

JFK, China, and the Bomb

Gordon H. Chang

William F. Buckley, Jr.'s *National Review* started 1965 with a startling proposal: The United States should "destroy—destroy literally, physically—the present Chinese nuclear capability" to guarantee that China could not become a nuclear power "for a good many years ahead." The magazine's editorial "Should We Bomb Red China's Bomb?" advocated an American air strike against atomic installations in China to protect Asia and the United States. Such a "mission," according to "an unimpeachable, fully qualified source within our military command structure," would be entirely feasible from a "military-technological standpoint."¹

The conservative journal contended that the interests of national security required radical action. China had exploded its first nuclear device just months before, in October 1964, and was expected to begin stockpiling weapons. Although the Chinese had no intercontinental missiles, *National Review* warned that China already had planes that could drop atomic bombs on all of Asia and that "even today a ship can carry a Chinese bomb into the harbors of New Orleans, San Francisco, New York or London." With such a frightening prospect before the nation, the United States could not sit passively "like a man who merely watches and waits while the guillotine is constructed to chop his head off." While the magazine's editors conceded the possibility that they had not addressed "every relevant doubt and question that may legitimately be raised" about the plan, they professed complete sincerity; they were convinced "that this proposal deserves serious discussion by serious men."²

Buckley probably presumed that only the political right wing had sufficient anticommunist mettle to advance a proposal of such audacity. His presumption was mistaken. As will be shown, the liberal president John F. Kennedy and his closest advisers, in their quest for a nuclear test ban, not only seriously discussed but also actively pursued the possibility of taking military action *with the Soviet Union* against China's nuclear installations at least a year and a half earlier.

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¹ "Should We Bomb Red China's Bomb?" *National Review*, Jan. 12, 1965, pp. 8–9. The call was repeated in another editorial, "Bomb the Bang," *ibid.*, June 1, 1965, pp. 449–50.

² "Should We Bomb Red China's Bomb?" *ibid.*, pp. 9, 10.

From the start of Kennedy's administration, government researchers and officials devoted close attention to China's weapons development and concluded that China would soon join the nuclear club. In January 1961 the commander in chief of the United States forces in the Pacific advised Washington that China might explode an atomic device by the end of 1962 and construct a small arsenal of nuclear weapons by 1965. Such a prospect chilled the president, who, according to the recollection of Walt Whitman Rostow, believed that "the biggest event of the 1960s [might] well be the Chinese explosion of a nuclear weapon." Under Secretary of State Chester B. Bowles shared Kennedy's concern and in fall 1961 publicly warned that Communist China was "far more dangerous, in many ways, than even the [pro-Nationalist Chinese] Committee of One Million would have us think."³

Members of the Kennedy administration were also certain that the prospect of a nuclear China weighed heavily on the Soviets, whose own ideological and political differences with the Chinese had steadily widened since the late 1950s. The Soviets had torn up contracts and withdrawn thousands of their technicians from China in 1960 in retaliation for Communist Party of China (CPC) criticisms. Beijing, challenging the Kremlin's leadership of the international Communist movement, accused the Soviets of "revisionism" and capitulation to American imperialism. On February 11, 1961, soon after taking office, President Kennedy, met with Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, Ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn E. Thompson, former ambassadors Charles E. Bohlen and George F. Kennan, and Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy in the White House to review the "thinking of the Soviet leadership." Kennedy already knew that Harriman, who had sent the president-elect reports of his conversations with Soviet leaders about their differences with Beijing, was deeply interested in having the United States exploit Sino-Soviet tensions. Kennan, too, wanted to take advantage of Sino-Soviet discord. "The main target of our diplomacy," wrote Kennan to then Senator Kennedy in August 1960, "should be to heighten the divisive tendencies within the Soviet bloc. The best means to do this lies in the improvement in our relations with Moscow." That trend of thought shaped the entire February 11 White House meeting. Discussing Soviet attitudes on foreign affairs, the men speculated that Nikita Khrushchev might be eager for some diplomatic success with the West, perhaps on arms control. "Soviet interest in this area appears real." They also concluded that in addition to the United States, Germany and China represented "the great long-run worries of the Soviet Union." "These are the countries whose relation to the atomic problem seems an important one to the Soviet Union, and indeed effective restraint of the

³ Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief Pacific, "Pacific General War Plan (U)," Jan. 1961, p. D-9, box 44, CCS 3146 CINCPAC-CNUNC (26 Jan 1961), sec. 1, Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff 1961, RG 218 (National Archives); Ciro E. Zoppo and Alice L. Hsieh, "The Accession of Other Nations to the Nuclear Test Ban," March 8, 1961, p. 57, box 23, CCS 3050 Disarmament (8 Mar 1961), *ibid.*; Alice Langley Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy in the Nuclear Era* (Englewood Cliffs, 1962), 154; Walt Whitman Rostow interviewed by Gordon H. Chang, June 6, 1985, Austin, Texas (in Gordon H. Chang's possession); U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin*, Sept. 18, 1961, p. 487.

