Evaluation on America’s China Strategy, Diplomacy, and Relation During Jimmy Carter’s and Ronald Reagan’s Presidencies

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Abstract

The relationship between China and the United States might be one of the most significant bilateral relations in the current world. There are always positive trends and uncertain fluctuations between these two countries since their establishment of formal diplomatic relationship. It is also this period of establishing formal Sino-US relationship that witnessed the two drastically differently viewed presidents – Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. Specifically on the Sino-US relationship, many people today regard Carter as a weak figure while Reagan as a tough one and believe that they were naturally different on this topic. This essay examines the details of the two presidents’ policies on the Sino-US relationship, including comparing and contrasting their historical contexts, reactions to the Taiwan issue, and the acceptance to the status quo. This analysis will come to the conclusion that both two presidents were not naturally different on the topic of Sino-US relationship and were both acting within the framework of the normalisation policy, which was determined by the legacies of formal presidents such as the Shanghai Communiqué signed by Nixon and was formally put into action since Carter.

Keywords

China; America; diplomatic relations; Jimmy Carter; Ronald Reagan.

1. Introduction

There is little doubt on regarding 1970s and 1980s the as paramount period of Sino-US relationship since 1949 when the People’s Republic of China established, for it was during 1970s and 1980s when PRC and the United States gradually established formal relations. This period was also considered in US as drastic diplomatic changes between the two contemporary presidents – Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, who were remembered very differently by later generations. Ronald Reagan’s presidency is often recalled as a time when America was “great” and “tough” enough to unite and lead the free world, marching forth victory of the Cold War while gaining domestic prosperity. In comparison, Jimmy Carter’s presidency, seen by the prevailing perspective, represented a “weak” image of American foreign diplomacy despite some noticeable achievements, especially the formal diplomatic relation with China, which, for a long time has been considered as Carter’s most precious legacy, ironically became the main reason present people distinguish him from Reagan.

This essay will, nonetheless, explores the continuity of America’s China policies from Carter to Reagan and ultimately argues that both presidents adopted pragmatic stances on China and related issues (e.g. Taiwan issue) – their diplomatic decisions in East Asia were, in fact, more accordant than different as many would regard today.

2. Text

First of all, it is necessary to take a review of what relation between PRC and the United States had been by the presidency of Jimmy Carter. During the whole 1950s, America’s sentiment toward the People’s Republic of China, a regime that was built by the victorious Chinese
Communist Party in the civil war, could be best depicted by a widely-known phrase – “who lost China”. This feeling, while certainly contained the contemporary American fear of communism spreading under the background of the Cold War, also implied an enduring American traditional condescending attitude toward China: an aged, decayed, and uncivilized nation which could not be corrected without American guidance.

Yet the United States was far from regarding China as a “hopeless land”. It actually often sought to establish a more favourable relationship. For example, on the Laos negotiation at Geneva, seeing the differences between Chinese and Russian delegates, officials of Kennedy administration attempted to make a breakthrough on the Sino-US relationship by firstly offering a recognition of PRC’s status in UN, which was declined by both sides [1]. Nevertheless, this gives a good example to indicate how the differences and later the intensification of relationship between China and USSR became one major potential for the Sino-US relationship, namely the rapprochement. Another significant aspect was China’s domestic situations, which showed the first potential breakthrough in the midst of, to many people’s surprise, the Cultural Revolution. Interpreted from contemporary American perspective, after a series of political movements and struggles, the almost absolute authority of the party leader, Chairman Mao, and the radical revolutionary route was weakened, and there was the possibility of some secondary officials who wanted a stable domestic situation might seek profits from a more favourable Sino-US relationship [2]. Although these expectations certainly did not turn into reality at that time, the interpretation was on the right track on predicting that a closer relationship between US and China would be beneficial to China. This paved the road for the later Nixon’s presidency which witnessed rapid reconciliation between US and China, from the unprecedented US president’s trip to China to the Shanghai Communiqué in which the most intractable issue in Sino-US reconciliation, the Taiwan issue, was discussed. For the first time American official narrative acknowledged that America never approved Taiwan separatism and supported the issue to be peacefully settled as a Chinese domestic issue, which at any rate seemed incredible [3].

