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**Normalization and Pragmatism: Jimmy Carter's China
Policy in the Cold War(1977-1981)**

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TFG Data

Normalization and Pragmatism: Jimmy Carter's China Policy in the Cold War(1977-1981)

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TFG Abstract

Carter's administration completed the normalization of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) on January 1, 1979, marking a pivotal moment in Cold War diplomacy. His approach aimed to formalize relations with Beijing while maintaining substantive, though unofficial ties with Taiwan. The policy reflected both strategic calculations -strengthening the U.S. position against the Soviet Union and ideological motivations consistent with Carter's emphasis on international cooperation and peace. This TFG proposes to study Jimmy Carter's China policy as a turning point in American diplomacy, reshaping U.S. engagement in East Asia. It analyses how the Carter administration's combination of realpolitik and moral diplomacy institutionalized the "One China" framework, which became fundamental to the contemporary U.S.-China relationship.

Dades del TFG

Normalització i pragmatisme: la política xinesa de Jimmy Carter a la Guerra Freda (1977-1981)

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Normalització de relacions, Política d'una sola Xina, Política exterior dels EUA, Diplomàcia de la Guerra Freda, Administració Jimmy Carter

Resum TFG

L'administració Carter va completar la normalització de les relacions diplomàtiques amb la República Popular de la Xina (RPC) l'1 de gener de 1979, marcant un moment crucial en la diplomàcia de la Guerra Freda. El seu enfocament tenia com a objectiu formalitzar les relacions amb Beijing mantenint vincles substantius, tot i que no oficials amb Taiwan. La política reflectia tant càlculs estratègics, enfortir la posició dels EUA contra la Unió Soviètica, com motivacions ideològiques coherents amb l'èmfasi de Carter en la cooperació internacional i la pau. Aquest TFG proposa estudiar la política xinesa de Jimmy Carter com un punt d'inflexió en la diplomàcia americana, remodelant el compromís dels EUA a l'Àsia Oriental. Analitza com la combinació de *realpolitik* i diplomàcia moral de l'administració Carter va institucionalitzar el marc d'Una sola Xina", que es va convertir en fonamental per a la relació contemporània entre els EUA i la Xina.

Datos TFG

Normalización y pragmatismo: La política de Jimmy Carter hacia China durante la Guerra Fría (1977-1981)

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Normalización de las relaciones, Política de una sola China, Política exterior de Estados Unidos, Diplomacia de la Guerra Fría, Administración Jimmy Carter

Resumen TFG

El 1 de enero de 1979, la administración Carter completó la normalización de las relaciones diplomáticas con la República Popular China (RPC), un momento crucial en la diplomacia de la Guerra Fría. Su enfoque buscaba formalizar las relaciones con Beijing, manteniendo al mismo tiempo vínculos sustanciales, aunque no oficiales con Taiwán. Esta política reflejaba tanto cálculos estratégicos -fortalecer la posición de Estados Unidos frente a la Unión Soviética- como motivaciones ideológicas acordes con el énfasis de Carter en la cooperación internacional y la paz. Este TFG propone estudiar la política de Jimmy Carter hacia China como un punto de inflexión en la diplomacia estadounidense, que redefinió la participación de Estados Unidos en Asia Oriental. Analiza cómo la combinación de *realpolitik* y diplomacia moral de la administración Carter que institucionalizó el marco de «Una sola China», y, que se convirtió en fundamental para la relación contemporánea entre Estados Unidos y China.

Linguistical Clarifications

This project includes historical figures of diverse linguistic backgrounds, and a Romanised version spelling of the names will be used. In East Asian cultures, the family name is written first, followed by the given name, which differs from Western naming conventions. This order reflects the cultural importance of the family name and will therefore be respected in this text. Furthermore, the forms utilised will follow the Pinyin romanisation system, which was officially adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1958 and has since become the international standard for transcribing Chinese names into the Latin alphabet. Therefore, the spellings Mao Zedong (毛泽东) and Deng Xiaoping (邓小平) are used.

Use of AI

During the elaboration of this project, two AI tools were used in a supplementary role, specifically ChatGPT and Perplexity. Both of them were employed to generate ideas regarding the structuring and organisation of the argument, do grammar and spelling checks, help with the searching of relevant academic sources and also ensure the bibliography was correctly formatted and ordered. In every case, the outputs needed some revision and corrections as well.

Abbreviations

AIT	American Institute in Taiwan
KMT	Kuomintang
NSC	National Security Council
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
SALT I	The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks I
SALT II	The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks II
TRA	Taiwan Relations Act
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America

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Introduction

The normalization of diplomatic relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) on January 1, 1979 marked a turning point in the evolution of Cold War diplomacy. The United States established formal relations with the PRC after 30 years of isolating China which created new power dynamics in East Asia and transformed the global Cold War relationship. Richard Nixon started the process in the early 1970s which Jimmy Carter completed when his administration established full diplomatic relations with China. Today, when the United States and China are competing for global influence in trade, technology and geopolitics, it is easy to forget that this rivalry was formed on a foundation of careful diplomatic relations. But understanding how that relationship started, and the little contradictions inside it from the very beginning, feels kind of necessary if you want to understand the world we live in right now. This study goes back to that start, to its origin point.

This project investigates the normalization process because it represents a strategic political shift in which the Carter administration from 1977 to 1981 played an essential role. The project aims to establish a new understanding of normalization by examining its development through the interaction between strategic priorities and ideological beliefs and domestic political conditions. Carter came into office with this idea, kind of committed to a foreign policy built on human rights and moral diplomacy. But when it got to China, those principles were overshadowed by the Cold War context. The argument of my defence is that Carter went for normalization by pragmatic routes, taking a compromise answer on Taiwan rather than pushing for a full diplomatic settlement. It also argues that the idealistic way the policy was presented helped hide the realpolitik behind what was actually happening.

This project uses dual research methods to examine primary and secondary sources. The primary sources were obtained from multiple digital archives. It includes the memoirs from the actual key decision makers, like Jimmy Carter, *A Full Life* (2015) and Zbigniew Brzezinski *Power and Principle* (1983), providing us first hand evidence about those internal debates that shaped the policy. The materials from the Office of the Historian of the US Department of the State provide official documentation which shows how U.S. foreign policy evolved during this time. Furthermore, it uses documentation which includes the 1979 Joint Communiqué issued by the U.S. Department of State and United States Congressional records that show how normalization policy developed and how people responded to it. The analysis focuses on academic texts as secondary sources which have influenced how scholars understand the U.S.-China relations and Carter's foreign policy decisions. The study of Jean A. Garrison shows how bureaucratic politics and adviser influence create a major impact on policy decision-making. The work of Brian Hilton introduces the concept of "maximum flexibility," which is particularly relevant for understanding the management of the Taiwan issue. The research uses studies from Breck Walker and Kevin V. Mulcahy to investigate how internal conflicts affected the Carter administration. The research study presents its theoretical framework and historiographical base through these academic works.

The study contains three main chapters. The first chapter examines the background to normalization, focusing on the legacy of earlier administrations, the evolution of U.S.-China relations in the 1970s, the initial policy direction of the Carter administration and the internal clashes between Vance and Brzezinski. The second chapter analyses the breakthrough year of 1979, including the final negotiations, the Joint Communiqué, the redefinition of relations with Taiwan through the American Institute in Taiwan, and the domestic and international reactions that led to the Taiwan Relations Act. The third chapter looks at the consolidation of the Sino-American relationship from around 1980 to 1981, with a focus on strategic collaboration against the Soviet Union after the Afghan invasion, but also the persistent tensions on human rights, Taiwan, and arms sales that kept showing the boundaries of the normalization framework.

1. Background and Early Steps Toward Normalization (1977–1978)

1.1-Historical Context

The process of normalizing relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the late 1970s cannot be understood without considering the diplomatic shifts initiated earlier in the decade. The PRC was founded in 1949 after the Chinese Communist Party's victory, but the United States refused to recognize the communist government in Beijing and instead supported the Republic of China (ROC) regime in Taiwan as the sole legitimate government of China. During the late 1960s the American view toward China underwent a major transformation because of several changes that occurred in the international system. The Sino-Soviet split divided the communist world creating new possibilities that Americans could use to their advantage (Overholt 1973, 707-711). The turning point of this situation was when President Richard Nixon visited Beijing in February 1972 crucially changing the dynamics of Cold War relations.¹ Nixon's trip to China concluded with the Shanghai Communiqué which established rules for restricted partnership between the two nations while maintaining unclear terms related to the "One China" policy. Rather than taking a clear position, the United States acknowledged that "All Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is one China and that Taiwan is a part of China" (Goh, 2005, 495), in other words, United States accepted that China claimed Taiwan as part of its territory, but they avoided clearly agreeing with that claim.

