

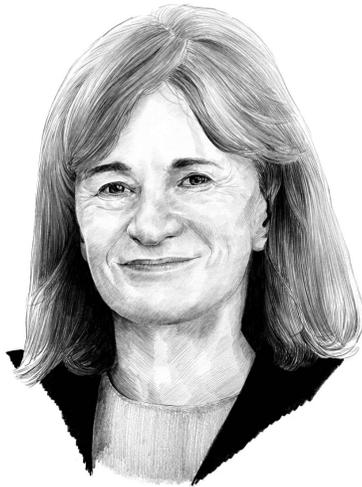
Q &amp; A

## Jane Perlez on What Nixon Knew

The journalist talks about her new podcast, Deng Xiaoping's secret meeting with the CIA, and why the U.S. and China still don't understand each other very well.

BY DAVID BARBOZA — FEBRUARY 20, 2022

*Jane Perlez is a distinguished journalist and a longtime reporter and foreign correspondent for The New York Times. Between 2012 and 2019, she was stationed in China, and most recently served as the Beijing bureau chief. She has also reported from Austria, Poland, Nairobi, Jakarta and Islamabad for The Times. In 2009, Perlez was part of a team that was awarded the [Pulitzer Prize for international reporting](#) for coverage of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In 2019, she was a [Shorenstein fellow](#) at Harvard University and produced a podcast titled, "[On the Trail of Xi Jinping](#)." Last week, in conjunction with National Public Radio affiliate WBUR in Boston and the program [Here and Now](#), she produced a five part podcast series called "[The Great Wager](#)," which traces American engagement with China from Nixon's historic visit to China in February 1972 to the recent deterioration in relations between the two superpowers. What follows is a lightly edited transcript of a recent conversation.*



Jane Perlez.  
Illustration by Lauren Crow

**Q: Why did you decide to produce a documentary-like podcast on U.S.-China relations centered on Nixon's historic trip to Beijing in February 1972?**

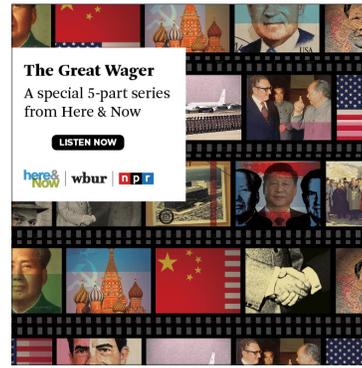
A: The idea grew out of my time here in Cambridge [Massachusetts]. I came to Harvard in the fall of 2019 as a Shorenstein fellow. And it was so engaging, to have the opportunity to go to lectures and meet so many new people in this intellectual firmament. Then I learned, of course, we had to do something [to complete the fellowship]. They said we were supposed to write a paper, and I said, "Well, how long is that paper supposed to be?" Someone said 15,000 words. And I said, "I've been a reporter all my life. I've never written anything that is 15,000 words long. Forget it." So I suggested doing a podcast.

I had just come from being stationed in Beijing for seven years, and I didn't know what a podcast was.

But I soon found out and someone put me in touch

with Jeb Sharp, this amazing producer, who had done foreign reporting with NPR. The first one, "On the Trail of Xi Jinping," was a natural story for me because I had been at a State Department lunch when Xi was still vice president, in early 2012, and everybody knew he was going to be president. All the preeminent China hands were there. Everybody was giddy with the thought of Xi being the new leader of China. And of course, things didn't turn out the way many people expected. So we had a good narrative for the first podcast about how Washington got Xi Jinping wrong. And during that work, I learned that the podcast medium is really quite enchanting.

As a child growing up in Australia, my family was very late to get a television. I remember sitting on the floor, listening to the radio program called *The Argonauts Club*. Everybody was a member of the Argonauts. The sound of the radio was really all enveloping and took you to another place. Podcasts can do that too. I hope we've done that a little bit in this new podcast, "The Great Wager," bringing people the story that emerged 50 years ago in China, but also fast forwarding to today, and trying to engage people who might not otherwise be interested in China's rise. I have done this podcast with NPR's Boston station, WBUR, and they assigned a fantastic producer, Grace Tatter. She has been with me every step of the way. In both podcasts, the producers knew exactly what I had in mind.



