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Ping-Pong Diplomacy and its Legacy in the American Foreign Policy¹

Abstract: The aim of the paper is to investigate ping-pong diplomacy between the United States and China, which was used by both countries as a diplomatic tool, aimed at achieving political rapprochement despite ideological dissonance and conflict over Taiwan. Both governments were seeking a way to establish closer relations but the circumstances prevented them from traditional diplomatic contacts. Sports exchange proved to be a convenient solution. In the paper the Author attempts to verify a hypothesis on a subsequent legacy of the ping-pong diplomacy in American foreign policy. The study allowed to determine reasons for the need to employ sport in order to establish closer relations between two hostile actors of international relations. It is an attempt to answer a question concerning the intentional or coincidental character of the analysed sports exchange. The paper is an empirical case study on one of the prime examples of positive sports diplomacy and was conducted with the use of decision-making.

Keywords: *ping-pong diplomacy; sports diplomacy; China-USA relations; international relations; politics and sport*

Introduction

The aim of the paper is to investigate the ping-pong diplomacy between the United States and China, one of the best known cases of sports diplomacy, within which a sports exchange in table-tennis between national teams of both countries was es-

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established. The sports contact was then used as an opportunity for diplomatic talks which resulted in a breakthrough in bilateral relations. Generally the issue has been deeply investigated, especially in the United States. The objective is not to reveal new facts about it, but to discuss its legacy. Accordingly, the hypothesis on the subsequent legacy of ping-pong diplomacy in the American foreign policy, which is caused by its success, is tested in the paper. This legacy means a change in the way of thinking about sports and its diplomatic meaning in the US, especially in the 1970s.

Apart from searching for the legacy of ping-pong diplomacy, the study allowed the author to observe the process and to determine the reasons for the need to employ sport in order to establish closer relations between two hostile actors (considering mutual will to do so). Moreover, it is an attempt to answer a question on the intentional or coincidental character of sports exchange. The research is empirically-based and it is a case study of the best known example of positive sports diplomacy that fostered cooperation between antagonized nations. Decision-making approach has been applied to determine motivations of stake-holders and determinants of choices.

Historical background

In order to understand the issue of ping-pong diplomacy and its significance, it is necessary to shortly present historical context of the Sino-American relations. They were deeply influenced by the civil war in China between the communists led by Mao Tse-Tung (Máo Zédōng) and the nationalist Kuomintang's government led by Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi). The conflict escalated after World War II and finished in 1949 with the communists' victory and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The defeated Chiang Kai-shek's government and its supporters escaped to Taiwan. This way two Chinese states were established, both questioning another's existence and legitimacy. The Communist China governed the whole mainland and the most of population, whereas the Taiwanese government was in possession of evacuated Chinese gold reserves. What is more, it regarded itself as a continuer of the Chinese statehood. Such attitude influenced international response to the question of formal recognition of the Chinese states. The Republic of China (Taiwan) was recognized by the Western nations, while the Communist states established close relations with the PRC (Hill, 1996, p. 44).

Over time, the alliance between the PRC and the Soviet Bloc began to deteriorate, particularly after 1956 in respect to the criticism of Joseph Stalin voiced by Nikita Khrushchev in a speech at the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as the Chinese disagreed with the criticism. The tension between the USSR and the PRC got more intense in 1958, when the Chinese introduced an economic