The global response to this shift was immediate, creating major worldwide effects. The PRC gained diplomatic recognition when they became a member of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council in October 1971, which resulted in Taiwan's expulsion from the organization. Washington shifted away from its strict isolation approach toward Communist China because it needed to implement practical measures which reflected the new Cold War priorities (Hirshberg 1993, 252). The United States alliance with countries in East and Southeast Asia suffered a setback when these countries began to change their regional policies. Particularly Japan, which moved quickly to normalize relations with China and their Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka recognized PRC in September 1972 which made him one of the first American allies to do so. This broader Asian realignment deeply reshaped American strategic thinking (Overholt 1973, 711-715). By the mid-1970s, the idea of engaging China became broadly accepted in Washington. The Nixon and Ford administrations established diplomatic relations with China, but Taiwan political issues and U.S. institutional bureaucratic problems prevented the completion of official diplomatic relations. Nixon's resignation together with the Watergate scandal had damaged presidential diplomatic efforts, which created an empty strategic space that Jimmy Carter would take the presidency.² Furthermore, by 1977, conditions inside China also supported gradual cooperation. The death of Mao Zedong in 1976 marked the beginning of a period of transition, with Deng Xiaoping³ consolidating power and signalling pragmatic openness to foreign engagement (Yu-Shek

¹ See *Image 1* for a picture from President Richard Nixon visiting China in 1972

² "Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian," State.gov, 2025.

³ See *Image 2* for a picture of Deng Xiaoping

Cheng and Wankun Zhang, 1999, 99-100). The new PRC priorities matched an American administration which sought to change ethical and strategic aspects of U.S. leadership, creating a unique alignment that Carter would inherit, along with the unresolved challenges left by his predecessors. For Carter, the Nixon legacy created both opportunities and unresolved dilemmas. Engagement with China was no longer politically taboo, it had become a normalized element of U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, the Nixon and Ford administrations had deliberately postponed full diplomatic recognition, leaving Carter to confront the most politically sensitive issues: the status of Taiwan. Thus, Carter inherited a diplomatic framework that strongly encouraged normalization while simultaneously constraining the range of acceptable policy choices.

1.2-Carter's Foreign Policy Vision: Between Human Rights and Pragmatism

The new president Jimmy Carter⁴ took office in January 1977. President Carter entered his role with an ethical framework which supported international human rights and multilateral diplomacy and transparent government operations. His speeches used different language to express his views when compared to the public statements of his earlier leaders. The post-Vietnam context had fundamentally reshaped the assumptions underlying American foreign policy. As historian Andreu Espasa de la Fuente has argued, Vietnam marked the beginning of an "era of limits" in U.S. foreign policy: the country confronted not only geopolitical and economic constraints (including the end of cheap oil) but also the lesson that effective foreign policy requires strong domestic consensus, a foundation that Vietnam had severely eroded (Espasa de la Fuente, 2018, min. 1:06:39-1:07:20). The post-Vietnam generation who had lost faith in government secrecy and military interventions found Carter's foreign policy solution to bring back moral conduct and ethical governance for international relations (Schmitz and Walker 2004, 117-119). The administration used its moral diplomatic approach⁵ to defend itself against international challenges but faced its most difficult test through Chinese diplomatic relations. Carter viewed diplomatic normalization as an essential component of his mission to establish global diplomatic relations based on stability and dialogues. His early internal discussions established diplomatic ties with the PRC as a special opportunity which could create a new period of peaceful cooperation and maturity in U.S. international relations. The PRC strategic position offered the United States a crucial counterbalance to Soviet influence in East Asia. The United States needed to establish diplomatic relations with Beijing while maintaining its Cold War political requirements. Carter faced additional difficulties in implementing his China policy because of domestic political restrictions. Congressional support for Taiwan remained strong because of anti-communist attitudes which developed over several decades and the bipartisan view of Taiwan as a democratic partner. Most legislators viewed any recognition of the PRC as a potential threat to Taiwan which would lead to negative political consequences in their

⁴ See the official portrait of Jimmy Carter in *Image 3*

⁵ "Moral diplomacy", associated with Woodrow Wilson, refers to a U.S. foreign policy approach that sought to promote democracy, human rights and ethical principles in international relations rather than prioritizing strategic or economic interests. See more at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/foreword>

constituencies. The domestic situation required Carter's administration to manage the initial steps toward normalization, which created a risk to their policy (Hilton 2009, 600-605). Public opinion presented obstacles because American perceptions of China were changing but some people still maintained distrust of communist governments. The administration used diplomatic language that described its initial diplomatic efforts as focusing on peace and safe development through gradual progress, which allowed them to build their path toward future recognition (Katz 2000, 671-675).

Carter used his method with China to establish a balance between his moral diplomatic framework and his need for practical diplomatic solutions. The administration viewed Beijing engagement as essential for their geopolitical objectives while believing it would help establish international norms over time. The Chinese leadership after Mao was seen as a moderate force which would lead to political changes through peaceful discussions instead of using military strength. The Carter administration created a diplomatic method which used moral principles and strategic planning to protect American values and national defense requirements (Schmitz and Walker 2004, 129-131). The administration used its careful approach to demonstrate how U.S. foreign policy methods had shifted throughout different periods. Carter selected diplomacy and negotiation with multilateral collaboration as his primary methods to create international stability instead of using military force and secret operations. China presented a dual nature for international relations because it required a demonstration of how countries could combine their ethical standards with their diplomatic activities. The early administration talks established an understanding that normalization would create a new period of U.S.-China relations which would develop through ongoing talks and shared knowledge while avoiding sudden conflicts (Hilton 2009, 599-605). Carter developed his initial international relations framework which combined standard diplomatic goals with actual military power assessment. The administration's human rights and ethical governance principles determined its official statements which required the administration to adopt a flexible diplomatic strategy because domestic political factors and international power dynamics and Taiwan's uncertain status created actual limitations. The administration's China policy implementation process faced internal disputes between idealistic and practical approaches which ultimately determined the success of normalization efforts and the establishment of the "One China" framework (Hilton 2009, 602-605).

1.3-Brzezinski vs. Vance: The Internal Battle for China Policy

The internal debates about China policy which occurred within the Carter administration functioned as the main battleground for U.S. foreign policy identity conflicts. The U.S. established diplomatic ties with the PRC because this process enabled different American foreign policy approaches to be discussed and partially resolved through the establishment of diplomatic relations. The National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski⁶ and Secretary of

⁶ See *Image 4* for a picture of Zbigniew Brzezinski

State Cyrus Vance⁷ emerged as the two main figures who represented the core of this debate. The process of establishing diplomatic relations moved forward because their conflict held back decision-making while their clash determined the speed and style and substance of the diplomatic process.

Brzezinski viewed normalization as a strategy which would enable the United States to gain military superiority over the Soviet Union during the 1970s when détente collapsed. The Soviet Union expansion into Africa and Eastern Europe during the 1970s combined with the Afghan invasion at the end of the decade, made him believe that the United States needed to form a partnership with China to limit Moscow's territorial ambitions (Garrison 2002, 90-92). Operating from the White House's national-security perspective, he pushed for a faster agreement, treating China primarily as a geopolitical counterweight to Soviet expansion and therefore advocating a high-profile, accelerated normalization that would signal a decisive shift in the Cold-War competition even if it required a more flexible interpretation of the Taiwan issue (Walker 2009, 579). On the other hand, Vance, the Secretary of State established diplomatic relations according to Carter's principles of moral and diplomatic conduct. He wanted to establish diplomatic relations through a system that predicted outcomes according to worldwide standards instead of competing between two nations (Garrison 2002, 89-90). Vance established China policy through institutional diplomacy which required multilateral discussions and used legal precedents to achieve long-term stability instead of short-term military advantages. Vance viewed normalization as an extension of Carter's human rights program which would decrease global tensions while bringing the PRC closer to international standards thus enabling Deng Xiaoping to implement domestic reforms (Schmitz and Walker 2004, 121). Furthermore, this gradualist approach aimed to protect the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) while restricting U.S. arms sales to Taiwan and preserving strategic-stability talks including Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the Soviet Union because he believed that quick diplomatic relations would create domestic opposition which would bring about power imbalances throughout East Asia (Walker 2009, 579-580).

