



THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN TRACK II DIPLOMACY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE PING-PONG DIPLOMACY IN SINO-USA RELATIONS (1969-1972)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This study examines the pivotal role of sports in Track II diplomacy, highlighting the transformative impact of Ping-Pong Diplomacy on Sino-US relations between 1969 and 1972. In the midst of the Cold War, Table Tennis emerged as an unlikely catalyst for diplomatic rapprochement between the United States and China. The research reveals how Ping-Pong Diplomacy facilitated people-to-people exchanges, fostering mutual understanding and trust between the two nations. This innovative approach to diplomacy helped to break down cultural and ideological barriers, paving the way for President Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972. Through a combination of secondary sources, diplomatic correspondence and scholarly analyses, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of sports diplomacy in bridging the Sino-US divide. The findings underscore the potential of sports to transcend political differences, promote cultural exchange, and facilitate international cooperation. By exploring the dynamics of Ping-Pong Diplomacy, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of sports in Track II diplomacy and its implications for contemporary international relations.

Keywords: *Cold War, Track II Diplomacy, Ping-Pong Diplomacy, Great Leap Forward, Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, Brezhnev Doctrine, Shanghai Communiqué, SALT-I*

Introduction

“Unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversarial groups or nations with the goals of developing strategies, influencing public opinion, and organizing human and material resources in ways that might help resolve the conflict.”- Josep Montville.¹

In the realm of international relations, diplomacy is often associated with formal, government to government interactions. However, the increasingly complex and interconnected nature of global politics has highlighted the importance of alternative approaches to diplomacy. Track II diplomacy, which involves unofficial, people to people exchanges, has emerged as a vital complement to traditional diplomatic efforts.

One fascinating example of Track II diplomacy, is the role of sports in bridging cultural and ideological divides. The 1971 Ping Pong diplomatic initiative, which brought together American and Chinese table tennis players, is a landmark case study in the effective use of sports as a diplomatic tool. In the midst of the Cold war, the United States and China were sworn enemies, locked into a bitter ideological struggle. By leveraging the universal language of sports, the US and Chinese governments were able to break the ice and established a tentative rapport, paving the way for President Richard Nixon's historic visit to China in 1972.

This research paper seeks to examine the impact of Ping Pong diplomacy on Sino-US relations between 1969 to 1972. By exploring the historical context, key players, and diplomatic outcomes of this initiatives, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of sports in Track II diplomacy.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study include:

- i. How did the Ping Pong diplomatic initiative contributed to the improvement of Sino-US relations between 1969-1972?
- ii. What were the key factors that facilitated the success of Ping Pong diplomacy in this context?
- iii. What lessons can be learned from Ping Pong diplomacy for the development of future sports-based Track II diplomatic initiatives?

Research Methodology

This article will employ a qualitative research methodology, drawing a range of sources including secondary sources, diplomatic correspondence and scholarly analyses. By shedding new light on the role of sports in Track II diplomacy, this study aims to contribute a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of international relations and the innovative approaches that can help to build bridges between nations.

Background

The aftermath of World War II marked a significant turning point in European history. The world witnessed a significant shift in the global power dynamics. The war had left Europe devastated. The war had created a power vacuum and United States and Soviet Union emerged as the two superpower. The ideological differences, post-war settlement, Soviet expansion and atomic bomb, all contributed to the bipolar world order. The Yalta Conference led to the Europe into two spheres of influence. The Soviet Union gained control over Eastern Europe, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. In contrast the Western Allies, led by United States, gained influence over Western Europe, including the United Kingdom, France, West Germany and Italy.² The bipolarization of Europe was further reinforced by the formation of two rival military alliances: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact, a military alliance between Eastern European Countries and the Soviet Union in 1955.