and social campaign known as the Great Leap Forward, which was contradictory with the Soviet model. In 1963 the Sino-Soviet relations became almost confrontational (Roszkowski, 2005, pp. 120–121, 156). The situation was obviously unfavourable to both sides, particularly to China which was falling into isolation. As a result, Chinese leaders began to search for a way of open the country to the international community. It maintained close relations with the non-aligned countries, but concerning its situation, establishing closer ties with the West was a natural, although risky solution. Relations with the US were particularly important as China desired to join United Nations, possibly bring Taiwan back under Beijing's control and to some extent – to deter against the Soviet Union (Xu, 2008, p. 123). There were also other conditions that contributed to China's decision to establish relations with the United States, such as the internal policy determinants in China including new policy towards the USSR, the concept of “three worlds” and the consequences of cultural revolution, the change of the internal policy in the USA and its consequences in foreign policy towards China and other Eastern Asian states. What is more, for certain time a limited dialogue between the two states was being conducted – through the “Sino-U.S. Ambassadorial Talks in Warsaw”, although with no direct effect. Thus there was a number of reasons for the new standpoint of Chinese leadership towards the United States.

The strategic position of the US was completely different at the beginning of the 1970s, but Americans were also interested in establishing closer relations with communist China, especially after Richard Nixon became the President. Nixon even before being elected claimed that the US need to reposition its policy regarding China. As he stated already in 1967, “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 neighbours. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation” (Xu, 2008, p. 119). After becoming the President, Nixon made the issue of China one of his priorities. During presidential campaign he promised to withdraw from Vietnam with honour, so bearing in mind China's engagement in the conflict, rapprochement with the PRC was desirable. What is more, Nixon thought that closer diplomatic relations with China may strengthen the American position in the Cold War. American President is also believed to have had a personal ambition to be remembered as the one who began the dialogue with China (Xu, 2008, pp. 119–120). All those arguments stand for the point that American-Chinese rapprochement reflected the need of both sides. What was preventing establishment of closer relation, then?

The ideological dissonance between the two states seems to be the answer. PRC was a communist country, while the USA were the leader of the Western, capitalist

world. It was hardly possible to enhance the level of bilateral relations with the use of traditional diplomatic channels then. Admittedly, at the time China distanced itself from the USSR, but the ideology remained the key issue. Another important factor should be associated with the Republic of China (Taiwan), which government did not accept the existence of the PRC. Americans were maintaining diplomatic relations with Taiwan and US troops stationed on the island. Americans had to act very carefully then. However, apart from close relations with Taiwan, it is believed that there were no greater conflicts of national interests between the USA and the PRC. Moreover, Nixon presented a completely new approach to the issue of Taiwan – as he was reported to have said during a private conversation with Nicolae Ceaucescu, “Taiwan was not an international but an internal problem, to be resolved by the Chinese themselves in a peaceful way” (Xia, 2006, pp. 151–152, 154).

As has been noted, at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s there was a will for political rapprochement expressed both by American and Chinese policy-makers, despite many unfavourable circumstances. As a result, various attempts to establish political contact were made, for example at the beginning of 1970 there was an initiative to arrange a high-profile meeting between the diplomats of both states. At the time all contacts had a form of secret diplomacy. After Nixon became the President, he once again tried to employ the earlier “Sino-US Ambassadorial Talks in Warsaw”, in which US and Chinese ambassadors to Poland met and talked in Warsaw, but with no effect (Itoh, 2011, pp. 16–17). A so called Pakistani channel – contacting via Pakistan’s diplomats – was more successful. This way China proposed that a special representative of American President, the Secretary of State or even the President himself could visit Beijing for the talks. The exchange of messages was leading to an arrangement of a secret meeting in order to prepare the official talks. Particularly Richard Nixon was to be insisting on the secrecy of these contacts, fearing that if the information about the meeting would come to light the Taiwanese lobby in America could prevent the rapprochement with China (Xia, 2006, pp. 154–155).