The conflict between these two factions extended beyond their differences because their struggle for control of government operations created actual bureaucratic conflicts. By the spring and summer of 1978, Brzezinski noted that substantive policy differences had begun entering through the bureaucracy, becoming "increasingly the object of interagency conflicts and of gossip before eventually arriving to the press" (Brzezinski, 1983, 38). Brzezinski secretly solicited an invitation from the Chinese to visit Beijing in May 1978 without having complete approval from Vance for the operation. He explains in his memoirs that structural tensions between the two men were inevitable from the start, rooted in their different institutional vantage points, he explained that "his was on diplomacy, mine on national security", adding that Vance's unwillingness to speak publicly about foreign policy consistently pushed him to the forefront of the administration's communication (Brzezinski, 1983, 37). There he began to cultivate a relationship with the PRC's acting chief liaison officer in Washington, DC (Walker 2009, 587-588). Carter developed an understanding of

⁷ See *Image 5* for a picture of Cyrus Vance

Brzezinski's urgent demands after he first became interested in Vance's procedural framework which matched his campaign commitments to ethical governance. The Cuban military operations throughout Africa, the Vietnam War invasion of Cambodia and the Ethiopian Somali conflict between 1977 and 1978 demonstrated that détente remained unstable which confirmed Brzezinski's previous predictions. The internal message from this time period shows how Carter's position evolved from March 1977 when he issued a directive to maintain human rights considerations as part of China policy to his October 1978 directive which required staff members to focus on strategic needs.⁸ The change represented a practical adjustment because Mulcahy (1986, 286) explains that Carter relied on Brzezinski during critical times which required presidential action despite its negative impact on government operations.

The discussion faced additional challenges because of domestic political issues. The Vance-led efforts faced increased difficulty because congressional militants who supported the ROC on Taiwan demanded legislative protections which resulted in Vance's cautious approach requiring military protections to be brought back to the table. The Taiwan Relations Act (1979) became law because Vance preferred to have rules defined through laws, which led to legal obligations that established boundaries for what could be done in the future, while Brzezinski opted for a method that established complete distance from all existing agreements (Walker 2009, 582). The research showed that public opinion remained divided because the strategic logic was “highly opinionated and agitated about something (it knows) very little about” and was understood by elites but overall anti-communist sentiment supported Vance's slow approach (Katz 2000, 677).

The Brzezinski-Vance contest developed a dual political system which combined realpolitik with moral diplomacy practices. President Carter declared that the U.S. would recognize the P.R.C. on December 15th, 1978, as a strategic victory for Brzezinski which would begin on January 1, 1979. The "maximum flexibility" framework created by Hilton (2009, 598) solved present conflicts while generating ongoing unclear approaches that continue until now. As Brzezinski explains, this division of responsibilities was not accidental, Carter himself had deliberately assigned Brzezinski, and not Vance, to lead on China, reportedly because “the Chinese trusted” him. He recorded, that Carter confirmed that “the circle of participants in the normalization was limited by him personally and was not part of some intrigue” (Brzezinski, 1983, 41–42). The Carter NSC and State dispute created a new precedent which Mulcahy (1986, 280) shows how National Security Advisers obtained greater power which caused changes to China policy and transformed U.S. foreign decision-making systems during the Reagan administration and afterward.

⁸ “Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian,” State.gov, 2025.

2.The Breakthrough: The Year of Normalization (1979)

2.1-The Final Negotiations and the December 1978 Decision

By 1978, the normalization of relations between the United States and the PRC had evolved from a strategic possibility into an urgent diplomatic objective. The Nixon and Ford administrations established their diplomatic foundations through the 1972 Shanghai Communiqué and their subsequent diplomatic activities while they intentionally refrained from solving their most difficult issue which involved Taiwan (Goh, 2005, 495). The Carter administration faced both the opportunities and restrictions which this earlier policy brought to their administration. The American foreign policy establishment viewed normalization as a necessary goal, yet political and strategic aspects of its implementation remained unresolved. The final phase of negotiations in 1978 must therefore be understood as the moment when ambiguity gave way to decision. President Jimmy Carter chose to direct his attention toward the Taiwan issue because he understood that full diplomatic relations with Beijing required him to resolve that specific issue. Chinese leaders consistently expressed three core demands which required the United States to terminate diplomatic ties with the ROC in Taiwan, to remove all military staff from the island and to cancel the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty (Garrison 2002, 84-86). On 15 December it was announced that diplomatic relations would be established as of 1 January 1979 and that Deng Xiaoping would visit the United States at the end of that month.⁹ Walker (2009, 586–588) shows that internal conflicts within the Carter administration determined the speed and the course of these negotiations. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance supported a slow procedural method which would decrease domestic resistance to his plans while National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski advocated for immediate normalization as part of his worldwide geopolitical strategy.

The Carter administration achieved its first success because previous administrations failed to understand the geopolitical situation which existed during the late 1970s. The combination of the Soviet Union's increased military operations in Africa and Afghanistan and the end of détente agreements, forced Americans to rethink their military strategies. China had become an essential partner for the United States because it had broken away from the Soviet Union and wanted to modernize through Deng Xiaoping's policies (Hilton 2009, 611-613). According to Garrison (2002, 90-92), the triangular relationship between the two countries and the U.S. chose to normalize their relationship because it would strengthen American power through that initiative. So, the United States viewed China through this perspective because it functioned as a military resource which the U.S. could use to balance power against Soviet forces. The analysis of Nixon's administration through the "soviet card" shows that U.S. foreign policy maintained its core elements from one presidential term to another (Goh 2005). The human rights and moral diplomacy which Carter presented through his speeches existed as two elements which operated between the boundaries of Cold War system limitations. During his mandate, the United States viewed normalization of relations with China as essential for national security while also using it to establish better control over

⁹ See *Image 6. The New York Times* cover reporting the establishment of diplomatic relations (1 January 1979)

international relations with major powers. In this sense, the main difference between Carter and Nixon emerged from their separate methods of evaluating their policy objectives through time.

On 4 December 1978 China accepted the contents of the draft joint communiqué for normalization. On 15 December it was announced that diplomatic relations would be established as of 1st January 1979 and that Deng Xiaoping would visit the United States at the end of that month. The decision required significant concessions, especially concerning Taiwan, while it brought major political dangers for domestic stakeholders. Carter made the decision to continue because he wanted to achieve long-term strategic benefits instead of focusing on immediate political advantages. Carter himself recorded the key terms in his personal diary at the time, noting that the Chinese had accepted a one-year treaty with Taiwan, agreed not to contradict the American position that the dispute should be resolved peacefully, and accepted continued U.S. sales of defensive weapons to Taiwan after the treaty's expiration. Reflecting on the broader decision to normalize, he later described it as "probably the most important diplomatic decision I ever made" (Carter, 2015, 107-108). The public opinion had mixed feelings about China which made it harder for the administration to establish its official stance. A November 1978 poll sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations showed that 25 percent strongly agreed, and 39 percent somewhat agreed that the United States should expand trade and technical exchanges with the PRC, while 21 percent opposed this idea. At the same time, attitudes toward Taiwan remained contradictory: although 53 percent considered it a vital U.S. interest, responses to a potential Chinese invasion were divided, with only 20 percent supporting the deployment of U.S. troops. By early 1979, perceptions of the PRC were still largely negative (64 percent unfavorable), while Taiwan was viewed positively by 60 percent (Garrison 2002, 85). This contradiction illustrates the domestic constraints under which the Carter administration operated. Although the elite class started to accept China normalization, public opinion remained divided and uncertain about Taiwan security matters and Taiwan political future. Carter needed to make strategic decisions about China normalization, but he had to keep moving forward despite the lack of national agreement. The role of Taiwan in these negotiations was decisive (Hickey, 2013, 192-194). This situation represented more than just another diplomatic matter, because it served as the main barrier that had previously stopped nations from establishing normal diplomatic ties. The United States made its East Asia commitments to redefine American commitments after Carter accepted Beijing's demands which solved the problem. The Taiwan question determined both when the final agreement would be signed and what its contents would include. In this case, the United States had to choose between official recognition of concession and actual practice which remained unchanged.

2.2-The 1979 Joint Communiqué and the U.S. Interpretation of “One China”

The Joint Communiqué of January 1, 1979, established the official diplomatic basis for the U.S.-PRC diplomatic relations. The document contained short text which described a complicated negotiation process, but it created rules which would influence their relationship for many years. The main issue between the two nations involved United States handling of Chinese territorial claims especially those related to Taiwan. The communiqué stated that “The United States of America recognizes the Government of the People’s Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.”¹⁰ In other words, the new policy established a complete break from earlier practices which had treated the ROC on Taiwan as the official government of China. The most sensitive part of the agreement concerned with determining Taiwan's actual situation. The United States chose to use a particular wording which “acknowledged” Beijing's viewpoint but did not confirm it. The 1972 Shanghai Communiqué introduced this distinction which later received a more precise definition through its use in 1979. The agreement's central strength came from its intentionally ambiguous nature. The two parties used the communiqué to create domestic political solutions which avoided direct disputes about territorial control. The PRC achieved a significant diplomatic accomplishment through its government recognition as China's only legal authority. The United States used precise diplomatic language which enabled its ongoing unofficial contact with Taiwan while keeping treaty obligations to Beijing (Zhao, 1984, 543-546).

