Premier Teng. We will be able to solve other issues. Let us obtain the maximum benefit of what is to happen tonight, because it has global political significance.

Chai: That is true.⁸²

There is a time difference of thirteen hours between Washington and Beijing. On the night of December 14, Brzezinski sent Woodcock the instructions, and then the ambassador met with Deng while in Washington it was still the middle of the night. The following day—the morning of December 15 in Washington—immediately after breakfast with Carter, Brzezinski called Chai who, according to what has emerged in documents, had received no information whatsoever regarding the meeting between Deng and Woodcock that had taken place the night before. Brzezinski however, could have pinned him down by saying that everything had been arranged and that the draft was to be used in answer to any questions asked by the press regarding the sale of arms. But the evening before, Woodcock did not seem to have agreed on any statement with Deng. On the contrary Deng had insisted that it would be best to be as evasive as possible on this issue, and Woodcock, on his part, had promised that this would happen.

The draft of the declaration that was to be released to the press, read by Brzezinski to Chai, was anything but “evasive”; it seems to have been purposely written to point out the strength of the American commitment to Taiwan’s security even after the MDT had expired (“the United States has made it clear that it will continue to trade with Taiwan, including the restrained sale of selective defensive arms, after the expiration of the defence treaty”).

So here is the question: if the declaration had not been submitted to Deng, how was it possible to know that the Chinese would not support the American position on this issue, but that nonetheless they would agree to go ahead with normalization? Perhaps because the declaration was prepared immediately after the meeting with Deng and presented to Chai as a clever bluff, as something that had already been agreed on by both parties?

Some doubts can legitimately be cast in this case. As we have seen, Brzezinski believed that the Chinese would “object to” the American position on arms, but at the same he thought that this would not stop them from allowing negotiations to go ahead. So why not show Deng the draft on answers that would be released to the press? Maybe because it was not ready or maybe because Deng would not have accepted it since it was all but “evasive.” As Woodcock had said, with Deng it was necessary to proceed with caution in bringing up the issue and obviously it would have been unthinkable for Brzezinski to use the threats that were, however, used on the morning of December 15 with Chai Zemin when he said, “But if we were to agree to a blockade of Taiwan the normalization would collapse here.”⁸³

82. Memcons, Brzezinski-Chai Zemin, December 15th, 1978, Box 41, China Vertical File, JCL.

83. *Ibid.*

Chai did not have the power to question Deng's actions and, not knowing what had taken place in the discussion the night before, he had no way of answering.

Thanks to the blitz of Washington and of Beijing, Brzezinski could include in the record of proceedings his official statement on the issue of arms sales to Taiwan—the thorniest issue in the negotiations with Beijing. Despite remaining unresolved from a diplomatic point of view, an appropriate political stance had been achieved for the White House thanks to the skills of Carter's NSC. The statement later issued by Carter's administration gave the impression that the United States had been explicit and clear on the arms issue with Beijing during negotiations with the ad hoc expression “within the agreement to normalize.”

This statement alluded to the fact that the United States had clarified this point within the agreement on normalization, thus satisfying both Congress and the press. But even if it was partly true that there had been some clarification, this only occurred at the last minute and not “within the agreement to normalize,” but only at its margin. The fact is that if for Brzezinski the arms issue and that of Taiwan in general was of secondary importance in respect to the strategic role of Beijing, he knew that this was not the case for many in Congress. If then for Brzezinski this point could have been left out of the agreement for normalization, given the strategic meaning it possessed, he knew that for many on Capitol Hill this was not how things were done. For Congress the arms issue remained a fundamental element in the agreement for normalization with Beijing in that it was a guarantee of respect of American commitment to the defense of freedom in the face of communism. It was therefore understood by Congress to be an integral part of normalization with Beijing.