It is worth noting, that the Pakistani channel and earlier the meetings of ambassadors in Poland were not the first channels that Americans were trying to employ in order to establish contacts with Beijing. In the past Americans were also using the assistance of Dutch and French diplomats, but unsuccessfully both times. China and the US were also making gestures suggesting their readiness to improve the relations. For example in December 1970 Chinese *People’s Daily* published on its front page a picture of Mao Tse-Tung with his old friend, American journalist Edgar Snow at Tiananmen with a quotation “The people of the world, including the American people, are our friends”. During the pictured meeting Mao was reported to have said, that he would welcome Nixon to China (Xu, 2008, pp. 120, 123). This case presents the

true essence of pursuing sports diplomacy as an instrument enabling the initiation of traditional diplomatic talks. Taking the circumstances, it was extremely difficult if possible at all to begin an open dialogue, even though both sides were interested in it and secret contacts were established. An extraordinary move or gesture was needed, which sports diplomacy proved to be. The issue of Mao's meeting with Edgar Snow is also worth noting here. Referring to foreigners, deemed "connoisseurs" of Chinese culture as "friends" and opening more insights to them appears to be one the Chinese diplomatic methods of swaying away from international conflicts. Although it has raised some controversies, it has proven to be rather effective concerning the obvious difficulty in appreciating Chinese culture.

Towards Ping-Pong Diplomacy

Ping-pong diplomacy was preceded by Chinese participation in the 31st World Championships in table tennis held in Nagoya in Japan in March and April 1971. At the time, as a consequence of the conflict with Taiwan, the PRC was not a member of most of international sports federations after it withdrew from them in 1958 (Hill, 1995, p. xiii; Xu, 2008, p. 86, Espy, 1981, p. 63). However, China sustained its membership in International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF). Despite it did not compete in two previous world championships, Chinese government was planning to send team in 1971. Prime minister Zhou Enlai (Zhōu Ēnlái), who often engaged himself in activities of sports diplomacy, met in China with the president of the Japan Table Tennis Federation Koji Goto – in order to discuss the possibility of participating in the forthcoming championships. It was problematic that Taiwan was a member of Table Tennis Federation of Asia, while the PRC pursued a policy, according to which it could not be a member of any international sports organization that Taiwan belonged to. Despite this fact Enlai and Goto agreed upon China's participation in the championships, what has been announced in *People's Daily* on July 2, 1971 (Xu, 2008, pp. 127–128; Espy, 1981, pp. 127–128). China was therefore set to participate in the world championships, what allowed the pursue of the Ping-pong diplomacy.

It should be noted, that Chinese leadership was not unanimous about the idea of sending national team to the table tennis world championships. Mao Tse-Tung and Zhou Enlai were in favour, while opposite views were presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and State Physical Culture and Sport Commission. Despite that Mao was determined to use the opportunity that sport offered and decided that Chinese team should go to Nagoya (Xia, 2006, p. 153).

In respect to the planned participation in the championships Enlai met with president of ITTF H. Roy Evans to discuss the issue of China's return to international

competition. During the meeting Evans was reported to suggest, that after the tournament China could invite a couple of teams to play exhibition matches (Danner, 2012, p. 77). Zhou warmed to that suggestion, but it is unclear whether the future events were directly related to the meeting (Axelrod, 2009, p. 378).

The PRC eventually took part in the table tennis world championships in Japan. Before departing, a send-off ceremony was organized in the Great Hall of the People. Prime minister Enlai asked athletes to abide the principle 'friendship first, than competition'. There was also a number of instructions issued by the government concerning contacts with Americans. For instance, Chinese athletes were not allowed to be the first to greet or exchange flags, while they were allowed to shake hands (Xu, 2008, p. 129). Those events illustrate the instrumental attitude of Chinese leadership towards sport. The guidelines concerning contacts with Americans may suggest, that China did not have a diplomatic plan concerning Ping-pong diplomacy at the time, or that it was hiding its true intentions.