The Taiwanese issue determined how the negotiators drafted the final document. The negotiators needed to establish a formula which would achieve their two different goals while protecting their work from political consequences. The implementation of this policy established what scholars name "constructive of ambiguity" which now defines American diplomatic relations with East Asia. This term refers to a strategic framework used by Henry Kissinger (7th national security advisor from 1969 to 1975, followed by being the 56th United States secretary of state from 1973 to 1977) where in diplomatic language is intentionally left vague. This allows disagreeing parties to interpret a treaty or statement in their own favor, facilitating a short-term consensus period when a definitive resolution is currently impossible.¹¹ The communiqué shows that countries established diplomatic relations by managing their existing conflicts instead of resolving their core issues. In this case, the Taiwan sovereignty conflict remained unresolved, however, both parties established a diplomatic system which permitted them to handle their opposing viewpoints. Governments reach stability through treaties because international relations function more effectively when parties maintain their ambiguous positions than when they choose their exact paths (Zhao, 1984, 544-546). The communiqué demonstrates how domestic circumstances and international dynamics work together to shape a country's foreign relations. The Carter administration had to ensure that the agreement would be acceptable not only to Beijing but

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Communiqué of January 1, 1979,” January 1, 1979.

¹¹ “Constructive Ambiguity: The Art of Saying Something and Nothing at the Same Time,” *Medium*.
<https://medium.com/@kootie73/constructive-ambiguity-784f931c652f>

also to Congress, U.S. allies, and the American public (Hickey, 2013, 176-178). The resulting language reflects this multi-level negotiation process, demonstrating the complexity of diplomatic decision-making in a democratic system. Successful normalization required both strategic agreement and the creation of diplomatic storytelling which could satisfy opposing needs. The "One China" policy which the communiqué established functioned more as a calculated agreement than a basic declaration of principles which would maintain a delicate but operational relationship.

2.3-Redefining Relations with Taiwan: AIT and the End of Recognition

The U.S. required a complete change in its dealings with Taiwan before it could start normalizing its relationship with the P.R.C. The United States moved away from almost 30 years of formal partnership when it stopped recognizing diplomatic relations and shut down its Taipei embassy and ended the Mutual Defense Treaty (1954-1979). The Carter administration did not want to completely cut ties with Taiwan, so they worked to establish a new framework for maintaining important relationships between the two countries while fulfilling their normalization obligations (Hong N., 1986, 69-73). The American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) served as their main instrument for achieving this goal. AIT operated as a private organization that functioned as an unofficial embassy to manage all diplomatic and economic and cultural activities between the United States and Taiwan. The United States could operate a major base on the island through this structure because they recognized the PRC as the only legitimate government of China (Zhao, 1984, 555-560). The establishment of AIT shows how Carter's administration developed practical policies through Carter's adaptive methods. The administration needed to find a way to handle two opposing goals, so it created an institutional framework which protected American interests while making it seem like they followed the "One China" policy.

The transition to unofficial relations between two parties created problems which required solutions. The absence of a formal defense treaty with Taiwan created security issues which developed into a complete security crisis for both the United States and Taiwan. The concerns developed into an important factor which determined how congress would react to the process of normalization (Zhao, 1984, 543-547). The Taiwan question remained central even after the formal agreement with Beijing had been concluded. The process of normalization established diplomatic recognition, but security matters, sovereignty questions and long-term stability issues remained unsolved. The establishment of AIT serves as an effort to handle ongoing conflicts which remain unaddressed between the two groups. The United States used two different methods during this time period by officially ending ties with other countries while maintaining their nonofficial relations. The United States used this method with Taiwan because it enabled them to fulfill their obligations while responding to changes in international power dynamics.

The announcement of normalization produced an immediate and profound sense of betrayal in Taipei. The Carter administration had notified President Chiang Ching-kuo¹² only hours before the public announcement, a gesture of insensitivity that compounded the substance of the decision itself. The Harvard International Review states that “the insensitivity with which the administration handled the affair, however, did little to ameliorate the sense of betrayal felt by the people of Taiwan. In fact, the announcement came only a week before an open election to fill vacancies in the National Assembly and Legislative Council, which was subsequently cancelled”.¹³ The American public received the most resentment from the public but people actually directed their anger toward the Carter administration. Taiwan had only twenty-two diplomatic allies by the end of 1980 which represented a major decline from its Cold War peak.¹⁴ Furthermore, the 1979 crisis produced one unexpected internal result that brought political changes in Taiwan. Chiang Ching-kuo's government developed a new strategy to defend its political position due to the regime facing international diplomatic isolation and lacking official recognition as a legitimate government. The Kuomintang (KMT)¹⁵ leadership understood that its former claim of being the legitimate governing authority throughout China had ended with the loss of official U.S. recognition and required them to establish a new legitimacy base. The government implemented a gradual reduction of repressive measures which resulted in increased opportunities for native Taiwanese to hold power and the establishment of more competitive elections that allowed non-KMT candidates to participate (Chao and Myers, 1994, 217). The 1980 electoral process expanded according to 1972 rules and Chiang Ching-kuo recognized in 1981 that constitutional government development would help demonstrate the fundamental differences between the two sides. The TRA allowed congressional funding to Taiwan which created an incentive for Taiwan to improve its human rights record because this record needed to meet requirements for sustaining arms sales.¹⁶

Once the 1954 Mutual Defense Treaty ended on January 1, 1980 it marked a fundamental turning point which changed U.S. policy toward Taiwan. President Jimmy Carter abolished the treaty after maintaining official diplomatic relations with the PRC, leaving Taiwan without a formal security guarantee for the first time in twenty-five years. The new alliance replaced existing relationships with a strategic plan which created uncertainty about its outcome. The U.S. and Taiwan maintain their relationship through strategic ambiguity as the U.S. recognizes informal diplomatic ties with Taiwan while remaining undecided about its military response to a possible cross-strait conflict (Bush, 2004, 170-178). Strategic ambiguity emerged as part of a broader Cold War framework governing U.S. relations with

¹² See the official portrait of Chiang Ching-kuo in *Image 7*

¹³ Charles J. Wysocki, “Taiwan: Flourish and Decline,” *Harvard International Review*, September 1980. <https://hir.harvard.edu/taiwan-flourish-and-decline-2/>

¹⁴ Kristina Kironka, “How Taiwan Lost Africa,” *CEIAS – Central European Institute of Asian Studies*. <https://ceias.eu/how-taiwan-lost-africa/>

¹⁵ Kuomintang (KMT). The party describes itself as “a political party with a grand vision and a proud history” whose vision is “to establish the Republic of China (ROC) as a free, democratic, and dignified country with prosperity for all,” emphasizing that “the Party’s precarious history is the very testament to realize its vision.” <https://www.kmt.org.tw>

¹⁶ John J. Chin and Staten Rector, “Taiwan: Democratic David in 21st Century East Asia,” *Frontiers in Political Science*, November 26, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1631545>

China following normalization in 1979, a compromise designed to bridge multiple competing interests: deterring China from attacking Taiwan, maintaining stability in the Western Pacific, deepening cooperation with the PRC to counter the Soviet Union and preserving a close if unofficial relationship with Taipei.¹⁷

2.4-Domestic and International Reactions: The Road to the Taiwan Relations Act

The decision to normalize relations produced major reactions from both American citizens and people from other countries because it showed the international consequences which resulted from Carter's diplomatic strategy (Hickey, 2013, 178-180). The sudden break of diplomatic ties with Taiwan created diplomatic problems for American legislators who considered Taiwan to be their traditional ally and their main opposition to communist forces. These concerns were particularly strong given the lack of prior consultation with Congress, which many legislators saw as an overreach of executive authority. As a result, Congress moved quickly to assert its role in shaping U.S. policy toward Taiwan, leading on 13 March 1979, with a 90 to 6 Senate vote and a House vote of 345 to 55, the creation of the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) in April 1979 (Garrison 2002, 87). This legislation remarked on the American commitment to assure Taiwan “to help maintain peace, security, and stability in the West Pacific”, and declared that “any effort to determine the future of Taiwan by other than peaceful means ... [was] a threat to the peace and security of the Western Pacific area and of grave concern to the United States.”¹⁸ In other words, the TRA established new rules for the U.S.-Taiwan relations which created a basis for maintaining unofficial ties while guaranteeing Taiwan's defense needs “providing Taiwan with arms of a defensive character”. Both the administration and leaders of Congress declared a victory, the president for his policy of normalization of relations with Beijing and key members of Congress because of their success in toughening the language of the administration's original legislation. The Chinese for their part expressed “grave concern” but did not suggest that the act would interrupt normalization of relations (Garrison 2002, 87).

