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Review by **Min Song**, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

At the thirtieth anniversary of Sino-American normalization and with the emergence of many newly declassified documents, it is time to reconstruct the normalization process. According to the current historiography, the Richard Nixon administration overshadows the Carter administration, while the Pakistan channel overshadows the Romanian channel. Most historians give full credit to the Nixon administration for opening the path towards Sino-American normalization, while considering the Carter administration as merely following and building upon this direction. They have paid little attention to the Romanian channel because the United States and Chinese governments eventually chose the Pakistan channel over the Romanian channel. This historiography has been characterized by a certain historical determinism that neglects the dynamism and possibilities of the historical process. Given that eight years lapsed between Nixon’s path-opening and Carter’s deal-closing, “inevitability” can not sufficiently explain the outcome of that process.

The *Diplomatic History* special forum, “Transforming the Cold War: The United States and China, 1969-1980,” represents a serious effort to reconstruct the normalization

process, especially during the Carter administration. The contributors to this forum examine actors and factors that have been understudied and underestimated. In “Sino-American Normalization: A Reassessment,” “‘Friends, But not Allies’ — Cyrus Vance and the Normalization of Relation with China,” and “‘Maximum Flexibility for Peaceful Change’: Jimmy Carter, Taiwan, and the Recognition of the People’s Republic of China,” Enrico Fardella, Breck Walker, and Brian Hilton convincingly argue that the Carter administration deserves much more credit than it has received for taking initiatives in turning a tentative rapprochement into the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the United States and China. Additionally, in “Communication Breakdown? Romania and the Sino-American Rapprochement,” Mircea Munteanu analyzes Romanian initiatives in attempting to act as a key point of contact between Washington and Beijing. All four contributors aim to demonstrate the interplay between domestic politics and foreign relations. Their studies not only fill many gaps in the narrative of the normalization history, but provide fresh views on the dynamism of the normalization process, which will help correct the determinist tendency of the current historiography.

One of the major obstacles in the process of normalization that the Carter administration had to overcome was the Taiwan issue. By promising to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the Nixon administration set this process in motion. But neither the Nixon administration nor the Gerald Ford administration proved to be capable of selling that promise to Congress. As a result, when Jimmy Carter came to the White House in 1977, he inherited an impasse in Sino-American negotiations that threatened to prolong the normalization process indefinitely.

Fardella, Walker, and Hilton’s articles all persuasively demonstrate that the Carter administration successfully turned that impasse into a historic breakthrough for Sino-American relations by taking on the Taiwan issue courageously, creatively, and skillfully. To satisfy Beijing, the Carter administration terminated the Mutual Defense Treaty and severed diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Further, in order to satisfy Congress, it managed to maintain the U.S. commitment to Taiwan’s security by reserving the right to continue arms sales to Taiwan after normalization. Most amazingly, the Carter administration’s insistence on continued arms sales and the passing of the Taiwan Relations Act did not provoke Beijing to reverse normalization. Fardella, in particular, praises the Carter administration for correcting Nixon’s overpromise and creating “a sufficiently balanced compromise” with Beijing that turned Sino-American relations around. (545)

Within the Carter administration, who was the most important figure in the making of the China policy? Fardella, Walker, and Hilton respectively focus on National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and President Carter. In “The Sino-American Normalization,” Fardella reinforces the standard narrative that Brzezinski eventually won Carter’s favor at Vance’s expense and played a predominant role in sealing Sino-American normalization. He argues that in March 1978, Carter’s authorization of Brzezinski’s trip to China marked “the beginning of the administration’s

new China policy.” (557) Under Brzezinski’s direction, this new policy took Chinese domestic politics into account and demonstrated flexibility on the Taiwan issue, which gave a decisive final push to normalization.