Perlez's podcast for NPR, "The Great Wager" is a 5-part series about Richard Nixon's historic trip to China in 1972. Credit: NPR

**In this podcast, you set out to reconstruct Nixon's trip to China, right?**

Well, it wasn't just Nixon's trip in February 1972 that interested me but the roots of it. Nixon had this idea for quite a while, that China could not be left out in the cold; that it was dangerous for the world to have, as Nixon said, China "in angry isolation" because of its size and potential. He was a great admirer of the Chinese. And he had taken a really important trip through Asia in 1953, when he was Eisenhower's vice president. That had a dramatic effect on him, even though he had conducted the Vietnam War in ways that I personally disagreed with. In a way, he had a better sense of Asia than many in Washington, and he understood that China was going to be a force in the world. He figured it was better to reach out to China rather than to keep it isolated. So I was interested in the origins of his diplomacy and strategic thinking. This was something that took a lot of planning. It wasn't just a lot of people sitting around the table and listening to each other. It was Nixon saying, "I want to do this," and Kissinger, who was a great strategist but at that time didn't know anything about Asia, getting together to do this. And they did it. That's the story we've tried to tell.

**You have some wonderful interviews in the series, with Robert Gates, Jon Huntsman, [Hung Huang](#), etc., and some audio clips from inside the White House and oral histories from the State Department archives about everything from the banquet China hosted for Nixon in '72, to recollections of a meeting at the CIA headquarters. What did you have in mind when you set out to do this?**

Look, I wanted to do a straight history with as much detail and personality as possible. People in the United States need to understand how the U.S. went about reaching out to China, and why we're in the place we are today. And a straight account of what unfolded is the best way to do that. I didn't come to it with a point of view. I just wanted to tell the story of how the United States came to be friendly with China. And remember, I'd seen China at the height of the Cultural Revolution. So in many ways, it was astonishing to me that in 1972, just five years after I'd been there, that the United States and China would be friendly.

And even though the two countries didn't recognize each other in 1972, a commercial relationship quickly blossomed. Nixon had barely been gone for 10 minutes and [Boeing](#) was in there selling 707 planes to China. I mean, those may have been the last 707 planes ever sold! The commercial side didn't miss a beat. But then they had to go through the vicissitudes of Mao falling out with Zhou Enlai, Mao dying and Deng Xiaoping coming in – someone who really suited the United States,

BIO AT A GLANCE	
CURRENT POSITION	Fellow, Belfer Center, Harvard University
PERSONAL LIFE	Married to Raymond Bonner

not only because he wanted to open up but because he was even more anti-Soviet than the other leaders. So you have Zbigniew Brzezinski as Carter's National Security Adviser, and Deng Xiaoping as the leader of China, and both were so anti-Soviet, so they really liked one another. Deng went to [Brzezinski's](#) Virginia house for a meal on the Sunday night before the official visit started. And that was kind of symbolic of how the relationship was going to blossom.

### How did you go about researching the podcast?



Perlez, left, in China in 1967. Credit: Courtesy of Jane Perlez

The research really started with my first visit to China. I beat Richard Nixon to China by five years. I was there in 1967, as an Australian university student. There were 50 of us who went to China on a summer vacation trip. We also had the opportunity to go to India and Indonesia. But China was, by far, the most interesting. On that trip, we met with [China's foreign minister] Chen Yi in the Great Hall of the People. And that meeting left an indelible impression on me. I mean, here was this great Chinese military strategist, kind of reduced during the Cultural Revolution to talking to a bunch of Australian university students. And when I started to go through the documents of the period, from the Chinese side, I saw that Mao had asked Chen Yi and three other generals to look at what China could do to get out of this jam with the Soviet Union, which was bearing down on their common border. There was fighting and the Soviet Union was far stronger than China, though both sides had nuclear weapons. It was fascinating to me, because Chen Yi said to Mao, "Why don't we

play the American card?" This is in some of the writings that Chinese historians, like Xia Yafeng, have shared.

I was aware of this, so I went through the State Department documents and Chinese materials that have been translated into English. Pat Tyler's book, [A Great Wall \[Six Presidents and China\]](#), was also a great resource, because he researched that in the 90s. He had interviewed William Stearman, for example, who was a Soviet hand in the State Department. There's a [document](#) about Stearman's meeting with the KGB agent Boris N. Davydov. In a State Department memo, which Stearman wrote up saying that he met the KGB agent over lunch at the restaurant in Washington and the KGB guy said, "Well, what would the United States think if we bombed the hell out of China and got rid of their nuclear weapons?" Well, that's all in the documents. But Pat had interviewed him and during the interview Stearman said, "Well, I was having lunch with this Davydov guy, and he told me they want to nuke China and I had a piece of fish on my fork." He said, "I was so shocked, I put it back on my plate, and I ran back to the State Department." So there are details like that in some places that you wouldn't expect.

And then I would say another really great resource were the oral histories at the State Department. So for example, Ambassador [Joseph Farland](#), who was Kissinger's operations guide for his secret trip to China. He did an oral history and I read this thing on the web, and there was great dialogue there. Then I called Susan Johnson, who runs the oral history division of the State Department. I said, "Do you have any tapes?" She said, "Yes, we've got tapes." So we were able to use the tapes in the podcast, which really made a difference.