Chinese Communists is a continuing task of the Soviet government." The participants discussed the merits of an early meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev, which soon was scheduled for June at Vienna. The acute interest in the Sino-Soviet division that the administration exhibited in private contrasted sharply with its public inattention to the subject.⁴

During the preparations for the Vienna summit, Kennedy's advisers recommended that the president exploit Sino-Soviet tensions and seek a common understanding with Khrushchev about China, including the need to prevent it from becoming a nuclear power. By emphasizing the Chinese threat to both Washington and Moscow, it was suggested, Kennedy might gain Soviet agreement to restrain Chinese aggressiveness and encourage a condominium of interests in what was called a "stable viable world order" dominated by the two superpowers. Kennedy's advisers suggested that the president inform Khrushchev that "so long as Peiping adheres to a doctrine of 'unremitting struggle' against the United States and our allies, we will have no recourse but to maintain our systems of individual and collective security arrangements." Thus, if the Soviet Union "sincerely desires peace throughout the world, it should urge Communist China to renounce the use of force in the conduct of its foreign relations." The president should stress that "it is neither in the interests of the USSR nor of the United States to allow Communist China to pursue policies which risk touching off a general war." The president should take the initiative in calling for a halt to nuclear proliferation. "Does the USSR really believe that the chances of avoiding a nuclear war will not be lessened after [Communist China] becomes a nuclear power? Can the USSR safely conclude that its espousal of the policies of a militant, expansionist [China] is fully consistent with Soviet national interests?" Kennedy's advisers were already convinced that the Soviet Union's fear of a nuclear China helped explain its interest in arms control, but they wanted to elicit the Soviet leader's ideas on what actually could be done about Beijing's nuclear development. Other background papers for the Vienna meeting speculated that the Soviet Union might want to utilize a nuclear nonproliferation treaty to frustrate the Chinese atomic program.⁵

But Khrushchev's behavior at Vienna disappointed and disturbed Kennedy. The atmosphere was grim throughout the meetings. The two men sparred over practically every issue, including China, with Khrushchev unwavering in his support for

⁴ W. Averell Harriman to John F. Kennedy, Nov. 12, Nov. 15, 1960, USSR, General, box 125, Countries, President's Office files, John F. Kennedy Papers (John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Mass.); George F. Kennan to Kennedy, Aug. 17, 1960, p. 7, attached to Kennan interview by Louis Fischer, March 23, 1963, transcript, Oral History Program (Kennedy Library); McGeorge Bundy, "Notes on discussion of the thinking of the Soviet leadership, Cabinet Room, February 11, 1961," pp. 1-6, USSR, General 2/2/61-2/14/61, box 176, Countries, National Security files, Kennedy Papers. Charles E. Bohlen concluded early in the administration that the "Soviet Union's great fear was not United States nuclear power, it was China's possession of the atomic bomb!" Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History, 1929-1969* (New York, 1973), 475.

⁵ "President's Meeting with Khrushchev, Position Papers: Progress Toward a Viable World Order," May 26, 1961, USSR-Vienna Meeting: Background Documents, 1953-1961 (G-2), box 126, President's Office files, Kennedy Papers; "Communist China," May 25, 1961, *ibid.*, "President's Meeting with Khrushchev, Position Papers: Soviet Aims and Expectations," USSR-Vienna Meeting: Background Documents, 1953-1961 (G-3), *ibid.*, "Soviet Positions on Various Disarmament Questions," 5-7, *ibid.*

China's recovery of both its United Nations (UN) seat and Taiwan. The Soviet leader failed to lunge for the "China bait" when Kennedy invoked the specter of an expanded nuclear community. At one point in the meetings, Kennedy cited the Chinese proverb that a long journey begins with a single step and tried to persuade the Soviets to take that step toward an arms agreement with the United States. But Khrushchev rebuffed the president and quipped that Kennedy seemed to know the Chinese well but that he, too, knew them well. Kennedy, in turn, needled Khrushchev, saying that the Soviets might get to know the Chinese "even better." Khrushchev ended the verbal duel by saying that he was already quite familiar with them.⁶

Kennedy discovered at Vienna that, although the Soviets were sensitive about China's growing power, they were not yet ready to reject their former partner and enter into a marriage of convenience with the United States. Khrushchev evidently did not want to lend further credence to the charge that he was conciliating imperialism. As some of Kennedy's advisers had observed, Moscow's behavior was ambivalent: Khrushchev wanted to pursue détente with the United States but could not appear overeager for fear of validating Chinese accusations that he was "soft" on the United States. Sections of the international Communist movement were already leaning toward Beijing in the internecine dispute. Bohlen, Kennedy's close adviser on the Soviet Union, had warned before the Vienna meeting that Khrushchev might act more "Bolshevik" to avoid being outflanked by the Chinese from the left.⁷