Since Ford’s presidency ended with a nationwide disgust of American intervention of foreign affairs especially by declaring wars, it could be reasonably said that by the time when Jimmy Carter came to his presidency, a road toward promising Sino-US relationship had already been paved for him. But what exactly China’s position was in Cater administration’s mind is worthy thinking. In fact, if chosen between the two “communist giants” for the United States to cooperate with, the Soviet Union was a far more potential companion than China. According to the Trilateral Commission’s report [4] on the ways to cooperate with Communist countries, while USSR was evaluated as capable for many high-technological and relatively deep projects, China’s potential appeared to be smaller and limited in less significant areas. It was not until the Soviet side presented visible hostility on American offers that Carter administration turned their sight on China [5]. Nor did Carter administration started their normalisation process at their very beginning two years because they were negotiating with USSR with armaments and dealing the Panama Canal issue [6]. These facts are capable for rebutting the argument that Carter administration put China in the central position on their entire global or regional strategy, at least not at the beginning.

In a more detailed look on Carter’s approaches to China, Carter appeared to present so considerable flexibility on principles in face of China, that many criticized him for being hypocritical, specifically, for ignoring China’s deficiencies on human rights, freedom, and democracy. Carter, in response, argued that an open and modernized China would be good both to the world and the Chinese themselves, and to achieve that, America should not be too rigid from the beginning, which did convince some people but at the same time further strengthened the impression of hypocrisy in others’ mind [5]. For the Chinese, of course, this justification stands for reasons, but it is also important to realize that the standard of “holding American
values” is different all the time, which often needs to be understood in historical contexts: specifically by Carter’s time, America was so exhausted by the Vietnam War it had just escaped that it had to took defensive position during the 1970s; also the term “hypocrisy” in America at that time was defined not by encouraging an underdeveloped country to open up, but by fighting against the communist “totalitarianism” through supporting the similarly “evil” right-wing dictators, like those in South Korea and Taiwan [7].

As for the attitudes from America’s Asian allies regarding the Sino-US normalisation, Carter appeared to be confident that these allies would understand the necessity and benefit in the regional security after a better Sino-US relationship. In his memoir, Carter [8] mentioned the contemporary South Korean president Park supported him on this issue and expected China could play a role in restraining military threat from the North. This, certainly, was under suspicion of underestimating allies’ objection. Many argued that it would be a significant damage to Korea-US relation that the US president was active in promoting Sino-US relationship while advocated US troops to gradually withdraw from South Korea, as Carter proposed to do when he was a candidate [6]. Similar questions were asked to almost all allies in Asia, which generated an overall illusion that the promotion of Sino-US relationship under Carter was at the expense of sacrificing the relations with allies and that Carter valued China more than allies. For counterarguments, it could be reasonably explained that the withdrawing of troops from allies was the cost of America’s strategic defensive position instead of the cost of a closer Sino-US relationship, because China never required America to withdraw its army from allies, except Taiwan, which was an entirely different issue.

The Taiwan issue might be the most intractable issue in the entire Sino-US relationship. It was also the main aspect on which American people distinguish him from Reagan. To them, Carter was the one relentlessly abandoned Taiwan and Reagan the one who stood at Taiwan’s stance. Yet if taking closer observation, one will find that Carter has done barely more than walking on the road the ex-presidents had already paved for him. For example, the core consensus of “One China” instead of “Two Chinas” or “One China, One Taiwan” had been determined in the Shanghai Communique [9], signed by Nixon. It was not only the consensus but also ambiguities that later presidents inherited from the ex-president’s achievements, which will be discussed later. Carter was the one who achieved normalisation on the formal stage, which is the main reason he received so many criticisms, but what many people intend to ignore is that simply any president after Nixon could be that one.

When comparing and contrasting how Ronald Reagan acted respectively on these areas, one could straightforwardly analyse from the central question – the Taiwan issue, where he could reach the answer to all abovementioned questions.

