

Mao-Nixon Meeting 1972: National Interest at the Core

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ABSTRACT

Meeting between Chinese leader Mao Zedong and US President Richard Nixon on February 21, 1972 was an imperative turning point in the contemporary world history. It played a decisive role to end the cold war and begin a new phase of world politics. 'The New Normal' developed after the historic meeting has been influencing contemporary world politics in many ways. Thus, even after more than half a century, significance and consequences of the meeting is widely discussed and highlighted often. This paper basically studies on the significance and consequences of the meeting from classical realist perspective. Both the US and China represent different political systems and had a long past of mutual negation and refutation. They even fought the Korean War. Against this backdrop, what made the two world leaders with totally different political ideologies and philosophies come together? How the realist school of thought and the national interests was prevalent behind this landmark meeting? With assistance of historical texts, reminisces, relevant books, academic papers, analysis and newspaper commentaries, this paper studies the role the classical realist school played to push both states to come together and normalize bilateral relation. It is a qualitative analytical study based on published secondary data and analysis. This study contributes to understand the background of evolution of the present world order and helps to analysis the current world politics.

Keywords: Mao-Nixon Meeting, Sino-US relation, classical realism, national interest.

1. Introduction

February 21, 1972. When US President Richard Nixon (1913-1994) landed at Beijing and his 'hand crossed the vastest ocean' (Renoaurd, 2012) shaking hand with Chinese leaders, the world history was about to take a new twist, which was hardly predictable a year before. Nixon's meeting with Chinese Leader Mao Zedong (1893-1976) not only changed the Sino-US relation in entirety rather redrew the trends of the world politics in manifold ways.

Nixon spent a week in China and he concluded his visit as 'the week that changed the world' (Foundation, 2013). Indeed, the turnabouts hence after invited colossal changes in the world, breaking many so-called convictions and principles. Therefore, the date February 21, 1972 has been marked on the annals of the world history as 'a diplomatic breakthrough' (*Global Times*, 2022).

Nevertheless, that was neither the starting nor the end.

After the success of the New Democratic Revolution (1919-1949) on October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong declared the foundation of the Peoples' Republic of China (China's History, 2025). Since Chinese Revolution started 'with the salvoes of Russia's October Revolution', (Jinping, 2022, p. 4) the newly declared Peoples' Republic sided the Soviet Union, then a home of October revolution and the first workers' state (USA, 1974/2014, p. 168).

Kuomintang government at the verge of defeat in the Civil War moved to Guangzhou from then capital Nanjing and asked the foreign diplomatic missions to follow along. US chose to side the Kuomintang and opposed the Communist Party-led new government. From then onward, relation between the PRC and the US severed for more than two decades. During these two decades, they essentially had relation of enmity. US was regarded as the leader of 'the Imperialism' (*U.S. IMPERIALISM IS a PAPER TIGER*, n.d.) by the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) and Imperialism was one among 'the three mountains' (Jinping, 2022, p. 5) that CPC defined as the major hurdles for Chinese National Rejuvenation, other two being Feudalism and Bureaucrat-capitalism.

It was time when the Cold War was ascending the peak. Soon after the new regime in China led by the Communist Party was siding the Soviet Union, US tried to bring it in own favor. Particularly, then US ambassador to China Leighton Stuart stayed at Nanjing, not following the Kuomintang government's directive to move to Guangzhou, intending to establish communication and relation with the new regime (Jin, 2018 pg.85). He even proposed to acknowledge the CPC government and provide aid to the new government. Stuart wanted to visit Beijing and meet Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Mao himself was positive for that meeting. But on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Washington was cooking something else. It moved from mere non-recognition to the containment of the new Chinese regime, deepening the mutual

enmity.

But right after more than two decades, leaders of both countries met and build renewed relation that laid foundation for change in balance of global power. No matter how the meeting between two supreme leaders of two countries resulted in global arena, the core of the meeting was essentially guided by the national interests theoretically based on the classical realism. Main objective of this paper is to find out how classical realist theory worked for that ground-breaking historical meeting.

2. Methodology

In this paper, the meeting between Chinese leader Mao and US President Nixon in 1972 after long inimical isolation has been analyzed from Classical Realist perspective. Classical Realism is one of the major theories in political science and international relation that according to the canonical classical realist Machiavelli, has 'set aside fantasies... and consider what happens in fact' (Leiter 2001). Classical Realism has rescued political theories from virtues and made it stand on the ground of reality.

History of classical realism traces back to the ancient Greek period, when Greek historian Thucydides had discussed about the practice of classical realism in his account of the Peloponnesian War, where he 'recognized the central role of power in politics of all kinds, but also the limitations of power and the ways in which attempts to use it can readily be made self-defeating' (Dunne et al., 2021 pg.33)

Referring to the conflicts between the ancient Greek city-states, Thucydides concluded that 'the great powers are often their own worst enemies because the success and hubris the great powers build make them think themselves as the above the community and encourage them to go far from the self-restraints.'

Classical Realists believe the incorrigible nature of states as extension of human nature and thus for all states, self-interests are of the prime importance. Machiavelli opines that the main responsibility of rulers is always to seek the advantages and to defend the interests of their state and thus ensure its survival (Jackson & Sørensen, 2016 pg. 65). For classical realists international community is chaotic where 'strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept' (Thucydides et al., 1974 pg. 406). Therefore, if a state is not strong it will be a standing invitation for other to prey upon it and for strong state, all states put their self-interests (which commonly known as national interest) in first priority. Another Realist theoretician Mearsheimer states that given those states operate in international anarchy, each nation wants its own state to be especially powerful, so as to guarantee the nation's long-term survival (Mearsheimer, 2018 pg. 153). Classical Realists put emphasis on the security of national interests as the major task for survival of whole state. Thus, according to this school of thought, every move of the state should be guided for the achievement of national interests.