The Cold War, which had its roots in the post-war European landscape, soon spread its tentacles to Asia, where it ignite a series of intense ideological and geopolitical rivalries that would shape the continent’s destiny for decades to come. The year 1949 witnessed a seismic shift in the international relations landscape, as the world transitioned from the aftermath of World War II to the dawn of Cold War .The Chinese Civil War (1927-1950) played a significant role in bringing the Cold War to Asia. On June 1949, just three months prior to the formation of People’s Republic of China (PRC), Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong, declared that new China would support Soviet Union in international affairs. In October 1949 People’s Republic of China (PRC) won a fierce and multifaceted conflict against the Nationalist Party (KMT), led by Chiang Kai-Shek. The Truman Government of USA decided not to recognize the newly formed PRC and continued their military assistance to the Nationalist Government at Taiwan. In 14th February 1950 PRC and Soviet Russia signed a Treaty of friendship and mutual alliance against USA.³ The outbreak of Korean War in June 1950 further deteriorated the Sino-USA relations. China entered in Korean War in October 1950 and in retaliation, USA imposed a total trade embargo on China. United Nations also imposed a collective embargo on China in May1951.⁴ United States withdrew all his officials from China. In 1964, US President, Johnson declared that, “So long as the Communist Chinese pursue conflict and preach violence, there can be and will be no easing of relationships...”⁵ Though ideological difference were there but from the very beginning PRC and USA both eager to use trade as tool for rebuilding their nation after the Civil War and pull back PRC from Soviet orbit respectively. So, the American opinion regarding this embargo was clearly divided. The U.S business leaders wanted the resumption of trade with China but Truman government was slightly shaky. They stopped the export of strategic materials and allowed the export of non-strategic materials to China.⁶ Thus the trade embargo had little impact on the economic development of newly independent PRC. The following table show the GNP/GDP growth of China from 1950-1959.

Column A			Column B		Column C	
Year	GDP Billion Yuan	% Change	GNP Billion \$	% Change	GDP Billion Yuan	% Change
1950	55.0	---	78		n.a	n.a
1951	62.9	14.2	91	16.7	n.a	n.a
1952	75.5	20.1	108	18.7	67.9	---
1953	79.8	5.9	114	5.6	82.4	21.4
1954	84.1	5.3	119	4.4	85.9	4.3
1955	89.2	6.0	131	10.1	91.0	4.8
1956	99.9	12.0	142	8.4	102.8	13.0
1957	103.5	3.6	151	6.3	106.8	3.9
1958	119.0	15.0	179	18.5	130.7	22.4
1959	127.0	6.7	170	-5.0	143.9	10.1

Source: Chen, Xin-zhu.J, (October 2006). *China and the US Trade Embargo, 1950-1972*, American Journal of Chinese Studies, Vol.13, No-2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44288827> Accessed 20th February 2025, p.174.

There were plenty of reasons for China’s economic growth despite of U.S trade embargo. The major reason was Russian financial and technical support. Other reasons were PRC’s flourishing trade with other communist countries, the cease-fire in Korean War in 1953, China’s import of industrial materials from other western countries, China’s First Five Years Plan (1953-57) for industrial development.⁷

Sino-Soviet Tension

But over the time the friendly relations between USSR and PRC started deteriorate, particularly from the second half of 1950s. The feud between the two communist giant changed the bipolar nature of cold war into a triangular relations between USA, USSR and PRC in East. It is true that in his early days PRC received financial and technical support from Soviet Russia. Stalin offered Mao a development loan of \$ 300 million for five years to be repaid by agricultural products and interest.⁸ The paucity of Soviet aid and the arrogant manner of Stalin to treat PRC also antagonized the Chinese Communist leader. The first open conflict between Moscow and Beijing came into surface after February 1956 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev criticized Joseph Stalin in a secret speech at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union.⁹ Furthermore, Khrushchev advocated for “peaceful coexistence” with the capitalist world, without consulting Mao, the senior most Communist leader at that time, shocked the Chinese communist leader.

Though in 1957 August Soviet Russia launched their first international ballistic missile (ICBM) and surprised the world with Sputnik, the first artificial satellite in October, still they wanted to avoid direct confrontation with USA. So, the new Soviet line of peaceful coexistence with America was the outcome to avert a devastating nuclear warfare. Mao was happy with the Soviet success but not prepare to support the peaceful coexistence policy. He rather advocated to use this new military strength against the capitalist world. Mao proclaimed that, “at present, it is not the west wind which is prevailing over the east wind, but the east wind prevailing over the west wind.”¹⁰ Besides, policy of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world, was a retreat from Marxist-Leninist ideology. The two communist giant had a difference of opinion regarding the process of attaining Communism. Earlier China had adopted the Soviet model of economic development through the Five Year Planning. But in 1958 Mao scraped the Second Five Year Planning and instead started a high lauded program called the “Great Leap Forward” which turned into a fiasco and Kremlin was dissatisfied with PRC for departing from the Soviet economic model. In retaliation, Khrushchev withdrew 1390 Russian technical staff from China in 1960.¹¹

In 1962 China waged a war against India in which Moscow supported India along with USA and condemned China for their reckless attitude. In the meanwhile, in October 16th 1964 China successfully tested their atom bomb without the technical support of Soviet Union. The rivalry between these two communist countries reached into a new height in 1965 when China denied Russia to use their air space against Vietnam war.¹² Sino-Soviet tension escalated even higher on the question of borders. Xinjiang province of China became the bone of contention as Russia claimed it was their area.¹³