Walker and Hilton challenge this Brzezinski-centered narrative by claiming more credit for Vance and Carter in shaping the administration’s China policy. In “‘Friends, But Not Allies,’” Walker contends that Vance’s “influence was pervasive throughout the normalization process.” (579) According to Walker, Vance’s view dominated Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM)-24, which was completed in June 1977 and set the “terms and timing” whereby the Carter administration normalized relations with Beijing eighteen months later. (583) Walker contests the conventional view that Vance’s trip to China in August 1977 was a big disappointment in the normalization process. During this trip, Vance raised difficult issues such as the U.S. official representation in Taiwan and continued arms sales after normalization. By presenting “the maximum American conditions for normalization,” Walker argues, Vance not only accommodated the needs of American domestic politics but also created room for Brzezinski to maneuver in later Sino-American negotiations. (594) Above all, Walker shows that while Brzezinski focused on the anti-Soviet, strategic aspect of Sino-American relations, Vance strove for broader bilateral interactions in economic, cultural, and scientific areas, upon which the two countries could build a long-term friendship. Between Brzezinski’s and Vance’s visions, Walker believes that Vance’s “was probably more consistent” with the development in Sino-American relations after normalization. (593)

In “Maximum Flexibility,” Hilton examines the significant impact of Carter’s moralist worldviews on the administration’s China policy. For instance, Carter believed that normalization would be instrumental in helping improve the lives of the Chinese people. Most importantly, among the Soviet Union, Taiwan, and Beijing, Carter believed that only Beijing represented a positive force for a more stable world that he desired. In particular, Hilton explains that Taiwan’s aggressive lobbying efforts offended Carter’s moralist sensibility and helped him make his mind to switch U.S. recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

The conventional view usually emphasizes the Soviet factor in influencing Sino-American relations. Fardella, Walker, and Hilton confirm that view by indicating that Soviet interventions in Africa and Vietnamese aggressions in Indochina created the urgency for the Carter administration and Deng’s government to normalize their relations. This indication seems to suggest that the Carter administration’s China policy were more or less a reaction to the change in U.S.-Soviet relations. If the Soviets and Vietnamese had not upset the status quo in 1978, would the United States and China have rushed to normalization at the end of 1978? To some extent, the three authors’ ambivalence on this question undermines their claim that the Carter administration was proactive on U.S.-China relations.

Domestic politics were critical in determining the pace and final terms of Sino-American

normalization. Fardella, Walker, and Hilton all take this factor into account. In the United States the heated debate over the Panama Treaty prevented the Carter administration from making any major move towards China in 1977. Walker stresses that Vance's raising "the maximum American conditions for normalization" in his trip to China reflected the reality of American domestic politics, rather than his reservations about normalization. (594)

The development in Chinese domestic politics was probably most consequential in finalizing Sino-American normalization. In China, 1977 and 1978 saw a historic power transfer from Hua Guofeng to Deng Xiaoping and an increasing outcry for economic development. Fardella, Walker, and Hilton all indicate that the Carter administration deftly took advantage of Deng's desire for opening and reform to wrest his acquiescence on U.S. arms sales to Taiwan after normalization. Deng's compromise decisively sealed normalization and represented a remarkable diplomatic success for the Carter administration. Among the three contributors, Fardella pays most attention to Chinese domestic politics in order to explain Deng's compromise. He quotes Brzezinski saying that, "After 20 years in search for a distinctive path to modernity, the Teng [sic]-administered regime appears to be joining the rest of the world." (557) He indicates that Deng's ultimate ambition was China's modernization, for which Sino-American normalization was instrumental in reducing China's security anxiety as well as increasing China's access to advanced technology.

Although the contributors to this forum make connections between Deng's economic programs and Sino-American normalization, their discussions are centered on the United States. The story on the Chinese side remains to be told. Was there a consensus within the Chinese government about the timing and terms of Sino-American normalization? How did Deng negotiate with other Chinese leaders to formulate a U.S. policy? How did the formulation of the U.S. policy interplay with Chinese domestic power struggles and ideological debates? Above all, how did China come to the point where its economic objectives began dictating its foreign policy? Did the U.S. engagement with China beginning in 1972 help China to reach that point? These questions require further examination. Given the utmost importance of the change in Chinese domestic politics to the timing and terms of Sino-American normalization, it is a pity that this forum does not include any work that makes adequate use of Chinese materials to explain that change.

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