Another iconic classical realist Italian thinker Nicolo Machiavelli had insisted on the national independence as the supreme political value and he highlighted on the importance of strengthening the state power. Fundamental features of the contemporary realism such as effective central authority, national security and state survival particularly are the contributions of Machiavelli. He stated that every ruler of the state must be guided by the national interests. He is credited for making the international relations stands on feet that previously was made stand on the head. In other words, he made international relations and politics much realist and objective, denuding the idealist and subjective covers.

Later in the twentieth century, German-born US scholar Hans J. Morgenthau described the world order as the anarchist phenomenon where every state is sovereign and free to make decision according to its national interest. Echoing Machiavelli, he highlighted on the central role of state and hence said, 'Security beyond the state and between states is impossible'(Jackson & Sørensen, 2016 pg. 69).

Classical Realists believe that international world is the brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other. And for that, states have to rely on military power and alliances in international world. It is not necessary that those factors safeguard any state in the anarchist world of international relations. But what classical realists argue is that military power and alliances can either help in peace building or can result the harsh war. But presence of these factors in international relations can control the severity from all sides.

This paper argues that ice-breaking meeting between Mao and Nixon was essentially based on the realist theoretical ground where both countries -China and the US and other concern states had interpreted, forwarded and acted according to their own national interests. Besides political principles and convictions of China and the US, major argument of the article is, it was their national interests and willing for favorable balance of power based on those national interests that made 'the hand crossed the vast ocean' leading to re-establishment of bilateral relation resulting major changes on the world politics. The meeting between two leaders, background and consequences of the meeting have been analyzed through the classical realist theoretical framework to answer how the classical realist theory played role for creating the condition of the meeting and how essentially it worked henceforth?

This paper on one hand navigates the factors of national interest of China and the US that led them to join hand of diplomatic relation and on the other hand explores the safeguarding of national interests of all states who were in one way or other affected by the new form of Sino-US relation.

Sino-Soviet Animosity

After the foundation of the PRC, Sino-Soviet relation, though moved smoothly and cordially at the initial years soon started encountering the problems and conflicts.

Soviet Union, already a powerful country was technically advanced, economically sound and militarily strong than other third world countries. It had an experience of fighting the Second World War and building Socialism as an alternative social system other than the Western-style governance. Underdeveloped and undeveloped countries throughout the world were attracted towards Soviet model of development and governance because they didn't want to follow the western-style governance rooted on colonialism, of whom they were the victims themselves. Additionally, the Soviet Union supported the former colonies to win independence from colonial powers and assisted for economic and infrastructural development and cultural advancement. Socialist characteristics of Soviet system had equally contributed to enhanced its influence throughout the developing countries (Primakov, Evgeni M, 1980).

Against the backdrop of the Cold War, the PRC led by CPC officially sided towards the Soviet Union and had numbers of mutual visits and development treaties. High-ranking leaders from both countries frequently visited each other countries. From 1950 to 1955, the Soviet Union provided loans totaling 5.3 million RMB to China. Soviet experts contributed for designing Chinese economic plannings. Numbers of Soviet experts and technicians were assigned to work in China. For the Chinese revolutionaries the Soviet Union was an ideal country, 'the country of Lenin and Stalin.'

Nevertheless, CPC from the revolutionary period has always disagreed to follow any country and political system blindfolded. Marxism with Chinese characteristics was in debate within CPC since the Yanan Period (1940s) (The Yan'an Period, n.d.). Therefore, CPC leaders though insisted to learn from the Soviet Union, were not ready to follow it blindly. In his speech delivered to mark the Centenary of the CPC, CPC leader Xi Jinping states, 'We will not accept condescending sermons from those who feel they have the right to lecture us' (Jinping, 2022 pg.12).

On the other side, the Soviet leaders, on the name of proletariat internationalism started imposing their will upon the other Socialist countries including China. Particularly after the demise of JV Stalin, the revisionist Soviet leadership adopted political line that is essentially against the genuine spirit of proletariat internationalism (The Origin and Development of Revisionism, n.d.). Albanian leader Enver Hoxha and Chinese leader Mao Zedong were at the forefront of the struggle against the new Soviet hegemonism.

Soviet leaders wanted the other socialist countries to be dependent upon them and demanded other countries to be the constellations of the Soviet Union. Chinese communists disagreed this proposal and termed it as 'the Social-Imperialism' (USA, 1974/2014, p. 168). Albanian Communists termed this as 'the Khrushchevites Revisionism' (Hoxha, 1980). This ideological debate is renowned as the Great Polemics in the history of the world communist movement. Therefore, cordial Sino-Soviet relation did not stand long. Mao himself said discord began to rise in the late 1950s.

Intense inter-struggle between Soviet leadership and Chinese leadership within the International Communist Conferences and on the newspaper-articles was turned into military conflicts broke out on Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri river and in Tielieketi in Xinjiang in 1969.

Before that, Soviet support to Indian side during Sino-India border conflict in August 1959 also made the Chinese leadership displeased and suspicious towards the Soviet leadership. Unilateral decision of the Soviet Union to withdraw all of the technicians and experts working in China for infrastructure development led Chinese leadership to rethink their policy of siding the Soviet Union.

In 1959 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev visited to China on the 10th Founding Day of the PRC. During his visit he proposed- 'With a view to improving relations between the Soviet Union and the US, China to make a concession to the US, proposing in a bilateral talk that China shall commit itself to ruling out the use of force in the reunification with Taiwan' (Jin, 2018 pg. 266). Chinese leaders regarded this proposal as an extremity of interference in their internal affairs.