It appeared therefore that Brzezinski had perfectly read Deng's intentions. He realized that their strategic lines would meet and that normalization would be one of the main points at the crossroads. In managing the negotiations, therefore, Brzezinski understood the basics of what normalization meant to Beijing and that the Chinese were inclined to put aside the arms issue in order to reestablish relations with Washington. However, although this issue could be temporarily put to one side for Beijing, the same could not be said of Washington, or rather of Capitol Hill. For this reason, it was necessary to demonstrate that it was still “within the agreement to normalize.”

A CONTROVERSIAL SUCCESS: THE TAIWAN RELATIONS ACT

In the timing of the blitz orchestrated by Brzezinski nothing was left to chance. It was a moment of extreme importance for Deng and for the history of the PRC. While Deng and Woodcock were ratifying the history of Sino-American relations in the Great Hall of the people in Tiananmen Square, a few meters away the Third Plenum of the Eleventh CC of the CCP was being held, which was to confirm Deng's victory in the party. On December 13, a short time

before his meeting with Woodcock, Deng made a speech that would give the go-ahead to one of the most important changes in the history of the PRC, the party's move from the "class struggle" to "socialist modernization."⁸⁴

In underlining the importance of the existing connection between Dengist reform, normalization, and the crisis in Indochina, according to some analysts, during the course of work of the CC, relations with Washington and the Vietnamese problem were discussed. Some historians believe that it really was at this time that Deng decided to send a "punitive expedition" against Hanoi.⁸⁵ It was in fact in those days that Vietnam began operations against Cambodia, actions that on December 25 joined together to create invasion on a vast scale.

Other authors, like Gerald Segal, claim that the CCP leaders had decided to postpone action against Vietnam, having the opportunity to test the waters on this issue with Washington and Tokyo thanks to Deng Xiaoping's visit, which had been organized for the following week.⁸⁶

Perhaps Brzezinski was alluding to this, when, referring to Deng's visit to the United States, he said to Chai, "We will be able to solve other issues?"⁸⁷ Most probably.

Another hypothesis can also be added. Bearing in mind how much was said about the mutual influence of the domestic and foreign policies of the United States and China, it is possible that the attack was, in any case, scheduled to occur after Deng's visit to the United States; otherwise it would have been much more difficult for the White House "to sell" normalization to Congress.

According to what Vance wrote to the president, in fact, Deng's trip to the United States was to have precisely this aim:

[he will] help us to sell normalization to the Congress and the American people. . . . The Vice Premier and his colleagues have clearly made a decision to help us with our domestic problems concerning normalization and this will strongly influence his conduct here. . . . it should be of immense help to us in the legislative battles ahead. He will also make China trade look very attractive to American business. Most important of all, his style will effectively dramatize to Americans our changed relationship and the non-belligerent PRC posture toward Taiwan.⁸⁸

84. Zhonggong, Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, ed., *Deng Xiaoping sixiang nianpu (1975–1979)*, 99–102. See also "Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," *Beijing Review*, December 29, 1978.

85. King C. Chen, *China's War with Vietnam, 1979: Issues, Decisions and Implications* (Stanford, CA, 1987), 87.

86. Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (New York, 1985), 213–17.

87. Memcons, Brzezinski and Chai, December 15, 1978, Box 41, China Vertical File, JCL. Perhaps logistic issues also caused operations to be postponed. See Zhang Zhen, *Zhang Zhen Huiyilu* (Beijing, 2003), 170–71; see also Harlan W. Jencks, "China's Punitive War on Vietnam: A Military Assessment," *Asian Survey* 19, no. 8 (August 1979): 804–805.

88. Memorandum, Vance to Carter, January 26, 1979, "Scope Paper for the Visit of Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping of the People's Republic of China, January 28–February 1, 1979," Box 3, Brzezinski Material: VIP Visit File, JCL.