Kennedy, however, was undeterred by the lack of substantive progress in American-Soviet relations at Vienna and continued to seek a modus vivendi with Khrushchev to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. The president's concern about Beijing, in particular, mounted. He gloomily told *New York Times* columnist Arthur Krock in October 1961 that the "domino theory" had lost its validity: China was bound to develop an atomic bomb, and when it did, all of Southeast Asia would fall to the Chinese Communists. In January 1962 Kennedy directed the National Security Council (NSC) to confront and resolve the "special unsolved problem" of a China with nuclear weapons and its effect "on our dispositions in Southeast Asia."⁸

Kennedy was not resigned to watching Beijing assemble its nuclear capability and decided to devote more of his own attention to achieving a nuclear test ban treaty with the Soviet Union. This was a significant change in attitude for Kennedy, since he had not been serious about a test ban during the first year and a half of his administration—his interest in disarmament, according to Theodore C. Sorensen, had been limited mainly to its "propaganda" effect on world public opinion.⁹ But during the late summer of 1962, months before the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy's growing consternation about China's atomic program stimulated his search for a test

⁶ Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York, 1965), 548–49; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York, 1965), 344.

⁷ Charles E. Bohlen to secretary of state, March 23, 1961, USSR, General 3/23/61–5/8/61, box 180, Countries, National Security files, Kennedy Papers.

⁸ Arthur Krock, no. 393, Memoranda, Book III, Oct. 1961, Arthur Krock Papers (Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.); "Summary of the President's Remarks to the National Security Council Jan. 18, 1962," National Security Council Meetings, 1962, box 313, National Security files, Kennedy Papers.

⁹ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 518.

ban, which he hoped might somehow prevent the Chinese from developing their atomic weapons. What the administration thought the negotiation of a test ban treaty could do to achieve such an end took clearer form in the months ahead.

A ban on nuclear weapons tests was not a new idea. During the last years of the Eisenhower administration, Washington had sought understandings with Moscow about ending nuclear testing, and in mid-1958, the United States, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom, the three nuclear powers at the time, agreed to a moratorium on all testing. But the downing of a United States U-2 spy plane over the Soviet Union in May 1960 scuttled prospects for a formal agreement, and negotiations at a trilateral Geneva Conference on the Discontinuance of Nuclear Weapons Tests bogged down in recriminations. Conflicts over technical issues, such as methods of detecting clandestine testing, obscured the contention and the underlying political suspicions. Discussions with the Russians after Kennedy assumed office also made little headway. Neither side found compelling reasons—even the threat of China—to override the perceived disadvantages of a formal treaty forbidding testing. The trilateral meetings in Geneva collapsed in January 1962.¹⁰

In mid-1962, however, Kennedy ordered a review of the western position on nuclear testing and the drafting of new treaty proposals. Several factors have been advanced as explanations of Kennedy's heightened interest in negotiations: the pressure of adverse world opinion following the Soviet resumption of atmospheric testing in 1961 (followed by the American resumption in 1962), a changing American strategic doctrine that deemphasized nuclear weaponry, and technological breakthroughs in the detection of distant underground nuclear explosions. But excerpts from the private journal of Glenn T. Seaborg, head of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) under Kennedy, provide some new insights. His notes of a series of meetings Kennedy held with his top arms control and national security advisers at the end of July and early August 1962 reveal that the administration was profoundly dismayed about the imminent acquisition of nuclear weapons by China and other countries. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, in a meeting with the president and his top advisers on July 30, 1962, presented a report commissioned by Kennedy on the potential spread of nuclear weapons in the absence of a comprehensive test ban treaty. Nitze said that a "test ban would be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for inhibiting this proliferation, and that to prevent it would require collaboration by the U.S. and USSR." Soon afterwards, Washington presented two major new draft test ban treaties to the Soviets at a newly established Eighteen-Nation Disarmament Committee at Geneva.¹¹

¹⁰ For background on arms negotiations during the Eisenhower administration, see Robert A. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954-1960* (New York, 1978); Lincoln P. Bloomfield, Walter C. Clemens, Jr., and Franklyn Griffiths, *Khrushchev and the Arms Race: Soviet Interests in Arms Control and Disarmament, 1954-1964* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966); and National Academy of Sciences (U.S.), Committee on International Security and Arms Control, *Nuclear Arms Control: Background and Issues* (Washington, 1985), 187-90.