On one side, animosity in Soviet-US relation was peaking up and on the other side Sino-Soviet relation was also losing its ideological tempo. China herself was engaged in the Cultural Revolution during this period. In such condition, Mao Zedong asked four of his marshals Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian and Nie Rongzhen to study the contemporary international situation and submit report. Well-experienced marshals in their report concluded as follows:

the international confrontation was mainly a struggle between China, the Soviet Union and the United States. The US and the Soviet Union regarded China as an enemy while the two were not friends either. Among the three relations, Sino-Soviet relations were worse than Sino-US relations, and the US- Soviet relations were worse than Sino-Soviet relations. The Soviet Union hoped to take advantage of the tensions between China and the US, and the US wanted to make use of the tensions between China and the Soviet Union. Whether the Soviet Union would wage a war against China or not mostly depended on the US, and a thaw between China and the US therefore could minimize the possibility of a Soviet military attack on China. In dealing with the Soviet Union and the US, it was necessary for China to hold onto unshakable principles as well as adopt flexible tactics. (Jin, 2018 pg.276)

But situation then was not mature yet to make a larger stride. So, the world had to wait up to 1971-72.

Need to meet

President Nixon's visit to PRC was indeed a result of chain of open and clandestine personal and institutional initiatives. For a staunch anti-communist like Nixon, shaking hand with the communist China was not a willing option, rather was conditional necessity.

No matter how hard-core anti-communist Nixon be during his tenure as the Vice-President, sensing the major changes in the global politics, in 1967 October, he wrote an article on the Foreign Affairs Journal that 'leaving China forever out of family of nations cannot be afforded.' 'There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most abled people to leave in angry isolation' (Nixon, 1967 pg. 121). Nixon won the presidential election in 1968 majorly for his self-claimed 'secret plan' to end the Vietnam War. Hence, ever since he won the election, his preference had been the end of the Vietnam war. With the clear motive to escape the war, he nominated Henry Kissinger (1923-2023) as the National Security Advisor. Kissinger, originally an academician had also been advocating to normalize relation with China to end the Vietnam war. During an election campaign of 1968, he used to draft a speech for Nelson Rockefeller, an unsuccessful nomination seeker for the presidential candidacy, advocating the importance of a dialogue with China. Both Nixon and Kissinger were agreed upon the necessity of formalizing dialogue with China to end the Vietnam trap.

US administrators were well-aware of the rising conflicts between Sino-Soviet relations. They calculated that this situation could be an opportunity to divide the communist camp where Soviet Union and China were two major pillars. If they succeeded in deepening division among these two communist states, it would be a major step to end the Cold War and weakened the rivalry camp particularly one led by the Soviet Union.

Additionally, US wanted to safe-land the Vietnam War which had been peril for US economy and global soft power. There were unprecedented mass protests in the US against the Vietnam War and actually the US elites concluded that the war had been fruitless and unproductive. As in the Korean War (1950-53), US wanted China to play decisive role to end the Vietnam War. In this regards Professor of Oxford University Rana Mitter has argued that during the end of 1960s, both the US and China were under severe domestic and international pressure. 'For the US, an oil crisis and high inflation were on the way, and the Vietnam War showed no signs of ending. For China, the Cultural Revolution had plunged the country into chaos, and it had alienated all its overseas partners including the USSR, leaving only Albania as an ally. Each side could see that the talks might provide a genuine opportunity for their counterparts' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg. 48).

The Soviet Union had taken the upper hand in the US-Soviet struggle since the US was bogged down fighting wars in Indochina, including Vietnam War. Therefore, the US hoped to work with China against the Soviet Union to alleviate its strategic pressure as well as get out of the Vietnam War mess with the help of China (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.277).

Initiative

In December 1969, American diplomats to Poland approached Chinese diplomats to show green signal for bilateral talk. At the same time, President Nixon had requested

the Pakistani President Yahya Khan to convey message to China for bilateral talks. In 1970, US Journalist Edgar Snow, an author of 'the Red Star Over China' a book based on Mao's life was invited to participate the Chinese National Day Parade in Beijing and the news of that event was highlighted on Chinese state media. Analysts interpreted this event as a positive gesture for possible dialogue with Washington. But disrupting events such as the US incursion in Cambodia were obstructing the progress in bilateral talks, therefore all had to wait for an appropriate day for recognizable achievement. And that day came on March 1971.

US table tennis players' team who was in Japan to participate the World Table Tennis Championship expressed desire to visit China with their Chinese counterparts. Though Chinese side was cautious for this proposal but lately they agreed to welcome US athletes in China. Their visit in China subsequently became the breakthrough for the long-awaited beginning of bilateral relation between the US and China. This peculiar diplomatic event is well-known as 'Ping Pong Diplomacy' (China-U.S. 40 Years On, 2019). President Nixon in his memoirs has written about that historical event- 'I was as surprised as I was pleased by this news. I had never expected that the China initiative would come to fruition in the form of a Ping-Pong team. We immediately approved the acceptance of the invitation'(Jin, 2018 pg.278).

Four months later another icebreaking event happened which accelerated the formal talks between two countries. US National Security Advisor Kissinger flew to Beijing from Pakistan on Pakistani Aircraft and met Chinese leaders including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. Kissinger's visit paved the way for President Nixon's visit in China which subsequently reshaped the International World Order and changed the course of world history. In an interview with the Times Magazine, Nixon said, 'If there is anything I want to do before I die, it is to go to China. If I don't, I want my children to' (Cai Hong, 2019).