From Reagan’s statements before he came to presidency, it is easy to assume that he shared completely different standard of “holding American values” than Jimmy Carter, most noticeably on the Taiwan issue [10]. But it could also be said that he was doing every candidate would do – opposing the status quo and the current policies. What really mattered was what he has actually done. Admittedly, Reagan in his first term attempted to find breakthroughs in America-Taiwan relationship. For example, he has proposed to sell new weapons to Taiwan while not to China, which caused worries on Sino-US relationship before 1983, but Reagan’s administration also faced with internal conflicts of dealing with Taiwan issue, and externally there was problem of how a deteriorated Sino-US relationship would cause on Reagan’s Cold War offensive position against USSR [10]. Ultimately, a compromise proposal was put into action in the Sino-US joint communique in 1982 – these weapons were not to be sold to neither China nor Taiwan [10]. For those who claimed Reagan’s stance on supporting Taiwan regardless of Sino-US relationship, this action was hardly a supportive evidence.

On the broader scale of US-Taiwan alliance, Reagan administration continued to recognize Taiwan as an ally, and has called for improvement on the current Taiwan Relations Act, signed
by Jimmy Carter in 1979 which acknowledged an informal relationship and a defensive strategy with Taiwan. However, in 1982 what Reagan actually achieved was an agreement with China: that as long as Taiwan’s current prosperity would not be disturbed and that the Taiwan issue would be settled peacefully, the United States would never intervene with Chinese domestic issue, and would gradually cease to sell any weapon to Taiwan for even defensive use, and many other aspects aimed to stabilize and improve Sino-US relationship [11]. One can easily see the similarity between this agreement and former documents signed between China and ex-presidents’ administrations, including Carter’s. While this agreement followed the same clearness of committing China’s unity, it also presented the same ambiguities: whereas the Americans saw it as China’s promise of peacefully settling Taiwan issue, the Chinese saw it as America’s acknowledgement of never intervening Chinese domestic issues, under any circumstance. In other words, on the broad topic of Taiwan issue, both Reagan and Carter were still walking on the same road that their predecessors had paved for them, inheriting the same clearness and ambiguities. Yet particularly for Reagan, who had yelled for improvement of relation with Taiwan, this agreement meant nothing but a reaffirmation of normalisation policies since Carter’s time with China, a “betrayal” to Taiwan which Reagan himself once had criticized [12]. It proved that he had to adopt a more pragmatic strategy toward Taiwan issue and the whole Sino-US relationship, which means to stabilize current relations, to find possible compromises, and to abandon radical proposals that he once advocated. This is rather a continuity between Reagan and Carter than a major difference.

The beginning years of Reagan’s presidency, as he attempted to create improvement of relationship between Taiwan but failed as he had to maintain the existing framework of normalisation, witnessed fluctuations of relationship with China. On Chinese side, both the government and the public protested for his “betrayal” and the bilateral economic interaction did experience a decline, but soon after Reagan’s reaffirmation, these protests and became more apparent than real and finally disappeared. Realizing both sides of the Pacific needed each other under a stable Sino-US relationship, the bilateral economic interaction quickly recovered and prospered to an unprecedented level after 1983 [13]. Even though Reagan has intentionally avoided speaking about China and Taiwan since then, it could also be explained that at that time the Sino-US relationship started to be mature – the framework of normalisation became unquestionable and the interactions and relation as a whole naturally and steadily developed within, without the need of intentionally making more significant breakthroughs.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay generally examined and explained that Carter’s and Reagan’s administrations on the topic of Sino-US relationship shared more continuities than drastic differences. Among all the continuities, such as policies on the Taiwan issue, the essential core was the framework: the Shanghai Communique under Nixon set the very foundation, and the normalisation policy since Carter set the formal framework that later presidents, including Reagan, would not easily attempt to break. With this essential continuity in mind, one should not simply criticize Carter for being too “soft” with China while at the same time praise Reagan for being “tough” in front of China. For a simple but critical example, how could those who considered Reagan as a “tougher” figure than Carter, standing for American ally, Taiwan’s interest regardless of the certain Chinese revenge, continue to keep such faith, when they realize that Reagan has just followed what presidents before him, especially Carter considering his normalisation framework, had already done with Sino-US relationship, and never attempted to challenge this framework ever since then?
References