¹¹ Harold Karan Jacobson and Eric Stein, *Diplomats, Scientists, and Politicians: The United States and the Nu-*

The first treaty, presented by United States Ambassador Arthur H. Dean on August 27, called for a comprehensive ban. The outlook for the proposal was not bright as the administration expected the Soviets to reject the provisions for installation of monitoring stations and inspections to detect violations. The Soviets argued that a verification system was unnecessary and would be used for espionage purposes. Dean said he knew, even before he presented the two treaties, that the Soviets would reject any plan requiring on-site inspections. But the second, backup treaty seemed more promising. It proposed a partial test ban, which would outlaw testing only in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water, and sidestep the sticky problem of underground explosions. That too was turned down by the Soviets. However, the rejected draft was virtually identical to the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which the Soviets did agree to less than one year later. Moscow's change of mind was inseparable from its own widening rupture with Beijing.¹²

Even though the Soviets rejected both August 1962 treaties, saying they gave unfair advantages to the United States, Kennedy remained convinced that a test ban agreement might help end nuclear proliferation. He thought that if the four existing nuclear powers—the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France, which had exploded its first atomic device in February 1960—could all agree on a test ban, they could pressure other countries to follow suit and sign. The result would be the end of nuclear proliferation since, the thinking went, no additional country could develop a bomb without testing. The nuclear powers would also conveniently retain their monopoly.

The Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 seemed further to impress both Kennedy and Khrushchev with the importance of arms control and reduction of tensions. Following the showdown, the two leaders drew closer to one another, while Sino-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate. China accused Khrushchev of recklessness in installing the missiles in the first place and of weakness in withdrawing them when confronted by the United States. As the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported in January 1963, Sino-Soviet relations had reached a "new crisis." Ideological and national differences had become so fundamental, the report argued, "for most practical purposes, a 'split' has already occurred. . . . the USSR and China are now two separate powers whose interests conflict on almost every major issue." According to the CIA, that development would "obviously have many important advantages for the West," although a separate "Asian Communist Bloc" under Beijing could have grave implications for the United States in the Far East.¹³

clear Test Ban Negotiations (Ann Arbor, 1966), 381–416; Glenn T. Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban* (Berkeley, 1981), 162–71.

¹² Arthur H. Dean, *Test Ban and Disarmament: The Path of Negotiation* (New York, 1966), 90–91; Jacobson and Stein, *Diplomats*, 397–413.

¹³ In a December 1962 television interview, Kennedy himself linked the worsening of Sino-Soviet relations with the stand of the United States during the Cuban missile crisis. See *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, John F. Kennedy: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to December 31, 1962* (Washington, 1963), 901–2. Ray S. Cline, "Sino-Soviet Relations," cover memorandum, Jan. 14, 1963, "USSR, General 1/9/63–1/14/63," box 180, National Security files, Kennedy Papers; Central Intelligence Agency, "Sino-Soviet Relations at a New Crisis," memorandum, Jan. 14, 1963, *ibid*.

The CIA report made an additional observation, which must have caught the eye of any reader on the American side who was contemplating a possible military clash with China. The CIA believed that the Sino-Soviet breach would continue to widen and that, although the “public military alliance between the two countries probably would not be openly repudiated,” this was “not really a key question.” “Already, neither side can consider treaty obligations as an important element in future calculations; each recognizes that, in crises which raise the possibility of nuclear war, for example in the Taiwan Strait, neither can expect its ‘ally’ to expose itself to major military risks unless the ‘ally’ itself feels its vital interests to be threatened.” The CIA report concluded that in all matters “short of survival,” “China and the USSR will increasingly view each other as hostile rivals and competing powers.”¹⁴

Other problems, however, complicated agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union on a test ban. One was the position of France. Its entry into the nuclear club and its adamant refusal to limit its program had confounded Kennedy, as it appeared that only if he could bring the French to subscribe to a test ban would the Soviets be willing to exert pressure on the Chinese. The Soviet Union also seemed unlikely to accede to a test ban unless Great Britain and France, regardless of their avowed independence from the United States, did so.

In early January 1963, Kennedy tried to send a message to President Charles de Gaulle of France through Minister of Culture André Malraux, who was visiting the United States to present the *Mona Lisa* for exhibition. Hoping to convince the French government to join arms talks, Kennedy drew a terrifying picture of a world imperiled by a China armed with atomic weapons. Over dinner in the White House with Malraux, as William R. Tyler, assistant secretary of state for European affairs, recalled, Kennedy stressed that a nuclear China would be the “great menace in the future to humanity, the free world, and freedom on earth.” Revealing his own alarm and racial bias, Kennedy claimed that the Chinese “would be perfectly prepared to sacrifice hundreds of millions of their own lives” to carry out their “aggressive and militant policies.” De Gaulle and other European leaders had to realize that the differences within the western alliance paled in the face of such a threat. Kennedy, recalled Tyler, believed that the Chinese attached a “lower value” to human life.¹⁵

William C. Foster, the head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) under Kennedy, later recalled that Kennedy was certain that the United States had to do “something about ostracizing or containing China. He felt that somehow there must be a way in which the rest of the world can prevent China from becoming a [nuclear threat].” Preventing China from acquiring the bomb loomed in Kennedy’s thoughts about a test ban, as his remarks to his closest advisers re-

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, “Sino-Soviet Relations at a New Crisis,” 6.