On February 21, 1972 Nixon visited China and that ended the long isolation of PRC from world forums. US, not only acknowledged the new regime in China rather it regarded the PRC as an important component of the world politics. During Nixon's China visit a bilateral communique was signed which is renowned as the Shanghai Communique. On that historical document US recognized establishment of PRC and Taiwan as a part of China. It is stated- 'The US acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China' (Office of the Historian, 1972). US also agreed to withdraw all US forces and military installations from Taiwan. This was a major achievement for Chinese leadership to break long-time isolation from global mainstream. (Nixon's China's Visit, 2025).

Nevertheless, according to US diplomat Teresita C. Schaffer the opening of relation (with China) and the Shanghai Communique were high strategy of the US

(Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.8). After signing the Shanghai Communiqué, US formally severed diplomatic relation with Taiwan. But, instead established private institutions to carry out their 'non-official' relations. US office at Taiwan was known as the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT).

She says, there was a whole vocabulary that was required (or forbidden) for dealing with Taiwan, starting with no references to 'government', or 'official'. US officials visiting Taiwan were not allowed to visit there on any diplomatic and official passports. All these arrangements show that US on the one hand wanted to ease relation with the mainland China but on other hand hoped to use Taiwan as a tool to contain China.

Later, in 1979 China and US established formal diplomatic relation after signing the Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations. Regarding the US arms sales to Taiwan, both countries issued the Joint Communiqué known as the August 17 Communiqué. This document restricted the US to sale any kinds of arms and ammunition to Taiwan. Present day Sino-US relation is basically rooted upon these three historical and landmarking documents.

World Effects

Effects of the changes in Sino-US relation was not only limited within them rather it had multidimensional effects on the world politics and international relation.

Foremost change the world saw was the changes in power dynamics of global power. As China received the US President, bi-polar power dynamics of the Cold War was disrupted, weakening the Soviet Union. Subsequently the Soviet Union was dismantled into multiple pieces. International Socialist Movement encountered major division. Economic condition of the Socialist countries deteriorated and ideologically multiple deviations were observed. All these developments made the Soviet Union lower-handed in the tough competition with the US during the peak days of the Cold War.

Certainly, the internal causes and contradictions were the major causes for the dismantlement of the Soviet Union. But among those various causes, one was definitely the disruption of the Sino-Soviet relation. Soviet Union was ideologically alienated within the world socialist camp and many countries those standing against 'the Soviet hegemonism' (Chairman Mao Zedong's Theory, 2024) started back-firing on the Soviet camp. This condition contributed for the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

End of Bi-polarity

Because of bi-polar politics, many countries particularly the western countries were reluctant to establish diplomatic relation with the PRC unless the US as the leader of the Western camp started diplomatic relation. PRC, the most populous country with tremendous economic potentialities was important country for whole world including the western countries. Hence, they were eager to establish diplomatic ties

with the PRC. But antagonistic relation between US and China was the hurdle on the way. Though some countries such as Japan and UK had some informal and people-to-people relation, most of the western countries did not have diplomatic relation till 1972. Nonetheless, France and Italy had diplomatic relation with the PRC even before Nixon's visit (Xinhua, 2024).

As soon as Nixon visited China, most of major developed western countries approached Beijing formally and established bilateral diplomatic relation. By the end of 1972 most of the major western countries had diplomatic relation with the PRC. On March 1972 diplomatic relation between PRC and UK was established and on October 11, 1972 Germany and China formed diplomatic ties. Six months after Nixon's China visit, Japanese Prime Minister visited China. Particularly for Japan, Nixon's visit and relation between US and China was of prime importance. According to Japanese scholar Professor Tsutomu Kikuchi, the news of President Nixon's visit to China came to the Japanese government just before his press conference, and has been long remembered in Japan as the 'Nixon shock' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.156).

Japan

Japan was a core member of the Western camp and particularly Japan was directly concerned with the East Asian affairs. Therefore, it was obvious that Japan claimed right to be informed about US initiatives to develop diplomatic relation with PRC. But the US leaders did not made any prior consultation with Japan and it indicated that they did not recognize Japan as a player in power politics, even though it had become a global economic power.

Nevertheless, every black cloud has silver linings. The 'new normal' opened Japan to pave the way for the normalization of diplomatic relation with China. Japan, under intense US pressure, had signed a peace treaty with the Chaing Kai-shek government in 1952 which constraint relation with the PRC informal and in private level only. But as soon as normalization of US-China relation enhanced, Sino-Japan relation flourished swiftly. Eventually it became a chance for Japan 'to properly deal with the historical issues caused by Japanese military intrusion and to build stable relations with the big neighbor' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.157).

Kikuchi discussing the position of Japan after Nixon's visit to China writes, 'Reflecting its guilt over its past history, Japan took a low-key stance toward China to avoid any dispute or conflict with it as much as possible, and worked to bring the relation closer under the mantra of 'Japan-China Friendship' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.277). Japan against the backdrop of historical enmity did not want to put own self on the risk of adverse relation with PRC. Later Japan became one of the biggest assistance providers for PRC. On the other hand, PRC became the major market for the Japanese products.

South-East Asia

Fate of the South East Asian countries after Nixon's China visit was similar with Japanese condition. Before Sino-US rapprochement, the South East Asian countries fretted that developing relations with PRC could risk alienating the US because those countries were dependent on the US not only for arms and trade, additionally the US was their 'prime security guarantor.' Soon after the Sino-US relation took paces, so-called 'China Threat' among the South East Asian countries faded out and they rushed to join hands of friendship and bilateral relation with Beijing. South East Asian countries who were considered 'distant countries' for China such as Malaysia, the Philippine and Thailand established diplomatic relation with Beijing in 1974-75.