China’s entry into nuclear club enhanced his prestige enormously in Third World. The Pro-Chinese faction had broken away their ties from regular communist party. Over enthusiastic Mao’s tirade reached a new height when in 1966 he launched the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” which had a clear anti-Soviet overtone. He criticized the Soviet leaders for their bureaucratic elitism, revisionism and their departure from Marxist –Leninist ideology.¹⁴

Sino-Soviet tension climaxed in 1968 with the Brezhnev Doctrine which decreed that Moscow would bring back any backsliding Communist state by using military force. This doctrine was clearly aimed China. Henry Kissinger rightly said, “No Communist leader was then challenging Moscow’s doctrinal preeminence more rigorously than Mao. If the Brezhnev Doctrine [...] had any obvious application, it was Mao’s China.”¹⁵ So, tension mounted and both side amassed thousands of soldiers along the borders. After the 9th CCP Congress in April 1969, Zhou Enlai on behalf of Mao appointed four veteran Marshall to study the international scenario and suggest the best possible ideas for the security of China. Though the Four Marshall Study Group believed that Soviet Russia would not wage out an all-out war against China, yet China should prepare for the worst scenario and in that case United States might be the trump card for China against Russia.¹⁶ In September 1969, Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin met Zhou Enlai to mitigate the border tension between the two communist giant. But Zhou avoid closeness to Russia to improve the relations with USA.¹⁷

Resumption of Sino-American Relation

The Chinese policy worked out as U.S officials began to rethink their policy towards China. Thus a series of cautious events leading up to the initial talk between USA and China. Richard Nixon before being the President of USA stated that, “taking the long view, we simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture their fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation.”¹⁸ Finally, when PRC joined the Security Council of United Nations, America did not oppose, as a gesture of friendship. On September, 1968, US State Department send a proposal for the resumption of ambassadorial talk and surprisingly China accepted it. This relationship remained tense until 1968 on the issue of Vietnam War. In fact Beijing at first not welcomed Nixon as the American President .Though, ideological differences were there, and Nixon and Kissinger realized the immense necessity of Sino-USA relationship to retaliate the 1971 South Asian Crisis and to stop Vietnam War. The U.S officials took help of the Romanian and Pakistani Channels to build secret contact with China. During his Visit to Pakistan in August 1969, Nixon asked its military dictator, Yahya Khan, to take initiative and send confidential message to the Chinese that expressed American desires to improve relations. Pakistani ambassador to USA convey the message to China and Chinese leaders released two detained American yachtsmen and ready to resume Warsaw talk without any precondition.¹⁹ So, Nixon and Kissinger decided to reopen the Warsaw Talk, in which Stoessel, the US ambassador to Poland

met the Chinese representatives, but with no result. As America launched a large-scale attack on communist Vietnam, in protest the Chinese halted the Warsaw talk at the 136th session of Sino-American meeting held on 20th February, 1970.

Though secret initiatives and ambassadorial level talk failed to achieve success, both Nixon and Mao continued to put their effort to rebuild the Sino-American relation. By the fall of 1970, USA withdrew troops from Cambodia. On 1st October American leftist journalist Edgar Snow and his wife were invited to participate the Annual National Day celebration of China at Tiananmen Square. In December 1970, Chinese *People's Daily* published on its front page the picture of Mao and Snow with a caption, "The people of the world, including the American people, are our friends."²⁰ In this occasion Mao made it very clear that he, "would be happy to meet Nixon, either as President or as a tourist."²¹ Nixon was also eager to soften the situation by a high level talk. But Zhou had stated that the main issue of the talk should be Taiwan question which could not accepted by the Nixon Government. Under this circumstances, it was very difficult to start an open conversation between the two ideologically different nations. So, an extraordinary move or gesture was needed to break the ice and sports played the pivotal role.