¹⁵ William R. Tyler interview by Elizabeth Donahue, March 7, 1964, transcript, 37–39, Oral History Program (Kennedy Library); William R. Tyler to Walter LaFeber, Dec. 10, 1971, attached to transcript of Tyler oral history, *ibid.*

vealed. At a NSC meeting on January 22, 1963, Kennedy emphasized that “the test ban treaty is important for one reason. Chicoms [Chinese Communists].” The declassified notes of Roger Hilsman, director of the State Department’s Intelligence Bureau, indicate that Kennedy observed, “If the Soviets want this and if it can help in keeping the Chinese Communist from getting a full nuclear capacity, then it is worth it. Can’t foresee what the world would be like with this. Chinese Communists are a grave danger. Ban is good if it does prevent them from becoming a nuclear power. Can’t afford to let them do this. Important if it has potential affect on Chicoms.”¹⁶

Two weeks later on February 8, Kennedy reiterated this theme to his top arms control officials—Johnson, Rusk, Bundy, Seaborg of the AEC, Foster of ACDA, and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. Kennedy asserted that “the principal reason” for seeking a treaty was its possible effect in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons to other countries, “particularly China.” If it were not for that possible gain, the treaty would not be worth the struggle with Congress and the political disruption. To press his point, Kennedy said that he would even accept some cheating by the Soviets on a comprehensive test ban if the Chinese could be denied the bomb.¹⁷

But how would a test ban stop the Chinese from developing a nuclear capacity if Beijing refused to sign a treaty? Seaborg recalls that he was never clear how this would happen, and conservative members of Congress who were closely monitoring the test ban negotiations also wondered. Foster confronted the problem in May 1963 during his testimony before the Senate Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee (popularly known as the Stennis Committee after its chairman, Sen. John Stennis), which questioned the value of a test ban. Foster argued that a treaty would slow the arms race, help maintain United States military superiority by stopping the testing needed to improve Soviet weaponry, reduce nuclear fallout, and end nuclear proliferation. Foster admitted that the administration had “no illusions that China would sign a test ban treaty in the near future. Its leaders have made it clear that they have no such intentions.” He then posed the obvious question: Why did the administration think a treaty would have any effect on China? Foster suggested that a test ban would give added force to the Soviets, whose policy had been to frustrate the Chinese nuclear program. If there was a treaty, the Chinese could not point to American or Soviet testing to justify their own program. The Soviet Union and other countries trading with China might also exert more economic and political pressures on Beijing. In any event, Foster added a not insignificant consideration: “The treaty

¹⁶ William C. Foster interview by Charles T. Morrissey, Aug. 5, 1965, transcript, 36–37, *ibid.* Sections regarding China and the test ban are still sanitized, including several paragraphs in which Foster describes Kennedy’s “willingness to consider politically dangerous moves” against China. *Ibid.*, 37. “Mr. Hilsman’s Remarks At Director’s Meeting,” Jan. 22, 1963, National Security—Hilsman Summary of President’s Views 1/22/63, box 5, Roger Hilsman Papers (Kennedy Library).

¹⁷ Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban*, 181, 188. Arthur Dean, an architect of the Limited Test Ban Treaty, also admitted that the treaty was based on the acceptance of the possibility of Soviet cheating. Dean, *Test Ban and Disarmament*, 82.

would have a divisive effect on Sino-Soviet relations." The senators remained unconvinced by Foster's vague contention that seemed to rely largely on trusting the Soviets to turn on their erstwhile ally. To many in the Senate who were unsure about the nature and depth of the Sino-Soviet division, Foster must have appeared wishful, at best. If the Soviets were so interested in stopping China's nuclear program, they wondered, why were they stalling on the test ban negotiations?¹⁸

Progress toward a test ban, in fact, was slow during the spring of 1963. Kennedy had no success with de Gaulle, and the American press focused on the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union over methods of detecting violations of a test ban. But the real block to an agreement was Soviet leaders' preoccupation with the worsening conflict with Beijing. The Soviets hesitated to reach an accommodation with the West until they resolved what to do about their eastern flank.