Previously some states in the region were suspicious about the support of the Communist Party of China (CPC) to the internal communist insurgent groups creating threat to their internal security issues. According to Boon and Jye, normalization between China and the South East Asian countries essentially relieved them of a major internal security threat (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.184).

Among the South East Asian countries, Vietnam was critical towards the Mao-Nixon meeting which pushed Hanoi 'to accept a settlement with the US in 1972.' Enraged Vietnam joined the Soviet camp fully and signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation by 1978. And consequently, China and Vietnam had a short skirmish during 1979.

Normalization of China and US relation changed the geopolitical condition of the South East Asian countries. It opened up the way for the diplomatic relation, that consequently led to the economic ties and mutual development. Position of the Soviet Union gradually weakened regionally and Chinese engagement on the region accelerated. The regional organization of the South East Asian countries ASEAN developed sound relation with China resulting the formation of ASEAN plus China Forum.

After the introduction of Reform and Opening Up policies of China led by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, insistence of economic relation beyond the political and ideological relations helped China to be closer with the region in entirety.

South Asia

Normalization of Sino-US relation had wider effect on the South Asian region. Since there are big countries such as India and Pakistan with humongous population and crucial geopolitical significances, every change in global politics imperatively have concerns and consequences on this region.

Changes in US foreign policy had large impact on South Asian regional politics and power balance. Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi told the New York Time that American's approach towards India changed 'when your policy towards China

changed' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.195).

Since Nixon administration was focused on establishing reproachment with Beijing, during 1971 India-Pakistan War, US sided with Pakistan. Beijing also supported Islamabad against Indian interference in the East Pakistan (later Bangladesh). US did not support India in expense of China because the US leaders had broader prospect of the global politics and the raging Cold War. And they were solely focused on the ending of the Cold war, defeating the Soviet Union.

US siding with Pakistan along with China led Indian government to move on the Soviet side resulting signing of the Indo-Soviet treaty. Then after the whole of the South Asia was divided into the Soviet and Chinese Camp until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992. Indo-US relation remained cold unless the cold war ended.

Discussing then condition, Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishanker writes-

'The larger environment by now was dramatically different, with the Sino-US rapprochement of 1971 upending the strategic landscape. The Indo-Soviet Treaty and the adoption of more pro-Soviet positions on international issues were India's response to this challenge. It was a particularly complex phase as the US-China-Pakistan axis which came into being at this time seriously threatened India's prospect. While there are many long-term consequences from it, the shift in India's posture arose more from other factors. The collapse of the USSR, its close ally, and the not-connected economic crisis in 1991 compelled us to look again at the basics of both domestic and foreign policy.' (S Jaishankar, 2022 pg.76).

On the other side, Pakistan became a trustworthy friend for both China and the US. It played crucial role in establishing communication between China and the US. Clandestine message passing by Pakistan between Washington and Beijing made both countries to come together.

3. Finding

Analyzing the Mao-Nixon meeting, this paper argues the classical realist theoretical formulations as the most pushing factor for the historical meeting. Realists think the national interests as the final arbiters in judging foreign policy. The circumstances that pushed the leaders of both countries to meet and normalize the bilateral relation show that the major objective of leaders from both countries was to defend their respective national interests.

US wanted to take benefit from the division in the Socialist camp that could result its victory in the cold war. As the world then was bi-polar and there was intense enmity between the Soviet Union as the leader of the Socialist camp and the US as the leader of the capitalist camp, normalization of bilateral relation with China, one of the pillars of the Socialist camp can disrupt the power of the Socialist camp and could lead to defeat of the Socialist camp in the cold war which will subsequently benefit the

national interest of the US.

US government during those days was majorly facing two big challenges: a) Deepening economic and cultural crisis, and b) Vietnam war.

By the time when Nixon took his oath of Office, substantial number of American policy-makers were agreed upon not only unwinnable-ness of Vietnam war but its reflection of a congenital moral failure of the American political system. More than Five hundred thousand US military personnels were mobilized half a world far but there was no sign of winning the war. Vietnam war drove US economy into a crisis leading to more public outrage against the American elites. (US Defeat in Vietnam, 2025)

Besides that, elongating Cold War was impacting adversely on US politics and economy. So, for the US elites, end of the Cold War was exigency. Ideological division within the Soviet camp was gradually turning into political and military clashes and conflicts. Conflict between Soviet Union and Albania, Vietnam and China, China and Soviet Union were some of the major conflicts within the Soviet Camp. Military clashes between China and the Soviet Union at the end of 1960s was the apex of the conflict, of which US was fully aware of. This large-scale military conflict within the Socialist camp, particularly between China and the Soviet Union was a positive omen for the US who was seeking a chance to isolate Soviet Union and build 'a new normal.'

Intensification of Sino-Soviet division created an apt environment for the US to take chance to change the power balance and create new power balance in her favor. Hence, crossing the bar of ideology and political system, the US extended the hands of friendship 'crossing the vast ocean.' So, the decision of the US to normalize the bilateral relation with China was largely guided by the intention of fulfilling her national interests.

At the very moment, unprecedented number and size of street protests and resistances were widespread in the US cities which was apparently against the loses US people were facing in the Vietnam war and implicitly caused by the deepening economic crisis (Rust, 2023). That led to the hazard on the cultural influence of the US worldwide. Vietnam war was being a major reason behind the division in the Western camp. Additionally, extending cold war was making US economy much vulnerable. Therefore, US elites wanted to end both the Wars- the Cold War and the Vietnam War. Nixon, as he promised to his voters during election campaign wanted to end the Vietnam war and leave Vietnam to cool down outrage of the US citizens.