Chinese participation in table tennis championships constituted an opportunity to make a direct contact with Americans. During the event Chinese world champion Zhuang Zedong (Zhuāng Zédòng) was reported to have talked to a member of American team Glenn Cowan, who was late for his team bus and got a ride by the Chinese team. The two men exchanged gifts and the Chinese offered an arrangement of Chinese-American table tennis meeting (Pigman, 2010, p. 193). Authors are not consistent about the actual formulation of the invitation though. There are views that it were the Americans who were seeking for the invitation to China while some other countries like Canada and Colombia were invited, but this was not expressed by an official position of American team but by a private opinion of an athlete (Xu, 2008, p. 131; Xia, 2006, p. 153). There was no official position on the details of the contact, what might be intentional concerning the desire to keep it secret.

Similarly to the issue of the PRC's participation in the championships in Nagoya, the Chinese support for the idea of inviting American team was not shared by all political leaders in China. Ministry of Foreign Affairs was suggesting, that the invitation might have an adverse impact on China. Enlai consulted Mao, who decided that Americans should be invited (Xia, 2006, p. 153). As a result, a formal invitation to play a series of matches in China was addressed to the American team on April 6, 1971. It was preceded by a visit of a Chinese official Song Zhong in American team's hotel. He asked the president of USA Table Tennis Association Rufford Harrison how he would react to an invitation to China? Harrison voiced his concern whether younger players would afford to rebook their tickets, but the Chinese offered to cover all the costs. A specialist on China in American embassy in Tokyo was responsible for the decision as the two countries did not maintain formal diplomatic relations. He

agreed and American table tennis players were to be the first delegation from the US in China since 1949, while Nixon himself recommended that visas should be issued to American journalists (Ladley, 2014, p. 197).

The table tennis tour and its aftermath

As a result of the earlier developments, nine American table tennis players with four officials and two companions crossed the bridge between Hong Kong and mainland China on April 10, 1971. Americans visited Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou and played two exhibition matches (Axelrod, 2009, p. 378; Xu, 2008, p. 135). They were welcomed very warmly and enthusiastically. Chinese prime minister's meeting with Chinese, American and four other teams in the Great Hall of the People on April 14 was to be a highlight of the visit. At the time Zhou stated: "a new chapter has been opened in the relations between our two peoples. Your visit to China has opened the door to friendly contacts between our two countries. We believe that such friendly contacts will be favoured and supported by the majority of the two peoples" (Chen, 1992, p. 62). A few hours later Washington lifted the trade embargo on China that was in force for 22 years and permitted trade of close equivalents goods exchanged with the USSR. Other gestures of the US encompassed termination of the American currency control in regard to China and visa facilitation for the Chinese visiting the United States (Xia, 2006, pp. 153–154; Pigman, 2010, p. 193).

Shortly after the sports exchange the developments were rapid afterwards. In July 1971 Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited China and met with prime minister Zhou Enlai. The visit was secret, but Nixon soon made it public. Preparations for the American President's journey to China were also initiated. In October 1971 Kissinger visited China again, this time officially, and talked on the details of future Nixon's visit. Shortly afterwards a campaign was launched in China in order to explain to the public the transition in relations with the US. Richard Nixon arrived in China on February 21, 1972. During his visit an informal strategic agreement between the two states was signed (Goldstein, Freeman, 1990, pp. 109–111). Even earlier – in October 1971, communist China became a member of the United Nations, taking the seat of Republic of China, even though the formal diplomatic relations between the PRC and the US were not established until 1979, due to the issue of Taiwan. Nevertheless, the political and diplomatic consequences of the Ping-pong diplomacy were remarkable and far reaching.

It should be noted, that although Chinese government is often perceived as a 'monolith', it is often more divided than it seems, as for example concerning the

attitude towards opening to the United States and sending team to table tennis championships. In cases when no-one inside China is willing to take public responsibility for a policy choice, foreigners who are willing to do so may be instrumentalised for this purpose, what can be seen as another subtle Chinese diplomatic method. This has happened in the analysed Sino-American relations, when Nixon made the first Kissinger's visit to China public.