The Chinese, in increasingly shrill terms, charged Khrushchev with abandoning communism in exchange for improved relations with United States imperialism. Throughout the first months of 1963, the Communist Party of China openly polemicized with many of the major communist parties of the world, including those in France, Italy, and the United States, that had been especially supportive of Moscow's views. To undercut the Chinese, Khrushchev temporarily hardened his position toward Washington and tried to rally as much of the international Communist movement as possible against the CPC. Foy Kohler, the United States ambassador to the Soviet Union, described the chill in American-Soviet relations in a long telegram in March 1963. He predicted that there would be no progress on the test ban, Germany, and other outstanding matters until the Soviet leadership "decides how to deal with Chicoms and starts to do so." Open hostilities between Moscow and Beijing already seemed a distinct possibility. United States intelligence agencies reported extensive troop movements along the Soviet-Chinese border and military clashes between the two sides.¹⁹

But as late as May 22, President Kennedy still publicly admitted that he had seen no interest on the part of the Soviets in a test ban treaty. Their position had remained unchanged for five months, he lamented, and the prospects were not bright. He was afraid the nuclear "genie," in his words, might soon escape from the bottle. Secretary of State Rusk expressed similar pessimism the following week at his press conference.²⁰

Then suddenly it appeared that the volatile Khrushchev had made up his mind

¹⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, *Military Aspects and Implications of Nuclear Test Ban Proposals and Related Matters*, 88 Cong., 1 sess., May 7, 1963, pp. 7-11.

¹⁹ Foy Kohler to Department of State, March 16, 1963, cable, Government Agencies, State Dept.—Miscellaneous Cables, 1961-1963, box 4, Vice Presidential Security file, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers (Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas); Roger Hilsman to Dean Rusk, cover memorandum, March 7, 1963, cited in Bundy, *Index of Weekend Papers*, 1/63-3/63, box 318, National Security files, Kennedy Papers; Hilsman to Rusk, research memorandum, March 7, 1963, *ibid.*

²⁰ Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, *Documents on Disarmament, 1963* (Washington, 1964), 194; *New York Times*, May 30, 1963, p. 1.



President Kennedy delivers the commencement address at American University, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1963.
Courtesy John F. Kennedy Library.

to shift direction. On June 7 Khrushchev accepted a secret proposal from Kennedy and British prime minister Harold Macmillan for a high-level tripartite conference on a test ban treaty. Kennedy quickly followed with his American University speech on June 10 in which he revealed the Khrushchev communication and reemphasized the urgent need for U.S.-Soviet cooperation in reducing tensions in the world. The Soviets responded glowingly to Kennedy's conciliatory address, disseminating it in its entirety on the Soviet media. American intelligence experts wondered if Khrushchev's *volte-face* was aimed at using the test ban negotiations as a lever or even as an implied threat against the Chinese.²¹

²¹ Thomas L. Hughes to Rusk, June 14, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang's possession), 1, 4. In September 1963, after the Limited Test Ban Treaty had been signed, the U.S. embassy in Moscow studied the development of Moscow's stance toward the treaty. The study stated that the Soviet attitude shifted significantly in late May because Moscow concluded that the dispute with the Chinese was not going to be resolved. American Embassy, Moscow, to Department of State, "Motivations for Moscow's Signature of the Test Ban Agreement," Sept. 6, 1963, *ibid.*

In contrast to Kennedy's overture to the Soviets was the letter that the Chinese delivered on June 14, just four days after the American University speech, to a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist party of the Soviet Union. The communication detailed comprehensive, fundamental differences dividing the two parties. The tone and content of the letter virtually foreclosed any possibility that a high-level bilateral party meeting scheduled to begin on July 5 would be able to close the rift. A study conducted by the American embassy in Moscow after the Limited Test Ban Treaty had been signed in August concluded that "it was the outbreak of virtually undeclared war between Moscow and Peiping [in the] spring which explained Soviet acceptance of a partial test ban agreement which it could have had at any time during the past year."²²

The Sino-Soviet split was a mixed blessing for Kennedy. He, of course, welcomed the splintering of the Communist world. Ever since the Chinese Revolution of 1949, Washington had longed for such a development. But now, even if the Soviets themselves would agree to a treaty, it was highly unlikely that they could pressure the Chinese to sign, as Foster had tried to convince Congress they would. The two countries were simply too distant from one another. In late June Kennedy himself told Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany that Khrushchev had a real problem with the Chinese and no way to bring them into a test ban.²³ Members of the Kennedy administration could have asked an ironic question: Where was the "Sino-Soviet bloc" now that it was "needed" by the United States?

The president gave few public hints of how he would resolve his quandary, but at a press conference in Bonn, West Germany, on June 24, he dropped a vague threat. In response to a question asking how the proposed test ban treaty would prevent China or others from gaining the bomb, Kennedy pointed out that one provision might be that signatories would "use all the influence that they had in their possession to persuade others not to grasp the nuclear nettle." Kennedy quickly added, "quite obviously" countries seeking the bomb "may not accept this persuasion and then, as I say, they will get the false security which goes with nuclear diffusion." Was Kennedy implying that the acquisition of a nuclear capability did not lessen, but instead heightened, the threat to a nation's well-being and invited possible retaliation from other powers?²⁴

The president selected the veteran diplomat and Soviet expert W. Averell Harriman as the representative of the United States at the tripartite Moscow meeting. Harriman had closely followed the Sino-Soviet split for years and was convinced that it was genuine and profound. Harriman confided to the Danish ambassador on July 1 that "Khrushchev's main preoccupation is with the Chinese." "There has never been close confidence between Moscow and Peiping," he said. In preparing for the Moscow meeting, Kennedy and his people were buoyed by Khrushchev's surprise

²² American Embassy, Moscow, to Department of State, "Motivations," Sept. 6, 1963, pp. 4-5.