Then-Foreign Minister Chen Yi (right) meets with Australian university students, 1967. Credit: Courtesy of Jane Perlez

**Did you also turn to the [Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum](#)?**

Well, the Nixon Library is an extraordinary resource to behold. I got a great deal of help from Ryan Pettigrew, who is the head of the audio visual division. He works for the National Archives and is assigned to the Library in Nixon's hometown in California. My understanding is they're not so strong in audio (that's the [Miller Center](#) in Virginia) but in the visuals. For example, they have what look like home movies taken by [former Nixon aide] Dwight Chapin on the February '72 trip. He had a hand held camera on the plane over from Washington, DC, and on the stops in Honolulu and Guam and onto Beijing. And at one point, Kissinger and people from the National Security Council are walking around, either in Honolulu or Guam and Kissinger says, "You wouldn't believe on my trip last July, there was one banquet after another, and they heard me saying the only thing missing was caviar. And so the next morning I got caviar on my breakfast tray." So I always like to say Kissinger was wooed by caviar.

**I've read some of the notes and transcripts of Kissinger's meetings in China. Were they also a resource for you?**

Yes. For example, Kissinger wrote a long, 27-page memo after his secret trip in 1971, when he first met [Chinese premier] Zhou Enlai. He was so impressed with Zhou and yet he adds in that memo a line which reads: "They don't wish us well. And in the future, there could be a big problem," something to that effect. For the most part, Kissinger was impressed with Zhou, who is someone I wish I could have developed more in the podcast. After meeting Zhou in 1946, one of General Marshall's aides remarked that Zhou Enlai could probably run General Motors. But there was another side that neither Kissinger nor anyone else from this period when the U.S. was getting close to the Chinese wanted to talk about, which is the violent period of the Communist Party in the early 1930s. Zhou Enlai was basically the head of the intelligence service that the Party set up, and he ordered some very brutal things. So he's not just a charming man...

**There are lots of State Department archives and oral histories, but were you able to get access to what Chinese historians have written about the period, or any of their archives?**

No, and it was very frustrating. There's a wonderful historian at Cornell, [Jian Chen](#), who's writing the definitive biography of Zhou Enlai. He was a teenager when all this was going on and now he lives in the United States. He told me there was an agreement in 2006 or 2007 between the U.S. and China, and that the Chinese would open up the archives to American scholars like



him to get access, and the agreement fell apart. So there's very little on the Chinese side, which makes it really difficult.

Red Guards photographed on Perlez's trip to China in 1967.  
Credit: Courtesy of Jane Perlez

**On the U.S. side, though, so much of it is now available, since it's been more than 50 years since Kissinger's initial trip to China, right?**

Wait, it's not all available. There are State Department and Pentagon meetings available but the CIA is really holding a lot of stuff back. A case in point is the history of the diplomatic relationship that was ordered up by a former CIA station chief in Beijing, who felt that the American diplomacy had been a little too favorable towards China. He was not by any means anti-China, but he wanted to have a rundown of all the meetings and what transpired in those meetings. And Jim Mann did a terrific job in filing an FOIA [Freedom of Information Act request] for that document in the 1990s, when he was writing a book. And he got it. But the latter part of the document is all deleted. And that's the part about the secret listening stations that China and the United States jointly established. I filed my own FOIA in late 2020 or early 2021, but never got anything.

**But isn't it natural to expect that the CIA archives would be the last to be opened?**

Well yes, but there's really nothing to hide. So much of this stuff is already out in the public. Everybody knows what those stations were for and why they were there.

**Let's move to your major discovery here, of some news about Deng Xiaoping and the CIA...**

So I was very lucky. A journalist I know in Washington said, "Well, you should really talk to this guy who used to be in the [Central Intelligence] Agency. I think he's got some interesting things to say about China." So I met this person in Washington, went to his house and talked to him. At the time, I knew about the "listening stations" that [the CIA had helped build with cooperation from Beijing in western China to track Soviet missile tests]. And so we talked a lot about the "listening stations" and the reasons for it. And I got to understand what telemetry was and how the United States was able to measure what the Soviet missiles were actually doing, whether the Soviets were conforming to the regimen of SALT treaties. And then, after a number of visits, he said, "Oh, by the way, you know that Deng Xiaoping came to the agency, right?" I said, "What?"