The TRA demonstrates that executive branch officials did not impose normalization as a top-down decision because multiple political actors in the American system fought over its implementation. U.S. policy toward Taiwan remained central to U.S. relations with the PRC which Carter established through his diplomatic efforts. The Cold War created an international context that shaped all reactions to normalization. First, the U.S. allies in Asia, viewed the move as a stabilizing development that matched their existing China policies (Hickey, 2013, 191-194). The Soviet Union viewed the agreement with distrust because it saw the deal as a military partnership between Washington and Beijing (Tubilewicz, 2005,

¹⁷ Matthew Turpin, “The Case for Greater Clarity and Less Ambiguity in the Taiwan Strait,” *Brookings Institution*, March 20, 2026,

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-case-for-greater-clarity-and-less-ambiguity-in-the-taiwan-strait/>

¹⁸ For the text of the Taiwan Relations Act, see Congressional Record, 96th Congress, 1 st Session, March 26, 1979 Vol. 125, Part 5, page. 6254 Section 2

49). International relations experienced a major transformation through this development which extended beyond its initial bilateral scope. The U.S. recognized the P.R.C. because it wanted to establish diplomatic ties with China which would restore official dealings with the PRC.

In my view, Carter was not just using China as a pawn against the USSR. Scholarly records show that he believed that normalization would create better international relations while reducing tensions because he believed it would advance his moral diplomacy goals even though he always considered strategic factors. The Carter administration achieved its diplomatic mission to establish complete diplomatic ties with the P.R.C. during 1979 through its successful combination of strategic military planning and effective practical diplomatic methods. The Taiwan question created the main barrier to this process which ended when the United States established the American Institute in Taiwan and stopped recognizing Taiwan. Carter's approach to China required both idealistic beliefs and real world essential elements. His speech and his vision for the future showed his intent to decrease worldwide disputes, but his strategic priorities showed that he focused on defeating the Soviet Union. Normalization emerged from a practical solution between two opposing ideas because geopolitical factors won over the process despite being presented as part of a plan to achieve worldwide peace through cooperation.

3.Consolidation and Pragmatic Cooperation (1980–1981)

3.1-Strategic Cooperation Against the Soviet Union

The U.S. and the P.R.C. entered into a new diplomatic period which began after 1979 when both nations established official diplomatic ties with each other. By 1980, the strategic logic behind normalization became increasingly evident. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 represented a decisive turning point in this evolution. The Carter administration interpreted the invasion as clear evidence that the Soviet Union had abandoned the principles of détente and adopted a more aggressive international strategy (Starr, 2004, 157-158). Between 1979 and 1980, the Sino-American relationship developed from diplomatic recognition into a strategic partnership which focused on countering Soviet power (Crean, 2024, 135-148). National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski considered normalization to be part of a larger effort to improve American power in the triangular relationship between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. On January 3 1980, he presented a “Strategic Reaction to the Afghanistan Problem” to Carter which included plans to sell defensive weapons to China.¹⁹ Brzezinski used his presidential memorandum to explain that Soviet military actions during this crisis operated as a modern version of the Truman Doctrine which emerged during the 1947 crisis arguing that “the Soviet intervention in the present case is both more blatant and more brutal than in 1947, and the Gulf is unquestionably more vital to Western interests today”. Carter supported these arguments because he had witnessed the Soviet Union destroy détente through its attacks in Africa, Indochina and now in Afghanistan. This episode reproduced, almost exactly, the dynamic previously examined, when strategic pressure intensified, Carter deferred to Brzezinski's realpolitik framework over Vance's procedural caution.

The strategy became more visible after 1979 (Hershberg, n.d.).²⁰ The United States and China maintained an informal relationship which allowed both nations to work together in opposing Soviet expansionism. The Chinese leadership under Deng Xiaoping identified the Soviet Union as the greatest danger to Chinese security after the Soviet supported Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in 1978 and the Soviet military buildup along the Sino-Soviet border (Ross, 1986). Both Beijing and Washington aimed to restrict Soviet power throughout Asia. The Carter administration considered China as a strategic partner which could help them stop their opponents from gaining an advantage in worldwide power dynamics. The relationship between the U.S. and PRC developed into a strategic partnership despite their lack of a formal military alliance. The two governments established a common position about Soviet interventions in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia through their expanded intelligence-sharing and diplomatic activities (Crean, 2024, 135-148). The normalization process which Carter

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, vol. XVIII, “Soviet Union”*; Document 45: Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Strategic Reaction to the Afghanistan Problem” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v18/d45>

²⁰ Federico Pachetti, “Going Global: Zbigniew Brzezinski and China’s Rise,” Wilson Center, October 10, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/going-global-zbigniew-brzezinski-and-chinas-rise>

initiated grew into a geopolitical alignment which developed through the joint effort of opposing Soviet expansionism. Furthermore, the visit of the Secretary of Defence Harold Brown to Beijing during January 1980²¹ established itself as the first official visit from the U.S. Defense Secretary to China since 1949. Brown conducted his visit to China with military purposes because he established military-to-military relations, describing it as a “new military dimension of uncertain but potentially great importance”.²²

The trade between the two countries grew rapidly during 1980 and 1981 because both countries started to establish normal economic ties after they had stayed apart for many years. Washington relaxed certain export restrictions in order to permit the transfer of civilian technology to China particularly in sectors related to science engineering energy and agriculture (Hong N., 1986, 69-73). American policymakers believed that economic engagement could simultaneously strengthen China against the Soviet Union and encourage Beijing's integration into the international system. This period experienced a substantial increase in both scientific and educational exchange programs. Universities established academic cooperation programs, and growing numbers of Chinese students traveled to the United States to study science, technology and engineering. The educational exchanges carried both practical benefits and symbolic value. The program provided Chinese students and specialists with access to Western knowledge and technology, which helped China develop its modernization program. The program allowed two societies that had maintained distance from each other since 1949 to establish a normal relationship through their educational partnership.

The relationship developed cultural diplomacy into an essential diplomatic method. Official visits to the two countries, scientific delegations, artistic exhibitions and media coverage helped both nations improve their mutual perceptions after enduring decades of hostile propaganda. The United States received Deng Xiaoping in January 1979,²³ marking the beginning of a new era, through which both countries established stable Sino-American cooperation. Beyond the strategic dimension, Carter's memoirs reveal that the personal dynamic with Deng extended into unexpected terrain, at the state banquet concluding the visit, Carter used the occasion to request that China once again permit Bibles and religious worship, prohibited since 1949. The episode illustrates how Carter's personal convictions shaped even his most high-stakes diplomatic encounters (Carter, 2015, 89). Also, the exchanges between both countries during 1980 and 1981 expanded the view that their diplomatic relationship had entered a permanent phase of transformation between the two nations (Crean, 2024, 135-148). Carter's foreign policy execution showed that realpolitik became the dominant force during his last presidential term. Carter had entered office with a focus on human rights and moral diplomacy, but his administration needed to follow traditional strategic estimates because of international power realities. China relations

²¹ See *Image 8* for Secretary of Defense Harold Brown's visit to Beijing in January 1980

²² Jay Mathews, “Brown Ends China Visit That Improved Military Ties,” *The Washington Post*, January 13, 1980. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/13/brown-ends-china-visit-that-improved-military-ties/044b179b-4352-4aec-9737-a76ac83b8491/>.

²³ See *Images 9 to 11* showing Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping's visit to the U.S. in January 1979.

developed through this evolution into one of the most significant examples. The administration used moral and diplomatic language for its public statements while the development of Sino-American relations, which relied on shared opposition to the Soviet Union, depended on mutual strategic advantages rather than ideological matching (Strong, 1986, 636-650). The practical reasoning process existed within the economic and cultural exchange activities between nations. The U.S. supported China's modernization because American officials believed that a stronger China would create better international relations during the Cold War period, not because they supported communist ideologies. Chinese leaders sought to work with the U.S. because they believed that American technology and investment and diplomatic backing would help them establish greater international power.

The period between 1980 and 1981 established the development of a relationship which operated according to pragmatic principles. The Washington-Beijing partnership did not establish itself as an ideological alliance who committed to an official defense partnership. The relationship between the two countries emerged from their need to maintain strategic security and their economic connections and their mutual goal to decrease Soviet dominance during the Cold War which was intensifying.