At the time of the blitz orchestrated by Brzezinski, Deng was in an extremely delicate position. Although he had greatly increased his power within the CCP, as underlined by Vance, Deng still did not have absolute power, and he still had to be on the lookout for the potential criticisms from the Politburo.⁸⁹ The problem of Vietnam represented a further challenge to his leadership. According to what was said by the Vietnamese leader Le Duan, at the fall of Saigon, Deng had been accused at least twice of “revisionism” by his adversaries, for being too much in favor of talks with Hanoi; now he had a chance to demonstrate how things had changed by assuming a more aggressive stance towards Hanoi.⁹⁰

In light of what Le Duan says, interpretation can be carried still further. In order to carry out his own plans for modernization at a tricky moment in politics like that of 1978, Deng had to create the largest support base possible within the CCP, and the Vietnamese issue was essential to achieving this. Although Deng had succeeded in outnumbering his adversaries from the radical left—who wanted to be directly involved in fighting in Cambodia alongside Pol Pot (something that would have been disastrous both in economic terms and to the country’s political image)—he could not afford to be seen once again as showing weakness towards Hanoi. By taking revenge for Vietnam’s betrayal, guilty of being linked to Moscow, Deng demonstrated to the party that he had not lost his warlike spirit. However, to reduce risks to a minimum and avoid repercussions regarding the modernization of the country, Deng needed support from Washington.

Despite formal opposition, the White House gave Deng the support he was looking for.⁹¹ Brzezinski “perceived potential benefit” from a Chinese attack on Hanoi, he was aware of the importance of a Sino-American entente, and he knew that it would reinforce strategic relations between the two countries and the position of the United States in Asia.⁹²

89. Ibid.

90. Speech by Comrade B (Le Duan) regarding the plot of reactionary Chinese clique against Vietnam, People’s Army Library, Hanoi, 1979, translated by Christopher Goshka in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 12/13.

91. Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s History of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (New York, 1996), 121. “Encouragement” was the term used by James Lilley, CIA official and expert on China, to describe the support given by the administration for which he was working for Chinese invasion of Vietnam. See Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, ed., *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945–1996* (New York, 2001), 346.

92. Interview with Z. Brzezinski, Washington DC, July 14, 2006; Z. Brzezinski, “East Asia and Global Security: Implications for Japan,” *Journal of International Affairs* 37, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 8. In his memoirs, Brzezinski wrote: “Throughout the crisis [in Vietnam] I felt that the Chinese action in some respects might prove beneficial to us.” Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 414. It would seem that Carter also sympathized with Chinese motives: “Carter said he feels more sympathy for the Chinese in this conflict,” in Memcons, NSC Meeting, February 16, 1979, “Sino-Vietnamese Conflict; Iran,” Box 46, Oksenberg Subject File Meetings, SMFE, JCL. “He [Carter] believes the Soviet-backed Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia gave the Chinese little choice but to invade Vietnam,” in Memorandum, Oksenberg and William Odom to Brzezinski, February 19, 1979, “Objectives for Today’s Meeting on the Sino-Vietnamese

Nonetheless Washington could obtain other benefits by taking advantage of Deng's need to achieve normalization as quickly as possible and to have American support against Hanoi. "Is that the place to kick the PRC in the shins?" said Oksenberg after the beginning of Chinese operations in Vietnam.

The executive committee was in fact obliged to present Congress with a draft of the law that aimed at maintaining the informal relations between Washington and Taipei by March—before the official opening of the embassy in Beijing. In Oksenberg's opinion, it was possible to take advantage of China's difficulties in Vietnam so as to favor the passing of a resolution in Congress that would guarantee more substantial American commitment regarding Taiwan than had been provided previously. Carter had, in any case, warned Deng during his visit to Washington that Chinese intervention in Vietnam would raise the price of the sale of normalization to Congress.⁹³

Carter, while threatening to veto modifications made by Congress if they clearly violated commitments made with Beijing, wished, however, to behave in a responsible way regarding Taiwan, so as to make a good impression on other allied countries and on public opinion.⁹⁴ To maintain the accords with Beijing, the MDT had to be terminated, but to maintain a good public image and at the same time to protect Taiwan, he had to keep to the substance, or at the very least the form, of the treaty. So that is what happened.