As per the realist belief, urge for power and security of state was the main reason behind the political moves of the US to shake hand with Beijing. US wanted to retain her position as the world hegemon and end up other competitors and contenders.

On the other side, PRC's agreement to normalize relation with the US was also

based on her national interest. Because of US-led initiative to isolate the PRC, she was not opportune to participate the international forums rather a dissenting Taiwan was representing as a legitimate China. To end this condition, Beijing had to have comfort relation with the US.

Secondly, China had bitter experience of fighting with the Soviet Union in frontier areas and aware of the heavy military presence on its northern border. By the summer of 1969 Soviet troops along the Chinese border grew to some forty-two divisions-over a million army men.

China, indulged into the internal chaos because of the Cultural Revolution was internally weaker then. After 1949 revolution, China though built up self-confident that it lost for a century after the Opium War of 1840s, nevertheless essentially held the stand of non-aggression and peaceful settlement. Therefore, as a skilled and learned strategist, Chinese leader Mao Zedong chose to extend communication and reconciliation with the US, that according to Kissinger, learned from the Chinese classic 'The Romance of Three Kingdoms', where the minister of Shu dynasty Zhuge Liang propounded the strategy of 'Ally with Wu in the east to oppose Wei in the north.' Mao chose to apply same strategy-Ally with the US to oppose the Soviet Union.

Kissinger noted-

'China and the United States would find a way to come together was inevitable given the necessities of the time. It would have happened sooner or later whatever the leadership in either country. That it looks place with such decisiveness and proceeded with so few detours are a tribute to the leadership that brought it about.' (Kissinger, 2011 pg. 194-95)

Normalization of Sino-US relation and Nixon's meeting with Mao Zedong was more a realist move and both leaders had deviated from their conventional political principles. For US people, their president meeting with Mao Zedong whom was described for at least two decades as a negative character was definitely awkward as much as for the Chinese people for whom US is the Imperialist gangster. For both countries the move was solely guided by the geo-strategic needs and national interests. Either they had to lose or had to make the choice. Situation left no midway or other alternating ways.

PRC, as a newly rising country had to prioritize her national security. Therefore, Chinese initiative to normalize relation with the US was based on her national interest and security, shadowing the ideological and political enmity and opposition with the US. This shows the primacy of national security and national interests upon other factors in state running, approving the classical realist school of thought.

Another important realist assertion is that the great powers are their own worst enemies. Richard Ned Lebow writes, 'Classical realists understand that great powers are

often their own worst enemies because success and the hubris it engenders encourage actors to see themselves outside of and above their community and this, in turn, blinds them to the need for self-restraints' (Dunne et al., 2021 pg.35). Soviet Union, then carried the same fate and it had been its own enemy because of the Soviet 'actors see themselves outside of and above their community (Socialist block) and this, in turn, blinds them to the need for self-restraints' that consequently drove it to dissolution and division.

Hubris of the Soviet Union leaders pushed Chinese and the US leaders to come in the same room and build relation to check the unrestraint assertiveness of the Soviet Union.

After Sino-US relation normalized, numbers of countries that remained hesitate to build diplomatic relation with PRC, eventually extended hands of bilateral relation based on their national interests. European countries hurriedly extended hands with PRC because they didn't want huge Chinese market to be isolated any more. Emerging economy of PRC was an attractive market for them. Burden of US-PRC enmity was costing European countries more in their national economy.

Similarly for the East Asian countries, normalization of US and China opened the way for the bilateral relation with PRC which was connected with national security, economy and cultural connections. Thus, as soon as the burden of enmity between China and US was eased, they established diplomatic relation with PRC which broadened the fulfilment of their national interests.

Present Situation

Howsoever beautifully and eloquently the bilateral meeting was portrayed, in fact both sides were contrarily suspicious and equally cautious toward each other. Standing on the more than two decade long (from 1950 to 1970) relation of animosity and ideological enmity, it was not obvious to easily perceive each other for both the countries. In an interview with an American Journalist Anna Louise Strong, Mao Zedong described the nuclear power of US as the 'paper tiger' (China Is Where I Wanted to Stay Forever, 2021). CPC in their official materials then generally portrayed the US as the gangster and gang leader of the Imperialism and always encouraged Chinese people to be ready to fight against the Imperialist aggression (Down with Imperialism! (1960-1966) | Chinese posters.net, n.d.).

Chinese people had experience of fighting with US army once during the Korea War (1950-53) and as Taiwan issue was still unresolved, so the Chinese leaders urged people to hate the imperialist hegemony. It was essentially a product of bi-polar world of the Cold War era where refuting each other camp between Capitalist and Socialist camps was regular and intense.

On the other side, the Western countries led by the US were equally active to

throw mud on the Socialism and Communism. They often juxtaposed Communism with Fascism and Communist leaders as authoritarians. Generally, they criticize Communist Parties-led system for lacking fundamental human rights and freedom. Same was the condition with China. Western media and thinktanks had been always negative towards Chinese political system and had been refuting it.

Therefore, initially it was even not easy to generate the trustworthy environment between US and China. Mao-Nixon meeting was the final outcome of long way of twists and turns. Suspicions towards each other were always there. Even after signing the Shanghai Communique, US was treating Taiwan as a separate state practically. American diplomat Teresita C. Schaffer shared her experiences as an American diplomat working in Taiwan,

'The opening of relations and the Shanghai Communique were high strategy. By the time the implementing regulations had been written further down the bureaucratic food chain, it seemed more like 'Alice's Adventures on Wonderland. One of the early heads of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), Ambassador Charles T. Cross, told me that despite its official character, this assignment was the 'most diplomatic job I ever had.' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.8)

She writes, 'Most of the staff of AIT were drawn from the US Foreign Service. In deference to the unofficial character of the office, they were required to submit a technical resignation when they were assigned to Taiwan. They would then be rescinded when they finished their assignment.' AIT is US and Taiwan founded private institution to carry out 'non-official' relations after signing the Shanghai Communique.