3.2-Persistent Tensions: Human Rights, Taiwan, Arms Sales

Despite the consolidation of strategic and economic cooperation, important tensions continued to shape the U.S.-China relationship after normalization. The 1979 diplomatic breakthrough established formal recognition between the two countries yet it failed to resolve the essential conflicts that existed between their nations. The United States and China regarded Taiwan as their most critical point of contention while President Carter's human rights dedication created problems with his efforts to work together with the communist government. Consequently, the period from 1980 to 1981 confirmed the new partnership boundaries while showing that the process of normalization only served to manage conflicts instead of achieving complete conflict resolution. During this time frame the Taiwan issue remained a major focus. The United States maintained significant unofficial relations with Taiwan through TRA which Congress approved in April 1979 although the Carter administration officially recognized the PRC as China's legitimate government. The TRA established the legal basis for continued economic, cultural, and security ties between Washington and Taipei, while also committing the United States to provide Taiwan with defensive military equipment (Hickey 2013, 176-180). This created a major contradiction for Beijing because it disrupted the ongoing process of establishing diplomatic ties. Chinese leaders believed that diplomatic recognition should gradually lead to the reduction of American involvement with Taiwan. The U.S. established unofficial ties with the island while maintaining its option to establish future military partnerships. The two governments maintained their ongoing conflict about Taiwan even after they established formal relations with each other. During the years 1980 and 1981, the United States arms sales to Taiwan created a major controversy between the two countries. The Carter administration wanted to

reduce public attention about these sales yet Washington kept approving defensive arms transfers according to the TRA regulations. Chinese officials repeatedly criticized this policy, arguing that it violated the spirit of the 1979 Joint Communiqué and interfered in China's internal affairs (Hickey 2013, 176-180).

The Carter administration developed the "construct of ambiguity" to handle two opposing demands of their administration. The U.S. wanted to maintain peaceful relations with Beijing while avoiding any direct military conflict with the PRC. The American decision makers needed to establish a strategy which would stop potential military attacks on Taiwan while providing Congress and American citizens with proof that the United States would continue its support for Taiwan. The diplomatic arrangement established between Taiwan and China did not provide definitive security assurances to either party. The United States used this diplomatic method to control its relations with both Taiwan and China throughout the entire period. The political complexity of this position became clear when Carter explained the matter during his visit to Beijing August 1981²⁴ after leaving office. The United States arms sales to Taiwan had no time limit according to Carter but he acknowledged that previous agreements in 1978 restricted sales to "strictly defensive weapons which cannot be used by Taiwan against the mainland".²⁵ The explanation demonstrated that China had made a false claim about a time limitation which they said had been promised during the negotiations for normalization yet China had no rights to interpret that original agreement. The Arms Control Association reports that Carter administration defense sales from its final year established a new standard which would create obstacles during the 1982 negotiations that produced Reagan's August 17 Communiqué.²⁶ The arms sales issue showed how the "constructive ambiguity" which existed at the core of the normalization framework created ongoing disputes which moved their actual conflicts to future dates.

The relationship between the two parties showed the limits of Carter's pragmatic approach to implement his human rights policy. Carter maintained his dedication to ethical diplomatic practices which he combined with his commitment to human rights protection throughout his time as president. His administration used its power to denounce authoritarian regimes especially the Soviet Union because these governments engaged in political oppression and blocked basic civil rights. The critical test of this framework occurred at the same time as the process of normalization. The Democracy Wall movement²⁷ began in Beijing during the winter season from 1978 to 1979 when Wei Jingsheng and other activists protested for political democracy which they viewed as the "fifth modernization" that should accompany

²⁴ See *Image 12* from Carter's visit to China in 1981

²⁵ Don Oberdorfer and Michael Weisskopf, "Carter: No Time Limit on Taiwan Arms Sales," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 1981.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/08/28/carter-no-time-limit-on-taiwan-arms-sales/3c2091c6-69bf-4fae-a0d4-75571995fac2/>

²⁶ "U.S. Conventional Arms Sales to Taiwan 1980–2010," *Arms Control Association*.

<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/us-conventional-arms-sales-taiwan-1980-2010>

²⁷ The Democracy Wall movement (1978-1979) was a brief period of political openness in which citizens posted hand-written manifestos on a wall in the Xidan district of central Beijing, publicly criticizing the government and calling for democratic reforms. The movement spread to other major Chinese cities before being suppressed by the authorities in early 1979.

Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. Deng quickly responded to the situation by using forceful measures against it which started in January 1979 when he began his campaign to stop the movement and the authorities sentenced Wei Jingsheng²⁸ to fifteen years in prison for his counterrevolutionary activities.²⁹ Even though the administration maintained a highly protective stance towards China when dealing with these particular matters, Washington chose to maintain silence about political restrictions happening in the PRC which arises from the Chinese political system's authoritarian structure. The Carter administration chose to focus more on Soviet bloc countries which practiced political censorship and democratic suppression than on Chinese political restrictions and censorship and lack of democratic institutions. Carter's foreign policy decisions made during the Cold War period showed how Cold War military priorities affected his diplomatic policies. The administration viewed the Soviet Union as the principal global threat to American interests, while China increasingly became recognized as an important strategic partner for the United States. Human rights issues lost their importance when they created obstacles which needed to be resolved through international relations. The Sino-American relationship proved the operational restrictions which limited Carter's moral diplomatic approach because it showed that ethical standards usually took second place to national security goals.

The United States critics began to recognize this contradiction which existed in the system. Some observers argued that Carter applied human-rights principles inconsistently depending on the strategic value of particular countries (Katz 2000, 666-667). The administration publicly denounced Soviet human rights abuses, but it refrained from making similar statements about China because maintaining positive relations with Beijing had become critical for Cold War military tactics. The United States relationship with China demonstrated how Carter's foreign policy had to deal with two opposing forces: his idealistic worldview and his realpolitik (Strong, 1986, 647-650). The situation experienced additional complications because of domestic political circumstances. Congressional support for Taiwan remained strong among both Republicans and Democrats and many legislators believed that the administration had already made excessive concessions to Beijing during normalization. Anti-communist attitudes continued to influence American public opinion and American public sympathy toward Taiwan remained strong because of the two nations' history of alliance. The situation required Carter to handle pressure from both Beijing and domestic political groups and congressional members who wanted to increase support for Taiwan. Chinese public opinion remained divided about the country despite increased economic and cultural interaction (Katz 2000, 666-667). The normalization process improved American perceptions of the PRC for some citizens, but most Americans maintained their distrust of communist governments and their doubts about China's future plans. The Carter administration faced restrictions on its activities because domestic tensions required policymakers to achieve equilibrium between Beijing strategic collaboration and Taiwan political backing. The ongoing tensions between the United States and China showed that

²⁸ See *images 13 and 14* from Wei Jingsheng and The Democracy Wall movement

²⁹ Los Angeles Times, "Article," *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1993.

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-09-14-mn-35002-story.html>

their normalized relationship failed to establish complete stability between the two nations. The two countries established a diplomatic framework which allowed them to address their existing disputes while maintaining their larger strategic relationship (Hong N., 1986, 73-75). The relationship depended on compromise, ambiguity, and mutual restraint rather than on genuine political convergence.

The transition from Jimmy Carter to Ronald Reagan in 1981³⁰ introduced new uncertainties regarding the future of the U.S.-China relations, although the general framework established through normalization ultimately survived the change in administration. During the 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan initially adopted a more critical tone toward the PRC and expressed stronger support for Taiwan, generating concerns in Beijing that the United States might reconsider aspects of normalization.³¹ However, once in office, Reagan became aware of the total secret Sino-American partnership against the Soviet Union which developed during the Carter administration, establishing strategic ties that restricted his decision-making abilities (Hong N. and Hammersmith 1986, 75-78). Reagan retained most strategic policies that Carter's administration had developed after he became president. The anti-Soviet dimension of the relationship remained central, particularly as Cold War tensions intensified during the early 1980s. Furthermore, Secretary of State Alexander Haig wanted to establish a formal "strategic association" with Beijing which he considered an existing informal relationship, to create a partnership that would block Soviet dominance in Asia. This statement demonstrates Brzezinski's plan under President Carter maintained its original objective throughout its execution.³² The Reagan administration used anti-communist language which extended beyond Carter's approach and China remained an essential ally for the United States in its battle against the Soviet Union. The Reagan administration maintained the same practical approach to diplomatic relations which had guided the Carter administration throughout its term.

³⁰ See *Image 15* from the Carter-Reagan presidential transition in 1981

³¹ Chas W. Freeman Jr., "The 1981-82 Sino-American Taiwan Arms Sales Negotiations," *Middle East Policy Council*, September 30, 2019. <https://mepc.org/speeches/1981-82-sino-american-taiwan-arms-sales-negotiations/>

³² U.S. Department of State, "The Reagan Foreign Policy, 1981-1989," *Office of the Historian*. <https://history.state.gov/departmenthistory/short-history/reaganforeignpolicy>

Conclusion

The normalization of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRC in 1979 represented a decisive turning point in the evolution of Cold War international relations. The process evolved through strategic needs, domestic restrictions and internal policy conflicts which comprised the Carter administration's decision-making process. The analysis demonstrates that the late 1970s period serves as the key decision point where normalization should be viewed as an expected result. The research findings demonstrate that the success of normalization depended on the United States to establish new foreign policy priorities. The U.S. decided to formally recognize the PRC which required multiple agreements that included ending diplomatic ties with Taiwan and canceling current security treaties. These agreements were not made casually, they showed up as a deliberate calculation that the long term strategic benefits of fitting in with Beijing were greater than the political costs of letting go of a formal alliance with Taipei .

