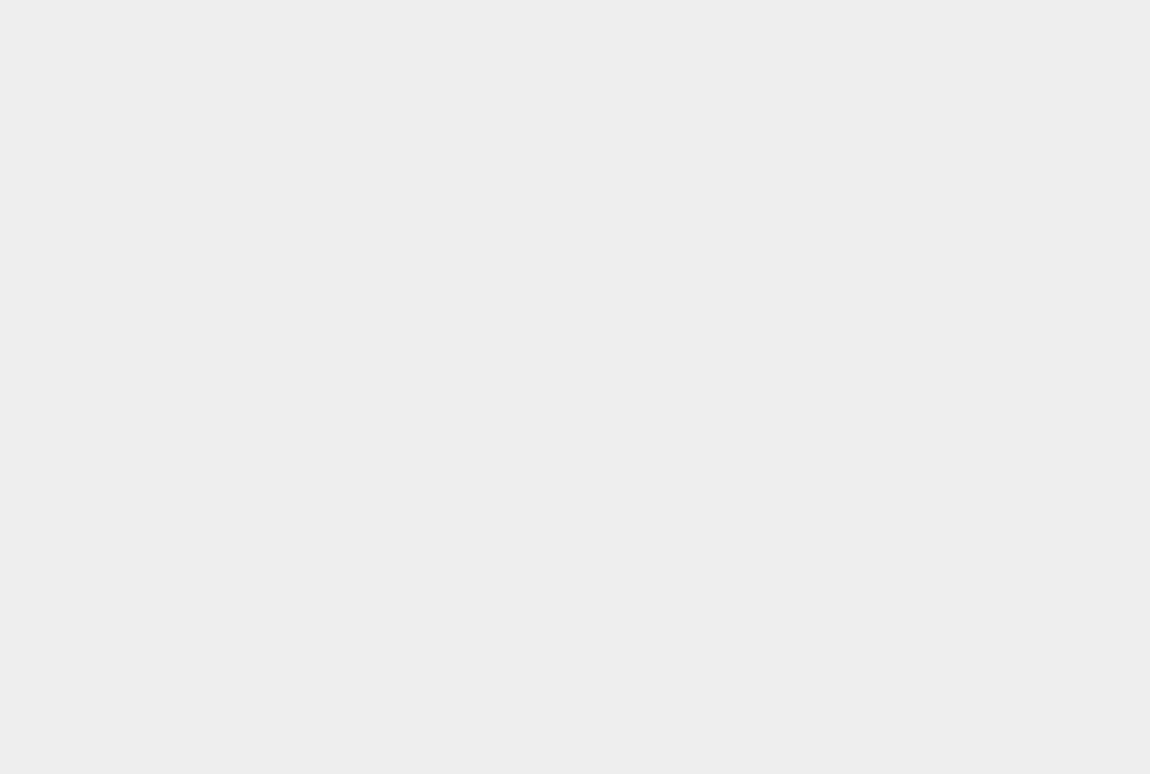DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

When Switzerland recognised the new China

By [Andrea Tognina](#)

JAN 17, 2020 - 12:20

Seventy years ago, Switzerland was one of the first Western nations to officially recognise the People's Republic of China – a gesture that enabled Bern to maintain good relations with the Communist government in Beijing over the following decades. It also meant access to the opening of the Chinese economy at the end of the 1960s.

A Chinese military delegation arrives in Geneva for the conference on Indochina, 1954.

(Keystone / Jean-jacques Levy)

"[The Swiss government] has today *de jure* recognised the central government of the People's Republic of China, with whom it will soon establish diplomatic relations stop […]"

That was a ☑ [telegram](#) sent by the Swiss president Max Petitpierre to his Chinese counterpart Mao Zedong on January 17, 1950.

On October 1, 1949, a few days after the proclamation establishing the People's Republic of China, the government in Beijing wrote to Bern with the aim of establishing diplomatic relations.

The initial reaction of authorities in the Swiss capital was probably influenced by the tensions that had characterised relations with another major communist country, the Soviet Union.

Dodis

Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland

EThis article is part of a series dedicated to the history of Swiss diplomacy, written in collaboration with the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis).

The Dodis research centre, an institute of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, is an independent pole specialising in the history of Swiss foreign policy and international relations since the foundation of the state in 1848.

(dodis)

Bern had broken off diplomatic ties with Moscow after the Bolsheviks had seized power, and the restoration and normalisation of links were only made possible after the Second World War. The difficulties also cost foreign minister ☑ Marcel Pilet-Golaz his job.

"This situation of difficult relations with the USSR undoubtedly had an important influence on how Bern responded to the request from Beijing," says Sacha Zala, director of the ☑ Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) project.

Quick recognition

Switzerland had significant economic interests in China at the time, especially in Shanghai. The prompt recognition of the new communist government, as well as Switzerland's status as a neutral country, allowed it to gain political advantage and carve out a role as mediator in the region.

On October 7, 1949, the Federal Council (Swiss executive branch) had already decided to recognise the Chinese government, in order to avoid being "either one of the first or the last" to do so.

The official recognition came on January 17, 1950 – exactly 70 years ago. Of the Western nations, only Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries were earlier in doing so. "In the following years, this early gesture would be recorded on various occasions by Chinese representatives working on bilateral relations," says Thomas Bürgisser of Dodis.

In the 1970s, Zhou Enlai remembered the episode gratefully in a conversation with the Swiss delegation.

"In 1954, at the conference on Indochina, [Switzerland] accepted me with the dignity also accorded to other statesmen," he said.

Special relations

"The visit of Zhou Enlai to Switzerland [in 1954, for the Geneva conference on Indochina] was the beginning of a period of special relations between Switzerland and China that lasted over the following decades," says Bürgisser.

In 1975, Swiss Ambassador to Beijing Albert Natural noted the enthusiastic tone with which the Chinese news agency Hsinhua reported on the inaugural Swissair flight from Zurich to Beijing.

"I have rarely noted such a tone when it comes to capitalist countries," he wrote. "Only Albanians – China's closest allies – are used to receiving such praise."

Federal Councillor Willi Ritschard (at front of photo holding his hat), at the Great Wall of China during a visit to inaugurate the Zurich-Beijing line operated by Swissair, April 1975.

(Keystone / Str)

In the 1970s, the good Swiss-Chinese relations revolved mainly around the hope that the Swiss economy might benefit from the future opening of the Chinese market to external commerce. And indeed, in December 1974, Bern and Beijing signed a trade deal – and then a free trade agreement 40 years later.

"Switzerland found itself then in an optimal position to capitalise on the economic opening of China," Bürgisser says. In March 1979, Swiss Economics Minster Fritz Honegger paid a visit to the architect of China's modernisation, Deng Xiaoping. At the end of their conversation, Deng declared laconically, "Switzerland and China enjoy good political relations. We welcome this collaboration."

Translated from Spanish by Domhnall O'Sullivan, swissinfo.ch