Ping-pong diplomacy in just a few days remarkably changed the political climate concerning Sino-American relations. It was an example of sports diplomacy aimed at 'paving way' for establishing political relations in a situation of no formal ties between the two states. A question appears then, why sport was used for the sake of political rapprochement? As it appears, table tennis world championships in 1971 were simply a convenient circumstance that both parties made use of. It should also be remembered, that Chinese policy-makers including Mao appeared to have understood the instrumental character of sport concerning diplomacy, as the country had employed sport to maintain friendly relations with other states before. Prime minister Zhou Enlai very often seized the opportunities to meet the athletes visiting China. After one of such meetings – with Soviet chess team, he was reported to have said, that as individuals those athletes were not important, but he met with them to show that the Chinese were friendly towards the Russians (Xu, 2008, p. 118). Such exchanges with actors that are 'not personally important', not necessarily concerning sport, might become signs of willingness to make important political or economical gestures, as lifting the trade embargo by the United States in the analysed case. Before Ping-pong diplomacy such activities were usually directed at countries with positive relations with the PRC, while the the analysed case involved two basically hostile states.

According to Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Pigman (2014, p. 1101), Ping-pong diplomacy was meant as a tool of testing whether public opinion in both countries would accept a more formal diplomatic opening. Such view appears to be precise in diagnosing the aim of this diplomatic employment of sport. What is more, according to some authors, Chinese motivation of establishing table tennis exchange was to prepare the people to the turnover in relations with the US, both in political and in psychological sense (Xia, 2006, pp. 152–153). United States and the communist China for many years were perceiving each other as enemies. In this context Ping-pong diplomacy had an internal context as well, whereas the external motivation was about creating opportunity for intergovernmental contacts. Although the two states exchanged messages before, the athletic contact served as a final announcement of a mutual desire for rapprochement.

The legacy of ping-pong diplomacy in the American foreign policy

The events related to ping-pong diplomacy have been evaluated as a great diplomatic success and an important step towards the full normalization eight years later (Johns, 2014, p. 2). As Zhou Enlai stated “never before in history has a sport been used so effectively as a tool of international diplomacy” (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2013, p. 91). As should be added, ‘never before and never again’, at least so far. If positive sports diplomacy is considered, it has been pursued many times by various states since famous table tennis exchange, but it has never been so successful and leading to such a breakthrough in bilateral relations, although on some occasions political rapprochement at least to some extent has been fostered. This applies for example to relations between Armenia and Turkey – presidents of those countries without formal diplomatic relations met twice on the occasions of football world cup qualification matches (within so called football diplomacy). In a similar manner political leaders from India and Pakistan employed cricket in order to bring the two nations closer at the times when tension between the countries was rising (within cricket diplomacy). Apparently though, the recipes of the employment of sport in shaping Sino-American relations left a legacy beyond those two nations as well.

The success of ping-pong diplomacy had a deep impact of both China and America. In the aftermath, on numerous occasions China was employing sport for the sake of politics, for example athletes were instructed to lose particular matches, mostly with other communist countries, in order to deepen the inter-state friendship. China was also building sports venues in the Third World countries, searching for closer relations (Hong, Xiaozheng, 2003, pp. 335–337). Apparently, the impact of ping-pong diplomacy on the society and policy-makers was even greater in the US. According to the main hypothesis, it even left a legacy, particularly in the 1970s. It sparked imaginations on how sport may serve for the sake of diplomacy and politics, as a tool of rapprochement between unfriendly nations. Numerous attempts to repeat ping-pong diplomacy in relations with other countries validate this assumption.