The internal debate between Brzezinski and Vance showed the wider push and pull in Carter's foreign policy, there was a realpolitik approach that put geopolitical competition with the Soviet Union first, alongside a more values-based diplomacy grounded in human rights and multilateral engagement. The two men represented not only different personalities or bureaucratic interests, but fundamentally different conceptions of what American foreign policy should be and how it should be conducted. It seems that once international pressure got stronger, especially after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, then the realpolitik framework kept winning. Carter's public speeches sounded full of peace and cooperation, but what was actually decided in the closed rooms was strategic calculations above all, and the idealistic framing of normalization served primarily as a way of managing domestic political opposition rather than as a genuine governing principle, a gap between rhetoric and reality that runs through the entire Carter China policy and constitutes one of its most historically revealing features.

The role of domestic politics should not be underestimated. During the Carter administration there was a Congress that stayed deeply skeptical about any move that could let Taiwan go. At the same time public opinion stayed split, it remained mostly distrustful toward the PRC. The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 came out of that inside push, it did not just approve Carter's approach it also changed it, and it placed limits on it, setting up legal commitments for Taiwan's defense that the administration had intentionally avoided stating in that direct form. So, the back and forth between executive initiative and legislative reaction created a policy that was both more complex and more durable than either side had first wanted. The Taiwan question stayed the main unresolved problem the whole way through all of this process. The framework that came out: official recognition of the PRC, unofficial ties with Taiwan via the American Institute in Taiwan and then a stance of strategic ambiguity about U.S. military promises, it just helped manage it. This management approach, institutionalized through the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 has basically shaped U.S. policy in the Taiwan Strait ever since. Furthermore, the idea of "strategic ambiguity" that guides how the U.S. responds to tensions across the Taiwan Strait today is, at its core, a direct continuation of the

decisions Carter made in December 1978 and January 1979. The planned refusal to commit, meaning not defending Taiwan across the board or abandoning it, was intentionally built into the design.

The consolidation of the Sino American relationship between 1980 and 1981, revealed the pragmatic logic underneath normalization. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did shift the bilateral relationship into something like a strategic partnership, with more intelligence-sharing, tech transfers and senior level military visits. Still, this cooperation stayed contained by stubborn frictions: about arms sales to Taiwan, about human rights and also about the basic question of how far each side would bend to accommodate the other's central interests. The relationship that came out of normalization wasn't really about true convergence, it was more like managed coexistence, built on shared strategic necessity. Carter's human rights commitments had defined his early foreign policy idea, but got slowly pushed under Cold War necessities as his presidency moved along. What projected was the way those human rights principles were used inconsistently, praised loudly for the Soviet scene, but largely ignored over in the Chinese one. This mismatch showed the limits of "moral diplomacy" as a way to govern. This was not hypocrisy in the simple sense, but rather the product of a system in which ethical commitments and national security calculations operated on different timescales and with different institutional constituencies.

The broader significance of this period lies precisely in its unresolved nature. The "One China" framework that Carter institutionalized was never meant as a clean statement of principle, it was more of a diplomatic compromise, a calculated compromise meant to mitigate competing demands without committing to any definitive outcome. And even now, decades later, that same ambiguity keeps quietly organizing one of the most consequential, and most volatile relationships in international politics. The U.S.-China competition that frames the current world order (across trade, technology, military posture and global governance) doesn't just appear from nowhere. It evolved from a relationship that was, right from the start, built on carefully left with multiple interpretations and contradictions that were never fully reconciled. Looking closely at where that framework came from, the decisions that were made, the tradeoffs that got accepted and the frictions that were deliberately left unaddressed, is not merely a historical event. It's a necessary way to understand the world as it is today and the structural limits that still shape how Washington and Beijing deal with each other, across the Taiwan Strait and beyond.

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Appendix

Illustrations



Image 1: “President Richard Nixon says goodbye to China’s Premier Chou En-lai at Shanghai Airport, Monday, Feb. 28, 1972 before departing for Alaska, winding up his eight-day China visit”. From: Anonymous. *App Newsroom*. <https://n9.cl/ugf75>



Image 2: Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference from 1978 to 1983. From: Anonymous. “Deng Xiaoping at the arrival ceremony for the Vice Premier of China”. *Wikimedia Commons*.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Deng_Xiaoping_at_the_arrival_ceremony_for_the_Vice_Premier_of_China_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Deng_Xiaoping_at_the_arrival_ceremony_for_the_Vice_Premier_of_China_(cropped).jpg)



Image 3: Jimmy Carter, 39th President of the United States. Official portrait, 1977. From: Department of Defense. Department of the Navy. Naval Photographic Center. “Jimmy Carter's presidential portrait”. *Wikimedia Commons*.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JimmyCarterPortrait2.jpg>



Image 4: Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-American political scientist, geostrategist, and statesman. From: Kightlinger, Jack E. “Zbigniew Brzezinski, 1977”. *Wikimedia Commons*.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zbigniew_Brzezinski_1977.jpg



Image 5: Cyrus Vance at the University of Georgia, College of Agriculture. From: Gotfryd, Bernard, photographer. "Cyrus Vance, Secretary of State [University of Georgia, College of Agriculture]". *Wikimedia Commons*.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyrus_Vance,_Secretary_of_State_\(University_of_Georgia,_College_of_Agriculture\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cyrus_Vance,_Secretary_of_State_(University_of_Georgia,_College_of_Agriculture).jpg)

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

LATE CITY EDITION
Weather: Windy, mild today; heavy tonight. Sunny tomorrow. Temperature: today 31-35; yesterday 45-50. Details on page 29.

VOL. CXXVIII ... No. 44,068 Copyright © 1979 The New York Times NEW YORK, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1978 20 CENTS

U.S. AND CHINA OPENING FULL RELATIONS; TENG WILL VISIT WASHINGTON ON JAN. 29

Israel Rejects New Peace Proposal; U.S., Irritated, Charges Distortion

LINK TO TAIWAN ENDS

Carter, in TV Speech, Says 'We Recognize Reality' After 30-Year Rift

By HERB RITCHIE
WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — President Carter announced a "historic agreement" today under which the United States and China will establish diplomatic relations on Jan. 1.

The President also said the T'ang Sheng-chao, the powerful Deputy Prime Minister of China, would visit this country on Jan. 29. The visit, he said, will be the first by a high-level Chinese Communist official since the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949.

In a dramatic and unexpected speech at national television, Mr. Carter also announced that the United States would terminate diplomatic relations and suspend defense treaty with Taiwan. But in remarks addressed especially to the people of the island, he pledged that the United States would remain interested in the peaceful resolution of the issue.

His Peking, a simultaneous announcement was made by the Communist Party Chairman Hua Guofeng. An official Chinese statement repeated the Chinese position that a renunciation of Taiwan with the mainland was "contrary to China's internal affairs." Page 10

By BERNARD GWEZDAN
WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — The Carter Administration acceded today to a demand by the Israeli Cabinet to reject the latest peace proposal, which the Israeli Cabinet rejected today. The Israeli Cabinet rejected today the latest peace proposal, which the Israeli Cabinet rejected today.

At the end of a special four-hour meeting, Prime Minister Menachem Begin, Israeli Prime Minister, said to reporters: "The negotiations, the negotiations will resume — we cannot say when."

The official in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry denied Israeli charges that Egypt had made new demands during Secretary of State Vance's trip. Page 43

No Hope for Treaty by Deadline
The endorsement by the Cabinet of Prime Minister Begin's stand to talk with Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance was Wednesday and yesterday seemed any remaining hope for the proposed Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty might be signed by this Friday, the original deadline.

Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan warned in an interview broadcast tonight that there was a possibility the draft peace treaty might not be signed at all, and that negotiations between Israel and Egypt would have to start all over again.

The Cabinet's refusal to go along with the United States Government's view Continued on Page 3, Column 1

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The Cabinet's refusal to go along with the United States Government's view Continued on Page 3, Column 1

Vance Goes to White House
Mr. Vance, who arrived at Andrews Air Force Base late this afternoon, went by helicopter directly to the White House to report to President Carter on the trip to China and Jerusalem.

There was no official statement by the White House after the Vance-Carter meeting. But the State Department was instructed to draft a "white paper" to put on record the conditions against the Israeli.

Relations between Washington and Jerusalem were again under severe stress, and Mr. Vance was described as "tired" and "anxious" by the Israeli Cabinet's decision, which left little room for any early progress.