The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) was passed in March 1979, apparently increasing America's commitment to defending the island—for example, widening the range of situations that would incur American intervention—with Congress taking a central role with regards to decisions made in supplying defense arms to Taiwan.

Notwithstanding this, several experts in the field have noted that careful analysis reveals the exact opposite. If in the MDT it was explicit, in fact, it clearly stated that an attack on behalf of either of the two parties would have pushed the other "to act" to face the "common danger," in the TRA it only states the "capacity" to resist action taken against Taiwan and no clearly stated commitment to take action. "In operational terms," wrote Richard Pious, "the United States has no real commitment to the security of Taiwan."⁹⁵

Also, on the issue of the sales of arms, things were presented in a really different way. The TRA reaffirmed in reality the central role of the executive on the subject; the executive should simply "inform" Congress only in the

Conflict," Box 46, Oksenberg Subject File Meetings, SMFE, JCL. However, some doubt can be expressed on the opinions attributed to Carter. Both documents refer to statements made by the president but reported by Oksenberg, whose leanings towards Beijing are well known.

93. Handnote, Carter to Deng, January 30, 1979, Box 9, Geographic File, ZBC, JCL.

94. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 210–11.

95. Richard M. Pious, "The Taiwan Relations Act: The Constitutional and Legal Context," in Louis W. Koenig, James C. Hsiung, and King-yuh Chang, eds., *Congress, the Presidency, and the Taiwan Relations Act* (New York, 1985), 161.

conclusive phase of the process and only if the transfer went beyond a certain value.⁹⁶

But what is more surprising is that this restructuring was completed by Congress itself using a formula that it had itself added to the draft proposed by the executive. The reason for this still has not been clarified. Different authors believe that the administration encouraged its own internal allies within Congress to limit the power of its own institutions, and these obeyed. During a debate on Capitol Hill, representatives from the White House, stirring up the bugbear of a presidential veto, were able to stimulate members of Congress to model the language of the final draft in a suitable way in the interests of the administration. Various analysts, probably influenced by the vehement attack of some senators against the White House and by the seeming disappointment of the Chinese following the passage of the new law, have transformed the form of the TRA into a success for the Congress at the expense of the executive.⁹⁷

Regarding the disappointment of the Chinese, however, there still remains a doubt. The language adopted in the TRA certainly did not please the leadership in Beijing and the Carter administration, fully aware of that, repeatedly tried to reassure them on this point.⁹⁸ Beijing's official opposition to the TRA, however, seemed to be quite foreseeable. It was essentially a diplomatic card that had to be played in order to increase the "American debt" created by the long American interference in Chinese internal affairs, a debt that, according to Deng and his comrades, Washington sooner or later had to pay back.

Even if were true that the TRA represented a small step towards Taiwan, it did not, in substance, violate normalization or compromise its strategic function, the MDT had disappeared, Washington withdrew from the island, and in the meantime became closer to Beijing.⁹⁹ The rhetorical vehemence of Beijing against the TRA was not accompanied by any substantial step in relations between the two countries. The Americans seemed aware of what was hidden behind the words of the Chinese, as said by Woodcock following the emanation of the TRA: "I consider it unlikely that the Chinese would react to the Taiwan Legislation in ways that would fundamentally damage our new relationship."¹⁰⁰

96. Bush, *At Cross Purposes: U.S.-Taiwan Relations since 1942* (Armonk, NY, 2004), 158.

97. See, for example, Mann, *About Face*, 95; Tyler, *A Great Wall*, 274.

98. See the talks between Huang Hua and Woodcock on March 16, Cable, Woodcock to Vance, "PRC Reaction to Taiwan Legislation," March 16, 1979, Box 8-10, ZBCF, RONSA, JCL.

99. Stapleton Roy, in charge of the TRA for the White House, several times brought it to the attention of the Chinese that "in essence it amounted to an expression of this interest but without committing U.S. to any particular action. As a result, it was not inconsistent with the normalization agreement." In Cable, Woodcock to Vance, "PRC Reaction to Taiwan Legislation," March 31, 1979, Box 8-10, ZBCF, RONSA, JCL.

