

Research Paper:

Background information and analysis of Ping Pong Diplomacy

Historic background

After the 1949 Chinese revolution, there had been no diplomatic ties between the United States and the People's Republic of China, with only limited trade, and few contacts. In April 1971, nine players from the US Table Tennis team took a historic trip to China, becoming the first delegation of Americans to visit the country in decades. (National Museum of American Diplomacy, 2021) This visit was the start of what became known as “ping pong diplomacy”, which helped lay the groundwork for establishing official diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Ping pong diplomacy also led to improved people-to-people understanding and cultural exchange.

At the 31st World Table Tennis Championship in Nagoya, Japan, an encounter between American Glenn Cowan and Zhuang Zedong of the Chinese team became an international sensation. Mr Cowan had missed his bus following practice and boarded the Chinese team's bus. On the bus, Mr Zhuang offered him a depiction of the Huangshan Mountains on a piece of silk cloth and Mr Cowan, a self-described hippie, returned the gesture the following day by giving Mr Zhuang a T-shirt emblazoned with a peace symbol and the Beatles' lyric “Let It Be.” The interactions between the players were caught by journalists and *Time* magazine called it “The ping heard around the world”. Two days later, the US team received an official invitation to travel to China and play exhibition matches against the Chinese team. The United States accepted the invitation and everyone rushed to make arrangements. (PBS, n.d.; National Museum of American Diplomacy, 2021; Andrews, 2018)

Since there were no diplomatic ties between the two countries, and traveling to communist countries was penalized, the US Department of State consular officials in Japan made a simple but profound change to the Americans' passports. On the page warning travelers of legal penalties “for travel to or in Communist-controlled portions” of the listed countries, the officials simply took a black marker and carefully crossed-out “China.” (National Museum of American Diplomacy, 2021) On April 10, 1971, the fifteen Americans crossed the bridge from Hong Kong to mainland China - the US Table Tennis team, two of their spouses, and four state officials (PBS, n.d.) Additionally, ten journalists (including five Americans, bringing it to 20 total) were invited to cover the visit, which essentially ended the information blockade that had been in China from 1949 (PBS, n.d.)

Once in China, the team traveled by plane and train to Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin and played “friendship matches” with the Chinese, with the slogan “Friendship First and

Competition Second”. Although the Chinese team was known by table tennis players as among the best in the world, the US team noticed that the Chinese players seemed to “take it easy” on them at times out of courtesy towards their guests. (National Museum of American Diplomacy, 2021; Andrews, 2018) When the American team left on April 17, they were met with a sea of news reporters and photographers. During their trip, on April 14, when the team met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, US President Richard Nixon had announced that the United States was easing its travel bans and trade embargos against China. (Andrews, 2018) The ripple effects of ping pong diplomacy continued throughout the year as US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger made a secret trip to Beijing already in July 1971. The Chinese team also visited the United States in an eight-city tour and in 1972, President Nixon was the first American president to visit mainland China. President Nixon has said that the Chinese leaders he met during the trip seemed to take “particular delight in reminding me that an exchange of ping-pong teams had initiated a breakthrough in our relations. They seemed to enjoy the method used to achieve the result almost as much as the result itself.” (Andrews, 2018).

Theory and analysis

It is appropriate to view the events of Ping Pong Diplomacy through the theoretical framework of constructivism, which turned attention away from constants like the state of anarchy and perpetual peace to changeable elements like power, identities, and interests (Ismayilzada & Önsoy, 2022). It is important to note that social interactions are a major factor in the interpretation of state actions (Uemura, 2015). Therefore, Ping Pong Diplomacy should be viewed through interactions between the United States and China, and how those interactions changed the views of each country.

A (cultural) constructivist approach to US-China relations shows that while the US viewed the relations through an ideological perspective, the People’s Republic of China perceived US policy within the context of their bilateral interactions. Based on their interactions in the 1950s, China consolidated a view of the United States as the enemy, which in turn led to the failure on the US side to establish communications with China in the 1960s. (Uemura, 2015) According to Zhenhong (2015), the deterioration or even conflict in relations was often caused by strategic misjudgement made by the US towards China.

Furthermore, the US failed to respect China’s core interests and major concerns, and Chinese leaders were particularly angry about Washington’s stance towards Taiwan (Zhenhong, 2015; Uemura, 2015). However, it was in the interests of both countries to develop friendlier relations and cooperation. The interactions between US table tennis player Glonn Cowan and

Zhuang Zedong of the Chinese team sparked the breakthrough in US-China relations that led to the historic visit by US President Richard Nixon to the People's Republic of China in 1972 (National Museum of American Diplomacy, 2021; Wasserstrom, 2000).

Since President Nixon's China policy was a drastic change from his predecessors by being mindful of China's fundamental concerns, Chinese views of the United States also changed. For example, in 1969, President Nixon publicly announced that Sino-American relations should not be jeopardized over their disagreement over Taiwan. (Uemura, 2015) That is just one example of attempts for the normalization of relations and shows that Ping Pong Diplomacy was just one part of a larger puzzle. The historical context and events leading up to the visit of PRC by the US table tennis team are important to note, because one could not have been possible without the other.

The visit could not have been possible without previous interactions between the US and China that somewhat changed how China viewed the United States - no longer an enemy. However, the invitation and subsequent visit laid the groundwork for the further normalization of relations (Wasserstrom, 2000). As players for the American team have said - major tournaments are conduits for international relations and positive interactions between participating countries (Miller, 2011). However, despite the upward trajectory of US-China relations (Zhenhong, 2015), both countries still have grievances towards the other.

For the United States, the view has remained that China has no respect for human rights and democracy. On the other hand, Chinese officials have claimed that foreigners should not judge China by their own standards, and should respect their country's distinctive traditions and values. (Wasserstrom, 2000; Uemura, 2015). In this regard, the fundamental issue of how each country perceives the other has not been overcome. Despite positive interactions and cooperation since the 1970s, friction between the two countries continues.

Whether it is economic, like the trade wars initiated by US President Donald Trump, or political, like the recent visit to Taiwan by US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, the perceptions and interactions have simultaneously changed and stayed the same. In the United States, the perception of China depends on regime type and ideology, while for China, the perception of the US is largely a function of what the United States does to China. In short, the different cultures and perspectives have led the countries to interpret the same behaviors differently. (Uemura, 2015)

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