²³ Rusk to Department of State, June 25, 1963, cable (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang's possession).

²⁴ *New York Times*, June 25, 1963, pp. 1, 10.

announcement on July 2 that he was ready to accept a limited test ban treaty if a nonaggression pact between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact nations was also signed at the same time. Still, the administration remained outwardly cautious, for there was always the possibility that the Soviets might sacrifice an East-West accord for a resolution of the Sino-Soviet dispute.²⁵

As the date for the Moscow conference approached, the administration busily formulated its position. Invariably, the recommendations called for Harriman to approach the Soviets to see if they would cooperate in taking action against the Chinese nuclear program. Using phrases such as "removing the potential capability" or "action to deny the Chicomps a nuclear capability," advisers in the administration made clear they were willing to go far to stop China's nuclear development, although Harriman doubted that Khrushchev would want to talk with him about China. According to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s cryptic later description, Kennedy nonetheless told Harriman as he left for Moscow that he "could go as far as he wished in exploring the possibility of a Soviet-American understanding with regard to China." What Schlesinger only dared to hint, declassified documents begin to reveal.²⁶

On July 14 Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Valerian Zorin warmly welcomed Harriman and his delegation to Moscow. The Soviets gave the British team, headed by Lord Hailsham (Quentin Hogg), an equally hospitable reception. In contrast, the front page of the day's *Pravda* prominently displayed a Soviet party letter blasting the Chinese Communists. That publicity boosted the hopes of United States officials for a successful outcome of the talks, according to American newspaper reports. Harriman publicly declared that he would be prepared to discuss any matter that Khrushchev might raise. The next day Khrushchev himself opened the negotiations. In a mood described by the press as "relaxed and jovial," he bantered with the United States and British delegations for three and a half hours about the test ban and related matters, including China. Across town the Chinese and Soviet party showdown remained under a cloud. Deng Xiaoping, the general secretary of the CPC and leader of Chinese delegation, was making no progress in resolving the differences with the Soviets and the Soviet press virtually ignored the party conference. The *People's Daily* of Beijing charged that Kennedy's strategy was one of

²⁵ Brady G. Barr, memorandum, meeting of Harriman and Kield Gustav Knuth-Winterfeldt, July 1, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang's possession); H. H. Stackhouse, memorandum, meeting of Rusk and Mongi Slim, July 15, 1963, *ibid.*

²⁶ Harriman to Kennedy, Nov. 12, Nov. 15, 1960, USSR, General, box 125, President's Office files, Kennedy Papers; Llewellyn E. Thompson interview by Donahue, March 25, 1964, transcript, 25-28, Oral History Program (Kennedy Library); Bloomfield, Clemens, and Griffiths, *Khrushchev*, 190; State Department, "Elements For a Package Deal With Moscow," July 3, 1963, ACDA Disarmament: Harriman trip to Moscow, part III, box 265, National Security files, Kennedy Papers; Walt Whitman Rostow, "Memorandum," July 5, 1963, *ibid.*; William C. Foster, "Memorandum for the President: Political Implications of a Nuclear Test Ban," July 12, 1963, *ibid.*; Col. Wm. F. Jackson to Lyndon B. Johnson, July 9, 1963, Colonel Burris, National Security Council, 1962-63, box 5, Vice Presidential Security file, Johnson Papers; "Personal & Confidential" memo to Johnson, *ibid.*; Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban*, 228; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 825.



Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev joked upon meeting W. Averell Harriman and Lord Hailsham, "I'm surrounded by imperialists."
Reproduced from *Life*, July 26, 1963, p. 26.

"wooing the Soviet Union, opposing China, and poisoning Sino-Soviet relations." Moscow, according to Beijing, was falling into Washington's trap.²⁷

Kennedy personally monitored the discussions in Moscow and required unusual precautions to ensure complete secrecy in the communications between Washington and Harriman. Restricting the customary wide circulation of cable traffic during a negotiation, Kennedy arranged that only six top officials outside the White House read the messages from Moscow. Only Rusk, Thompson, Foster, McNamara, Under Secretary of State George Ball, and John McCone, the director of the CIA, were permitted to read the cables on a hand-delivered, "for-your-eyes-only" basis. All messages from Washington to the American delegation in Moscow were cleared through the president. Kennedy followed the negotiations with "a devouring interest," according to Assistant Secretary of State Benjamin H. Read, who was responsible for communications during the Moscow talks.²⁸

²⁷ *Time*, July 19, 1963, pp. 24–25; *New York Times*, July 14, 1963, pp. 1, 3; *ibid.*, July 15, 1963, p. 1; *ibid.*, July 16, 1963, pp. 1, 3; *Peking Review*, July 19, 1963, p. 10.