Even when we revisit the Nixon's article published in Foreign Affairs Journal (1967 October), his major argument behind 'not leaving China forever outside the family of nations' was to save the Asian governments from 'the common danger of Communist China.' (Nixon, 1967 pg.121)

His argument was –

'During the colonial and immediately post-colonial eras, Asians stood opposed primarily to the West, which represented the intruding alien power. But now the West has abandoned its colonial role, and it no longer threatens the independence of the Asian nations. Red China, however, does, and its threat is clear, present and repeatedly and insistently expressed.'

His statement shows the motive behind extending normal relation with China was essentially to expand its influence in Asia on the name of security of East Asian and Pacific nations.

He further argued that there must be change in China and unless it is not gained the world will not be safe. He wrote,

'The World cannot be safe until China changes. Thus, our aim to the extent that we can influence events, should be to induce change. The way to do this is to persuade China that it must change: that it cannot satisfy its imperial ambitions, and that its own national interest requires a turning away from foreign adventuring and a turning inward toward the solution of its own domestic problems.' (Nixon, 1967 pg.121)

Chinese side was also equally suspicious about the US moves. Amidst the progress of bilateral relation, China instantly suspended meeting with US officials when Nixon extended Vietnam war in Cambodia. A talk scheduled for May 20, 1970 was cancelled by Chinese side in pretext of US aggression on Cambodia.

On the other hand, Chinese side was cautious about possible political and cultural changes because of diplomatic ties with US and other Western countries. Therefore, Chinese leadership even today insists on the supremacy of Chinese political and cultural-civilizational system. They always draw a line between them and the Western political sphere.

Nevertheless, because of realistic need of the circumstances, both nations came at a point for fulfilling their own national interests. Though normalization process started during Mao and Nixon, both countries agreed to have formal ambassadorial-level diplomatic relation only in 1979. Till then both the leaders were not in the executive power. Mao died on 1976 and Nixon was no more the president of the US. But Deng Xiaoping in China and Jimmy Carter in the US extended the normalization into diplomatic ties.

Dynamic policy of Reform and Opening up introduced by Deng in China during the end of the 1970s, helped to assure US to step ahead in bilateral relation with the Communist China. Opening up policy opened 'the China Gate' to the outer world for investment and market, gradually. China defined that dynamic system as the Socialist Market Economy. Subsequently, that policy is proved as the apt policy for economic prosperity and development of PRC. Introduction of the policy eased PRC to import technology from the developed countries such as US, Japan and the European countries.

Today, China has rose as the second largest economy of the world making US elites more cautious. They still have not been relieved of the old mindset of 'China Danger' and 'Sinophobia.' Chinese rise as the competitor of US in every field has made the US elites more anxious (Yang & Keller, 2025). Because Chinese success for them is not merely the success of Chinese nation but it would be still the failure of the western liberal political system as well. Thus, US along with its allies have been continuing economic embargoes, disruption and conflicts, political and ideological attacks and occasional military skirmishes against China. Lately, Sino-US trade war in 2020s is a result of such situation between two countries.

Nevertheless, as China has plunged into the globalization process so much in

depth that hurting China is self-harming for all countries. Australian scholar Peter Varghese rightly said that it is not easy to contain a country as integrated into the global economy as China, unless of course your strategy is to dismantle the global system and the supply chains which support it, which is precisely what some advocate.' (Sanjaya Baru & Sharma, 2021 pg.172)

On this ground, the very aspiration of Mao-Nixon meeting is still relevant and timely. Due to the policy and political instability of the US, some problems and conflicts arise intentionally. But in lack of reasonability, such practices fade out gradually. Rationality and reasonability are still prevalent in international relations as an imminent feature of the classical realism.

4. Conclusion

President of PRC Xi Jinping during the last meeting with Henry Kissinger in 2023 July 20 said, 'Fifty- two years ago when China and the US were at a crucial inflection point, Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai, President Richard Nixon and Dr. Kissinger, with their extraordinary strategic vision, made the right decision for China-US cooperation and launched the process of normalizing the China-US relationship. The decision delivered benefits to the two countries and changed the world' (*Xi Meets with Henry Kissinger*, 2023).

History sometimes takes irregular path to make a new history. Meeting between Mao Zedong and Nixon was such an occasion that was not common but when happened had created a history. Consequently, that changed the political geography of whole world and guided the world into the new phase of journey. Bold decision taken by the leaders of both sides liberated the time from the status quo and guided ahead. Paradigm shift made by the meeting not only fulfilled the then needs of both nations rather it has open avenues for many nations to move ahead.

US diplomat and one of the protagonists behind the Mao-Nixon meeting Henry Kissinger published a book 'On China' in 2011. Till then long way has already been travelled. Looking back the momentous history back in 1972, Kissinger wrote-

'By the time the improbable pair of Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong decided to move toward each other, both their countries were in the midst of upheaval. China was nearly consumed by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution; America's political consensus was strained by the growing protest movement against the Vietnam War. China faced the prospect of war on all its frontiers-especially its northern border, where actual clashes between Soviet and Chinese forces were taking place. Nixon inherited a war in Vietnam and a domestic imperative to end it, and entered the White House at the end of a decade marked by assassinations and racial conflict' (Kissinger, 2011 pg. 184).

