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The Day the Door to China Opened Wide

By Richard Holbrooke
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The opening with China by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in 1971-72 is justly remembered as a historic breakthrough. Less famous but of equal importance was the next major step: the establishment of full diplomatic relations between China and the United States. Without this action, announced by President Jimmy Carter on Dec. 15, 1978, the relationship could not have moved beyond a small, high-level connection with a very limited agenda.

When they left office in 1977, President Gerald Ford and Kissinger left behind an important but incomplete, and unstable, relationship with China. The United States still recognized the government on Taiwan, which called itself (then as now) the Republic of China, as the legitimate and sole government of all of China. Since 1972, Washington and Beijing had maintained small "liaison offices" in each other's capitals, without recognition. Official communications were limited, and two-way trade was less than \$1 billion a year (today, it is a staggering \$387 billion annually).

Carter took office hoping to normalize relations with China, which would require switching American recognition from Taiwan to Beijing and ending a sacred defense treaty between the United States and Taiwan. Some saw this as a simple acknowledgment of reality; in fact, it was a momentous step that required diplomatic skill and political courage. A way would have to be found for the United States, while recognizing Beijing, to continue dealing with the authorities on Taiwan without recognizing its claim to represent China; most important, Washington had to retain the right to sell arms to Taipei. The politics were not simple: There was the famed Taiwan Lobby, one of the most powerful in the United States. Led by "Mr. Conservative," Sen. Barry Goldwater, and the leading contender for the 1980 Republican nomination, Ronald Reagan, it was to fight normalization all the way. (Goldwater eventually took the U.S. government to the Supreme Court to challenge, unsuccessfully, Carter's action; Reagan pledged in the 1980 campaign to partially undo normalization -- then abandoned that position after he was elected.)

The saga unfolded over the first two years of the Carter administration, out of public sight except for two important trips to China -- one by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the other by national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski (as assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, I participated in both trips). Incredibly, those involved in the negotiations managed to keep the work secret. The Chinese demanded a complete severing of all official ties between Taiwan and the United States, including arms sales. Knowing that such a move would provoke an enormous domestic backlash, we looked for a formula that would continue official contacts and arms sales with Taiwan even after we had de-recognized it and terminated the mutual security treaty ratified during the Eisenhower years. There was no precedent for this in American or international law. With advice from Eisenhower's attorney general, Herbert Brownell, State Department lawyers drafted the Taiwan Relations Act, a groundbreaking law that allowed the United States to conduct

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official business on Taiwan, including arms sales, without formal government-to-government relations.

The Chinese wanted trade and other benefits of recognition. When we explained to Beijing why special arrangements with Taiwan were necessary in order to recognize the government on the mainland, it balked. In those Cold War days, recognition would benefit both nations, as Beijing was fiercely hostile to the Soviet Union, with whom it had almost gone to war only a few years earlier. But Taiwan remained a huge obstacle.

The breakthrough came in late 1978, carefully timed to follow the midterm elections. Mao Zedong had died in 1976, and the most important factor was probably the emergence of Deng Xiaoping as China's paramount leader. Deng -- who had been forced to wear a dunce cap and denounce himself during the insanity of the Cultural Revolution -- had achieved the greatest comeback imaginable; in the fall of 1978, he got enough power to cut a deal with Washington. Beijing would not "agree" to American arms sales or other activities with Taiwan but would proceed with normalization anyway. It was classic Chinese negotiating style: firm on principle, flexible on specifics.

I'm leaving a lot out here, but this was the essence of a very complicated negotiation. In January 1979, Deng made his historic trip to the United States, which began with a private dinner at Brzezinski's house and climaxed with the most sought-after state dinner of the Carter years (also noteworthy for Richard Nixon's first visit to Washington since his resignation; I sat at Nixon's table, and retain a menu everyone signed that night). At Zbig's house, Deng spoke of his dreams for a China he knew he would not live to see. He believed China could leapfrog the years in which the world had passed it by, but only with American support. He was ready to cooperate on containing the Soviet Union, even agreeing to the installation of secret American intelligence listening posts along the Chinese border to track Soviet missiles. He accurately foresaw a vast exchange of students, modern technology and trade. More than any American official, he anticipated what the opening to China would accomplish.

But even Deng could not imagine all that was to be unleashed by that announcement on this day 30 years ago -- nothing less than the development of the most important bilateral relationship in the world today.

Richard Holbrooke, a former ambassador to the United Nations, writes a monthly column for The Post.

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