

# PING-PONG DIPLOMACY SPEARHEADED U.S.-CHINESE RELATIONS



Agence France Presse

Chinese and American table tennis players go through some practice drills before an exhibition match in Beijing in April 1971.

*Unlikely diplomats went to play table tennis and changed history along the way.*

**O**n April 10, 1971, nine American players, four officials, and two spouses, accompanied by 10 journalists, crossed a bridge from Hong Kong into mainland China to usher in the age of “Ping-Pong Diplomacy.” The eight-day adventure signaled a joint desire to relax old tensions between Washington and Beijing.

“You have opened a new chapter in the relations of the American and Chinese people,” Premier Chou En-lai said during a banquet for the visiting Americans in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. “I am confident that this beginning again of our friendship will certainly meet with majority support of our two peoples.”

That same day, April 14, the United States lifted a 20-year-old trade embargo against China. U.S. relations with China had ended in October 1949 when communist

forces led by Mao Zedong overthrew the Nationalist government led by General Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang and his government took refuge in Taiwan, and no American group had been allowed inside mainland China in the 22 years since the communist takeover.

So it was completely unexpected when on April 6, 1971, the U.S. table tennis team, in Japan for the 31st World Table Tennis Championships, was invited by the Chinese team to an immediate, all-expense paid visit to the People’s Republic of China.

From April 11 to April 17, the U.S. team played the Chinese team in exhibition matches, visited the Great Wall and Summer Palace outside of Beijing, met with Chinese students and workers, and attended social events in China’s major cities. A year later the Chinese players toured the United States, playing a series of “Friendship First” exhibition matches before enthusiastic U.S. audiences.

The United States and China had already been quietly conducting back-channel negotiations, as each nation



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Members of the U.S. table tennis team attend a discussion meeting between the Chinese and U.S. teams in Beijing April 16, 1971. The Chinese team invited the U.S. team to visit China while they were playing in the World Championship matches in Japan.



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Chinese Vice Premier Li Lanqing, left, plays a game of table tennis with former U.S. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger, right, at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing March, 18, 2001. A grand reception was hosted there to mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic "ping-pong diplomacy" in U.S.-China relations.

sought to improve relations, against a background of Soviet aggression. During 1971, National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger made two secret visits to China to establish rapprochement, and that summer, in the aftermath of the goodwill established by ping-pong diplomacy, President Richard M. Nixon announced that he, too, would go to China the following year to begin formal talks to normalize relations between the two nations.

On February 21, 1972, Nixon became the first American president ever to visit China. ■