Nevertheless, the most important aspect of the whole analysis is to highlight

the results of the landmarking meeting? What could be the alternative results if that normalization did not take place?

Foremost point is both the countries were benefitted by that move or it was guided by the seek for the national interests. US wanted to shortened the Vietnam War that was succeeded after Mao-Nixon meeting. Soon after the normalization of Sino-US relation, the War on Vietnam was landed. Nixon succeeded making his promise to the people. That probably elected him for the second term, which was not completed because of the Watergate Scandal.

Secondly, that move weakened the Soviet Union to greater extent causing the dismantlement of the Soviet Union in 1992. After the end of the Cold War, the world order changed into unipolar world ending the bipolar world. US became the center of the unipolar world.

Thirdly, ideologically US became successful in benefitting from the division within the Socialist Camp. Its prominence in the world is continued, hence American scholars claimed it as the ideological victory of liberal capitalism on the Socialism (Gamble, 2009).

Fourthly, US continued its prominence in Asia.

From Chinese side, it won major victories as well. During the course of normalization of Sino-US relation, on October 25, 1971, by an overwhelming majority, the 26th UN General Assembly adopted the resolution to restore all the legitimate rights of the PRC in the United Nations. Prior to that, Taiwan was the legitimate Chinese representative. Albania and Algeria proposed to restore the PRC's lawful seat in the UN and expel the Kuomintang representative. On the contrary Japan and US proposed for the 'dual representation' proposal which was rejected making Beijing the legitimate representative in the UN. (Jin, 2018 pg.284)

This ended the two decades long isolation of PRC from international forums such as the UN. After PRC became the legitimate member of the UN, Chinese role and contributions in myriads of international issues increased exponentially.

Secondly, in *the Shanghai Communique* signed during Nixon's visit, US had recognized the One-China policy that was highly valued decision till today. In fact, that was the game-changer decision because prior to that US and some Western Countries had not agreed upon One-China policy which means they believed on the division of Chinese sovereignty. In such case there was always possibility of geographical division of China which was against the aspiration of PRC.

On the Shanghai Communique, US had recognized the Beijing based PRC government as the legitimate government of China and Taiwan, the inalienable part of China. This for the PRC could actually be considered as a political victory.

Thirdly, PRC successfully terminated the possible Soviet attack on China through the diplomatic initiatives. Chinese leaders, understanding the condition in much correct way, promulgated the wise way out, and drove PRC into a new way of progress and development. Normalization of Sino-US relation that Mao-Nixon corner-stoned was continued by the leaders following them and thrived the relation into new heights amidst occasional conflicts and skirmishes.

After the death of Mao Zedong, Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping promulgated the Reform and Opening Up policy in 1978 that ease China to extract much benefit from the relation with the US and other developed countries. Consequently, Chinese economy thrived and today China became one of the major powers of the world. All these historical phases and events are interconnected and complimentary to each other. With reform and opening up policy, China is benefitted by technological transfer and capital investment of the US and other countries.

Fourthly, with the normalization of Sino-US relation, China established diplomatic relation with other countries who had been escaping diplomatic relation with PRC because of US pressure. Expansion of Chinese diplomatic circle helped Beijing to enhance its political, economic and cultural role throughout the world. Since China is a large country in term of geography and population, it is an attractive market for many developed countries. Though some of the Western countries had already started relation with China in informal ways, it was only after 1972, that they could develop it in full phase.

Fifthly, normalization of Sino- US relation had played decisive role in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Soviet Union, leader of Socialist camp was not treating the member countries in equal footing rather Soviet leaders were treating other socialist countries as their subsidiaries. They were imposing their wills upon the other socialist countries, disregarding their sovereign rights. Even Soviet Union was subjugating other socialist countries militarily. Therefore, there was deep division within the Socialist camp and Soviet Union had changed its essential characteristics to turn into 'the Social-Imperialist country.' Chinese leaders joining hands with the US had changed the power dynamism of the world isolating and weakening the revisionist USSR.

Normalization of Sino-US relation had again highlighted the prevalence of the realist school of thought upon the Idealist school of thought. Both the countries extended hand of friendship with each other crossing their conventional political ideology and beliefs. US is a capitalist country who believe on liberal ideas of democracy whereas China is a country led by the Communist Party whose main objective is to establish Socialism. Both these political systems have antagonistic relation and they have been refuting each other since long. Nevertheless, Nixon and Mao decided to establish diplomatic ties with each other ending two decades of intense tussle and animosity. For that they are entirely guided by their national interests and realist outlook. Certainly,

both leaders Nixon and Mao had to manage the criticism within their party and country for ‘unfollowing’ or ‘deviating’ their political principle. But the final consequences had absolved the relevancy of their crucial decision. Both countries were benefitted by their decision of normalizing mutual diplomatic relation. Thus, that was the agreement based on the Win-Win principle.

China as the major component of this change benefitted much. It has many things to do with the contemporary thriving Chinese economy. Emergence of China as the major country in the global politics is also because of the normalization of Sino-US relation. Certainly, more than a half century has already passed, so major changes during these fifty-three years is obvious and wide. Emergence of China as a global power drove US to tighten its China containment policy through multiple multilateral and bilateral alliances such as QUAD, Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) etc. Attempts to use the issues such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea against China as a part of containment of China is not hidden.

In such condition, highlighting of the historical meeting between Mao and Nixon is much relevant. Main aspiration of the meeting can’t be shadowed but put in light to realize the contemporary leaders of being united and cooperating for bilateral and global benefit.

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