The immediate reaction of American officials in the Vance party was that Continued on Page 3, Column 1

CITY OF CLEVELAND
DEFAULTS ON LOANS
Council Adjourns Without Action as Midnight Deadline Passes
By REGINALD STUART

China Move Reflects Carter's Aim To Protect Arms Pact and Taiwan
By HERB RITCHIE
WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 — Administration officials said tonight that President Carter's announcement of American plans to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China reflected the President's aim to protect the arms pact and Taiwan.

Image 6: Cover *The New York Times*: Former PRC vice premier Deng Xiaoping and former U.S. president Jimmy Carter sign historic diplomatic agreements between the United States and China on Jan. 31, 1979. Jimmy Carter Library



Image 7: Portrait of Chiang Ching-kuo, the seventh president, son and successor of Chiang Kai-shek. From: Secretariat of the National Assembly. “Portrait of Chiang Ching-Kuo, President of Republic of China (Taiwan) from 1978 to 1988.” *Wikimedia Commons*.



Image 8: “Brown Sees a Basis for Chinese Accord” (10 January 1980). Photograph of U.S. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown’s visit to Beijing in January 1980, the first official visit by a U.S. Defense Secretary to China since 1949. *The New York Times*

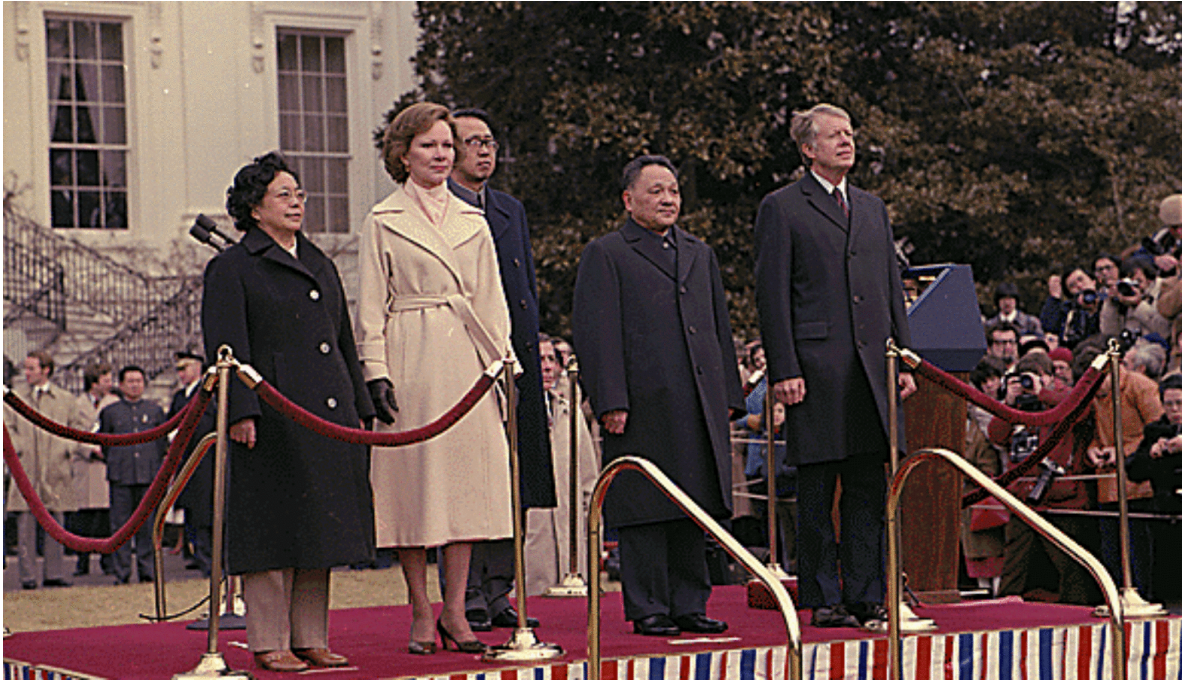


Image 9: Madame Zhuo Lin, First Lady Rosalynn Carter, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, and President Jimmy Carter at the arrival ceremony for the vice premier of China at the White House on Jan. 29, 1979. From: Jimmy Carter Library



Image 10: Following the welcoming ceremony, President Jimmy Carter and Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping head to the Cabinet Room for meetings. From: Jimmy Carter Library



Image 11: On Jan. 31, 1979, Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping and President Jimmy Carter sign historic diplomatic agreements between the United States and China. From: Jimmy Carter Library.

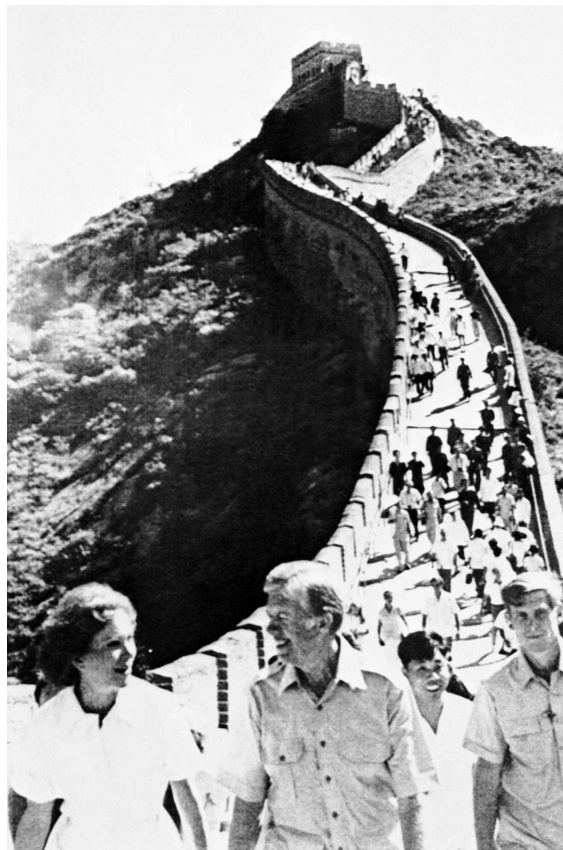


Image 12: Former President Jimmy Carter on a 10-day trip. “Former US President Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn walk at the Great Wall of China, Aug. 26, 1981”. From: Peter Bregg/AP



Image 13: The image shows a large crowd gathered in front of the Xidan Democracy Wall in Beijing in the late 1970s, where citizens posted hand-written manifestos calling for political reform. The wall is covered with dense layers of large-character posters, reflecting the brief but intense period of public political expression that characterized the movement before its suppression in 1979. “In the late 1970s, crowds gather before the Xidan Democracy Wall in Beijing. Source: File photo”. *Human Rights Museum*.

<https://8964museum.com/time/en/t-b02-005/>

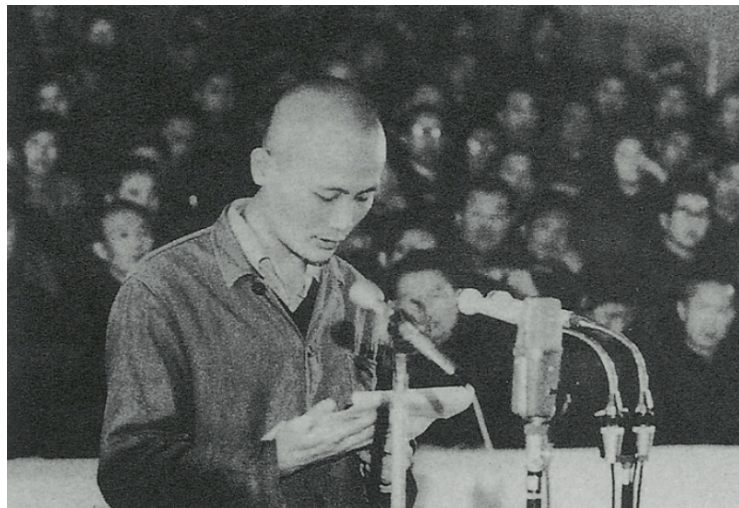


Image 14: Wei Jingsheng was one of the most prominent voices of the Democracy Wall movement. In 1978, he posted a manifesto arguing that China's modernization was incomplete without democracy, which he called the "fifth modernization", directly challenging Deng Xiaoping's reform agenda. “As Wei Jingsheng is sentenced, he reads his own defense statement in court”. Source: File photo. *Human Rights Museum*.

<https://8964museum.com/time/en/t-b02-005/>



Image 15: 1980 President Jimmy Carter welcomed President-elect Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan to the White House for a tour and escorted them to the Oval Office. From: The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library. “President Jimmy Carter welcomes President-elect Ronald Reagan and Nancy Reagan to the White House for a tour”. *Wikimedia Commons*. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Jimmy_Carter_welcomes_President-elect_Ronald_Reagan_and_Nancy_Reagan_to_the_White_House_for_a_tour.jpg