100. Cable, Woodcock to Vance, "PRC Reaction to Taiwan Legislation," March 27, 1979, Box 8-10, ZBCF, RONSA, JCL.

Even if the Taiwan issue did not completely disappear, the year after the TRA emanation discussions between Beijing and Washington would be progressively concentrated on real issues, regarding strategic relevance with Afghanistan and bilateral commercial relations.¹⁰¹

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the diplomatic normalization between the United States and the PRC may certainly be considered one of the most important events in the development of the Cold War in Asia as well as in the world. Its historical meaning transcends the simple diplomatic recognition between two countries: it was a crucial tactical element in a much wider strategic plan outlined by the convergence of Beijing's and Washington's national interests in the second half of the 1970s.

The rationale behind this convergence on the Chinese side has to be identified in the epoch-making change realized in that period by Deng Xiaoping's rise within the CCP and the beginning of his project of "reform and opening." If the events of 1968–1969—namely, the degeneration of the Cultural Revolution and the parallel intensification of the "social-imperialist" threat coming from Moscow—had already led Mao to inaugurate a shift towards the U.S., the urgency of the economic reform inspired by Deng Xiaoping added a domestic element—reform—to the "opening" to Washington.

The relationship with the United States was thereby "internalized" as a crucial factor to relaunch the economy of the country and lead it to regain its central position in Asia. This process had a profound impact on both Chinese society and politics: on the domestic front it promoted the process of economic and political liberalization of the society and favoured the consolidation of a new reformist leadership guided by Deng Xiaoping; on the international front it elevated the cooperation with the United States to a higher level leading it toward a strategic alliance versus Moscow. The alliance with Washington freed the horizon of the Chinese reform from the obsession of the social-imperialist threat and marked the beginning of the "return" of China in Asia under the banners of "peace" and "development".

On the American side the roots for the convergence of interests with Beijing lie mainly in the international strategy of the country during the second half of the 1970s. The defeat in Vietnam coupled with the expansion of Soviet intervention in the Third World pushed the U.S. to close the doors of Asia to Moscow and promote a strategic partnership with the PRC. Thanks to this new entente with Beijing, the U.S. could maintain good relations both with China and Japan, an unprecedented development in Cold War history and an enormous plus in the American global strategy. At the same time the process of

101. A. D. Romberg, *Rein In at the Brink of the Precipice: American Policy toward Taiwan and U.S.-PRC Relations* (Washington, DC, 2003), 110.

“internalization” of the relationship with Washington resulting from Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening” seemed to realize the old American dream of a return of China into the “family of nations”. The progressive opening of China to international trade marked therefore a twofold success for Washington, ideological and economic. The most populous and radical communist country opened its “giant” doors to American investments and, by so doing, unavoidably fostered a progressive “westernization” of its society.

In Washington’s eyes, then, Deng’s “reform and opening” became a crucial element for the success of U.S. strategy. This explains why the Carter administration made him its favourite candidate for the leadership of the CCP during the internal struggle of 1978–1979. At the same time Deng, in order to get U.S. support, needed to help the administration to sell the new cooperation with Beijing to the Congress and the American people. To do so he had to show himself as the symbol of a “new China”, a “post-communist” leader in a cowboy hat, a reformer with promising democratic inclinations, a pragmatist wishing to open millions of Chinese houses to American products and ideas. As a result, and for the first time since the foundation of the PRC, the domestic levels of the two countries became determinant for the evolution of the mutual relationship: hence, China domestic policy became an integral part of Washington’s China policy; and vice versa, U.S. domestic policy became an important part of Deng’s strategy.

In an enlightening essay published recently, Rosemary Foot rightly maintains that in 1978 the fear sparked by the increasingly close relationship between Hanoi and Moscow and Deng’s desire to modernize the country made China more inclined towards finding an agreement with Washington.¹⁰²

According to Foot, the Chinese were much more flexible than the Americans probably believed. So, perhaps, the United States could have gained more in that particular moment by exploiting China’s willingness to compromise.