**“ So, Deng Xiaoping said, “I'd like to go to the [Central Intelligence] Agency.” So... they took him to the command center on the first floor, and they showed him the big map where the listening stations would be for Vietnam and for the Soviet Union. ”**

He told me a little about it. And then on the next visit, he told me a bit more. I said, "How did you manage that?" And he said, "Well, Deng asked for it." And at that stage, people who follow this know that Deng was about to launch a little war against the Vietnamese. So he wanted some help on that. And the agency gave him some help on that. And in return, they wanted some help on the Soviet missiles because the United States had just been kicked out of Iran. You know, it was at the time of the fall of the Shah of Iran. So, Deng Xiaoping said, "I'd like to go to the Agency." So they had to find some time around his visit that was called "white time," when nothing is on the official schedule for his visit to the U.S. So at the appointed time, they took him there and into the underground car park. Then they took him to the command center on the first floor, and they showed him the big map where the listening stations would be for Vietnam and for the Soviet Union. And then they took him up to the seventh floor to meet [CIA Director] Stansfield Turner, [Frank] Carlucci, Jim Lilly, and I think one other person; Deng brought his own people. I don't have a transcript of the

meeting but I was told they talked about shared interests. And then off he went. There's never been another visit like it. I did check that out. I asked if Jiang Zemin or Hu Jintao had been and the answer was no.

**This is quite remarkable that a leader of China would actually go into the CIA, and that the U.S. and China would also set up a governmental joint venture, and build U.S.-backed listening stations to spy on the Soviet Union?**

MISCELLANEA	
BOOK REC	<a href="#">Home in The World, A Memoir</a> by Amartya Sen
FAVORITE MUSIC	19th/20th century classical
FAVORITE FILM	<i>Casablanca</i>

Yes, they were going to work together. There was some hesitation on the American side because the Americans supplied the computers, the radars, the hardware, etc, but Deng wanted the Chinese to have access to the stuff they didn't have. They were years and years behind. So he wanted his people to be trained in how to use that. I was told a little more than two dozen guys

from the NSA military services went out to the Haidian District in west Beijing and trained. I tried so hard to find someone who had been on that mission but I wasn't able to...

**When did the operation end?**

I think its effective end was in the late 80s or early 90s, because the technology moved on. The Chinese called the operation "79-11," which I guess was November 1979. That was 10 months after the Deng meeting at the CIA, and maybe that was when it was formally signed. There used to be a gathering every year for the people who were involved in that in Beijing. I believe there was a gathering as late as 2009.

**The other remarkable feature of this operation is that it was public, in some ways. I read about it when I was looking through a description of then-Senator Joe Biden's first visit to Beijing in 1979. These listening stations are mentioned in the article, and so Beijing and Washington clearly wanted some of the operation to be public...**

That's right. Philip Taubman had a front page article about this in *The New York Times* in 1981. And soon after the Tiananmen Square massacre, maybe 10 days later, *The Washington Post* had a front page story. It looked to me as though the CIA wanted the world to know or wanted everybody to know these stations were still running. The lead of the story was something like, "Don't worry, because our trucks are still traveling from Xinjiang to Beijing with tapes from the sites where the United States is spying on Soviet missile tests." They wanted it known that the relationship between China and the United States was still going on. They wanted the Soviets to know, obviously, that this was still going on. I suspect when [Brent] Scowcroft and [Lawrence] Eagleburger went out on that secret trip ordered by President [George H.W.] Bush after June 4 [1989], that those monitoring stations were probably on the agenda.

**In the podcast, you also had to deal with how this U.S.-China relationship has frayed, and evolved into a nasty rivalry on so many fronts...**

The scope of the podcast is that we go from friend to rival and almost enemy in a span of 50 years. It's quite remarkable that we've turned tables so quickly. And this podcast led me to conclude that we don't understand each other very well. And this is happening at a time when we don't have many [American journalists](#) in China. *The New York Times*, for instance, has just one reporter there. And for those who are there, they face so many restrictions, not only by the rules, but increasingly the attitudes of the Chinese people towards western reporters now, attitudes that have been fostered by incredible government propaganda and nationalism. And so it's very hard for journalists who are there to talk to Chinese people.

**Let's talk about the final episode, when you shift from the engagement with China, and the normalization of relations, in 1979, to the present, and this dark period of, really, disengagement. What were you trying to do with the final episode?**

In the final episode, I wanted to bring home the notion that Nixon saw that today would happen. Richard Reeves, one of Nixon's biographers, told a gathering at the JFK Library here in Boston that Nixon saw that there would be a point where the United States and China would face off against each other. And he didn't know whether it would be a military or an economic clash. But it would be one or both of those. And Nixon said, according to Reeves, that it was up to his successors to take care of that. So I wondered, as I've been putting this podcast together, what would Nixon have done differently in the last 10 to 20 years? He had a feel for China. So he might have paid more attention than the presidents of the last 20 years, I think he would have paid much more attention. It's important to understand that Nixon knew China was going to grow and become very strong and that it was going to deal with the world on its own terms, not on our terms.



Big-character posters photographed on Perlez's trip to China in 1967. Credit: Courtesy of Jane Perlez



David Barboza is the co-founder and a staff writer at *The Wire*. Previously, he was a longtime business reporter and foreign correspondent at *The New York Times*.

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