The Ping-Pong Diplomacy and Sino-American Rapprochement

During the cold war period sports has always been played a vital role in the bilateral relations between PRC and USA. In 1956 PRC boycotted Melbourne Olympic in protest of the participation of Republic of China or Taiwan.²² Using sports as a diplomatic tool was not a new venture for China. Table Tennis was a popular sports in China. Since 1963-64 China played numerous demonstration games in Africa, New Zealand and different Asian countries.²³ Being a member of

International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), China was eager to participate in the 31st World Championships held in Nagoya in Japan. Zhou convinced Goto Koji, head of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF) of Japan and president of the JTTA, to ban Taiwan (ROC). He was successful to stop Taiwan to participate in the game but Chinese leadership was not unanimous about the idea of sending team in the Championship.²⁴

The PRC eventually participated the World Championship. Before departing, a send-off ceremony was held at the Great Hall of the People where the players were instructed to abide by the principle of "friendship first, then competition" But at the same time the Chinese players were instructed not to engage any conversation with the American players.²⁵

During the championship Zhuang Zedong, the star Chinese player was reported to have a brief conversation with Glenn Cowan, an American player who missed the team bus and got ride in the Chinese team bus. Zedong presented Cowan with a beautiful silk brocade painting as a gift of friendship. The next day Cowan presented Zhuang with a red, white, and blue T-shirt with a peace sign above the words "Let It Be".²⁶ On 6th April 1971, Mao invited the American Table Tennis team to China tour. As a result nine American Table Tennis player with four officials visited China and warmly welcomed by Zhou and Mao in the Great Hall of the People. They played two exhibition match before 18,000 people and lost the both, but won the heart of the people. Zhou stated that, "a new chapter has been opened in the relations between our two peoples. Your visit to China opened the door to friendly contacts between our two countries."²⁷

A few hours after the meeting Washington withdrew the trade embargo imposed on China 22 years ago, ends the U.S currency control, permitted for trade in commodities nearly equivalent goods traded with U.S.S.R, Visa facilitation for the Chinese to visit USA.²⁸ After the sports exchange political development became rapid. In 9th July 1971, US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger visited China and had a talk with Zhou Enlai. The main aim of Kissinger's visit was to fix the future meeting date between Nixon and Mao. In October 1971, Kissinger again visited China. This time he went there officially to fix the dates and others things related to Nixon's visit to China. Nixon arrived China on 21st February 1972 and stay there till 28th February. It was a historic event for both the country. A Kodak moment was created between Mao and Nixon when they met at the airport. Nixon passionately said that, "We will build a bridge across 16,000 miles and 22 years of hostility which have divided us in past."²⁹

Nixon's week-long visit concluded with a document, called "Shanghai Communique", a historic diplomatic deed, outlined the mutual goal for both the countries on several issues. The two sides agreed to normalize their diplomatic relations, both US and China decided to expand trade and economic cooperation, including the exchange of goods, services and technology, both sides expressed their desire for a peaceful resolution to Korean question and Vietnam issue. The two sides expressed their support for international disarmament efforts. Though started in a very friendly atmosphere, the Taiwan question remained unsolved in Shanghai Communique. In the meantime, President Nixon's involvement in Watergate Scandal in 1973 stopped US closeness towards China. Newly appointed President Carter was reluctant to take further move regarding Sino-USA relationship till 1976. In late 1978, President Carter decided to act. After a long discussion on 15th December, 1978 Carter declared that both the nation, "have agreed to recognize each to other to establish diplomatic relations as of January 1, 1979."³⁰

Ping-Pong diplomacy had a far reaching impact. It forced USSR to be more accommodative. Two months after his visit to China, Nixon went to Moscow in May, 1972 and signed the first ever nuclear arms limitations agreement (SALT I). Ping-Pong diplomacy gave birth of China's giant economy. Less than a decade, China's economic growth was 10% each year.³¹

Legacy of Ping-Pong Diplomacy

The legacy of Ping-Pong Diplomacy serves as a powerful reminder of the potential of sports to bring nations together and promote peace, understanding and cooperation. Zhou Enlai rightly said, “never before in history has a sport been used so effectively as a tool of international diplomacy.”³² Sports has been successfully used as a diplomatic tool many times by various nations to improve their bilateral relations. Armenia and Turkey without any formal diplomatic relation met twice on the occasion of World Cup football match. Despite of political hostility, USA and Cuba, used basketball and baseball to ease their relations. America also apply this “Baseball Diplomacy” to mend his relation with North Korea.³³ India- Pakistan cricket matches have long been considered a symbol of sports diplomacy between the two nations.

Conclusion

So, the Ping-Pong Diplomacy marked a ground breaking moment in history of international relations, demonstrating the potential of sports to bridge diplomatic divides and facilitate rapprochement between nations. The success of Ping-Pong Diplomacy has had a lasting impact on international relations, inspiring numerous sports diplomacy initiatives around the world. As the world continues to grapple with complex global challenges, the lessons of Ping-Pong Diplomacy remain highly relevant. By harnessing the power of sports to build bridges between nations and cultures, we can create new opportunities for dialogue, cooperation and peace.

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