This is probable. Yet it is also legitimate to claim, as I have tried to do in this article, that given the circumstances the compromise reached was probably the best one possible.

It could be assessed not only on a diplomatic level, but also on a political one—therefore, not only in terms of the relationship between the two countries, but also considering their mutual interdependence with sensitive domestic policy logics.

A cardinal prerequisite for this assessment is the watershed in relationships between China and the United States during 1978—a watershed that would lead China’s domestic policy into the field of the administration’s China policy and the American domestic policy into Deng’s strategy.

Bearing this in mind, we can imagine that the two parties were determined to reach a sufficiently balanced compromise that would allow them both to reap greater political advantage also at a domestic level. And so it was.

102. Foot, “Prizes Won, Opportunity Lost,” 115.

If the two parties shared a strategic project, and if the Taiwan question could be settled more easily thanks to this convergence, they had every reason to find a mutually beneficial agreement: Deng, thanks to normalization and the “external” support of Washington in Indochina, reinforced his position within the party and laid the foundations for the success of his reform project; Carter, and Brzezinski, achieved normalization with Beijing at conditions that were considered “unimaginable” previously—that is, the continuation of arms sales to Taiwan and the TRA—and strengthened the strategic partnership with Beijing, thus establishing an advantage over Moscow that was unprecedented in the history of the Cold War.

From this it is clear that the real success was in fact normalization—that is, the fact that the two parties managed to achieve it bearing well in mind its strategic importance. If “strategic” was the basis of the agreement between Washington and Beijing—an agreement that, according to Brzezinski, could even be isolated from the completion of diplomatic normalization—also normalization, considering its importance for Deng’s leadership within the party, became strategic; that is, it became functional to strengthening the agreement.

Some claim that the unresolved question of arms represented a failure for the Americans because it left leeway for a subsequent claim by China on this point as indeed happened in 1981.¹⁰³ However, it appears that the “unresolved” question of arms did not exist. Brzezinski’s skill consisted in obtaining normalization while continuing to sell arms to Taiwan by means of a last-minute blitz founded on Deng’s desperate need to achieve normalization. If the Chinese had raised the question later, it would have been because the conditions were different in 1981.

While Brzezinski won an important point to parade before Capitol Hill and the American people, that is, of having normalized relationships with Beijing while continuing to sell arms to Taipei “within the agreement to normalize,” for Deng it was merely a tactical concession granted on the fringe of the negotiations, a deferral that would give China the possibility of achieving normalization and of taking up the question of arms sales to Taiwan again in better times—an essential deferral for normalization. It did not represent a flaw, but rather a strength, not surrender, but a wise compromise, not “unresolved,” but an integral and essential part of the solution itself.

It can therefore be said that normalization represented a huge success for the Carter administration. It was not easy to assess it then or for some time afterwards because of the complexity and secrecy of the negotiations.

The TRA should also be included in this balance as it is in perfect harmony with this success.

Normalization with Beijing and the inauguration of the strategic agreement in Vietnam were achieved while Washington reasserted its interest in the secu-

103. Bush, *At Cross Purposes*, 150.

rity of Taiwan, “extorted” in Beijing by the “rebels” of Capitol Hill, but fundamentally compatible with the rules of normalization thanks to the shrewd legal foresight of the TRA and military disengagement from the island. In this way the administration, despite the claims raised by Congress, managed to maintain its prerogatives in terms of arms sales to Taiwan and the promotion of the China policy while preserving its image as a reliable ally.

The Carter administration thus had the courage to face the political risks entailed in choosing normalization with Beijing: in less than one year, it was able to assume the responsibilities that such a goal entailed and to incorporate them in a complex but effective strategy that minimized potential impacts and achieved what was to be one of the greatest successes of the twentieth century.