One of the most remarkable examples of a will to use the sport in a similar manner as the famous ping-pong diplomacy concerns American relations with Cuba, which were relatively similar to those with communist China, but also with differences such as geographical proximity and American cultural influence on Cuba despite the official hostility (Sugden, Tomlinson, McCartan, 2008, p. 222). Attempts have been made to establish exchanges in various sports, with baseball and basketball in particular. If baseball is concerned, first initiatives of re-establishing sports contacts were formulated

in 1971 (Turner, 2012, p. 131; Elias, 2010). Due to political reasons and reluctance of American administration, the first of such initiatives failed, but it was argued that baseball exchange could serve in a similar manner as the ping-pong diplomacy. For example, the Assistant Secretary of the US Department of State William Rogers wrote to the Secretary of State Henry Kissinger concerning an initiative in 1975, “A public relations move would correct some of the distortions in the public mind about the Cuban policy – shifting an emphasis to a non-political and non-governmental area. The Chinese ping-pong players were accepted by the US public as a good way to break the ice between countries separated by years decades of hostility. Baseball with Cuba could serve a similar purpose...” (Sugden, 2007, pp. 49–50). Despite that, for various reasons baseball diplomacy between the USA and Cuba was not initiated until 1987 (Turner, 2012, pp. 208, 210–213, 216). Attempts in basketball were more successful though, as in 1977 American Department of State agreed to a visit of a college team from South Dakota (a joint team of two universities) in Cuba to play against its national team (LeoGrande, Kornbluh, 2014, p. 157; *South Dakota College...*, 1977, p. 2/1), which was an initiative of two American senators James Abourezk and George McGovern (Abourezk, 1989, pp. 234–235; Palmer, 2010, p. 479; Turner, 2012, p. 175). Both cases can be perceived as an effect of the success of ping-pong diplomacy.

The impact of ping-pong diplomacy in the US can also be seen in regard to sports exchanges with the Soviet Union. Despite ideological conflict, the two Cold War superpowers were maintaining sports and cultural contacts, beginning from 1958 when the first Cultural Agreement was signed (Richmond, 2003, p. 15). Exchanges in basketball and athletics appear to be the most important from the diplomatic perspective. Basketball series were played annually either in the USSR or in the US. Until 1972 when the basketball exchanges have been intensified, they did not attract greater attention though (Riordan, 1974, pp. 335–336). Although this intensification is usually associated with other reasons including political, the change of American attitude most probably was also influenced by the success of table tennis exchange with China. There have also been ideas to try “another ‘baseball diplomacy’” in relations with other countries, for instance with North Korea in 1979 (Public Papers..., 1979, p. 1153). Numerous anniversary events of ping-pong diplomacy are also a prove of its strong presence in public awareness in the US (Miller, 2011).

Conclusion

Ping-pong diplomacy was undoubtedly a great diplomatic success, leading to a breakthrough in relations between two hostile countries. There was a mutual will for such change, but various circumstances were making it difficult, such as the ideological dissonance and the issue of Taiwan – American ally in conflict with the PRC. A trigger for political rapprochement was therefore needed and table tennis exchange served this purpose.

It was unclear whether the employment of particularly table tennis for diplomatic reasons was intentional or coincidental. Most evidently it was a hybrid of two. There was a need for non-political contact and table tennis world championships in Japan was a convenient and safe opportunity for both China and the US to establish one.

The efflorescence of initiatives to employ sport for the sake of diplomacy in the US after the success of ping-pong diplomacy in 1971 confirms the hypothesis concerning its impact on American society and policy-makers. There were obvious limitations, as for example American Department of State was reluctant to some sports exchanges. Nevertheless, such initiatives were repeated, particularly in the 1970s, denoting the legacy of the event. Today the United States belong to the most sophisticated countries concerning sports diplomacy. The success of ping-pong diplomacy is most probably one of the reasons for this.

The research allowed to make various observations concerning some of the diplomatic methods pursued by China. This concerns referring to foreigners familiar with Chinese culture as “friends” and thus utilizing them as ‘ambassadors’ of China, as well as using grassroots exchanges (such as athletic) in order to communicate willingness to make important political or economic gestures. It is also characteristic that in case there are different views on major issues in Chinese government, policy-makers like to avoid responsibility for political decisions by instrumentalising foreigners, as in the case of establishing relations with the United States.

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