²⁸ Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 734–35; Benjamin H. Read interview by Joseph E. O'Connor, Feb. 22, 1966, transcript, 3, Oral History Program (Kennedy Library).

The opening session in Moscow greatly encouraged Harriman, and he immediately reported the good news to the president. Kennedy, revealing his preoccupation with the Chinese, responded to Harriman the same evening. Kennedy was determined to use the test ban talks to find a way to stop China's development of nuclear weapons. On July 15 he gave Read a provocative directive for Harriman, which the president himself had drafted in longhand. The cable read, in part:

I remain convinced that Chinese problem is more serious than Khrushchev comments in first meeting suggest, and believe you should press question in private meeting with him. I agree that large stockpiles are characteristic of US and USSR only, but consider that relatively small forces in hands of people like CHICOMS could be very dangerous to us all. Further believe even limited test ban can and should be means to limit diffusion. *You should try to elicit Khrushchev's view of means of limiting or preventing Chinese nuclear development and his willingness either to take Soviet action or to accept US action aimed in this direction.*²⁹

Kennedy did not spell out exactly what kind of Soviet or American "action" he had in mind, but it is clear that he was suggesting more than political methods. He knew that the Soviet ability to persuade China to abandon development of the bomb was negligible. As he had dejectedly confessed to Adenauer in late June, the Soviets had no way of bringing China into a test ban.³⁰

Could the Soviets coerce the Chinese into abandoning their quest for the bomb? That, too, was unlikely since Moscow had little remaining leverage to use against Beijing. Moscow, top administration officials were almost certain, had ended its assistance to China's atomic program as early as 1960 or 1961. By 1963 China's effort was wholly independent. And whatever economic and political weapons the Soviets might have had, they had largely been expended in the futile counterattack against the Chinese ideological offensive. The Soviet attempt at economic coercion had failed to bring Beijing into line in 1960, trade between China and the Soviet bloc had fallen precipitously, and the recent effort to isolate Beijing in the international Communist movement had not intimidated the Chinese Communists. If anything, Beijing had become more antagonistic to the Soviets.³¹

The United States possessed even fewer means to influence China. Trade and normal diplomatic relations between the two countries did not exist. And in any case, China's economy was autarkic—even world economic sanctions against Beijing would hardly have been decisive. China's leaders had invested so much material and political capital in the nuclear program that it was unlikely they would surrender to external pressures. Unless there was a total prohibition of nuclear weapons

²⁹ Kennedy to Harriman, July 15, 1963, cable (Freedom of Information Act release, in Benjamin Loeb's possession), emphasis added. Glenn T. Seaborg, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission under Kennedy, also suggests that Kennedy's July 15 cable to Harriman indicated a possible interest in a joint preemptive strike against Chinese nuclear facilities. Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban*, 239.

³⁰ Rusk to Department of State, June 25, 1963.

³¹ Hsieh, *Communist China's Strategy*, 154; Memorandum of conversation, Harriman and Penn Nouth, Aug. 19, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang's possession); Rusk to American ambassador, Bonn, cable, July 24, 1963, *ibid.*; Barr, memorandum, meeting of Harriman and Knuth-Winterfeldt, July 1, 1963.

throughout the world, Beijing had announced, it would reject a test ban treaty and continue to develop its own capability in order to break the atomic monopoly.³² With the Chinese on the verge of exploding an atomic device, Kennedy must have understood that only force, only military “action,” would have any chance of “preventing” China from becoming the fifth nuclear power in the world.

The option of taking military action to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons had, in fact, been discussed in the administration for months before the Moscow meeting. In February 1963, Secretary of Defense McNamara drafted a memorandum for Kennedy on the prospects and implications of the “diffusion of nuclear weapons.” He concluded that the spread of nuclear weapons was “clearly not in the interest of the US.” While he thought that a test ban would help slow proliferation, a more important factor would be “the pressures the US, the USSR and others are willing to employ in restraining others from testing.” “The cooperation that may develop between the US and USSR, as a result, has a potential importance,” McNamara wrote. “In some cases, we, and others, would probably have to employ stronger incentives and sanctions than has seriously been considered so far. However, a comprehensive test ban would make it more likely that stronger steps could be taken and would be effective.” McNamara listed the “sharing of weapons information” with countries such as France or Israel as an example of “positive incentives” and mentioned “penalties (economic or military)” for use against uncooperative states.³³

More explicit were the “top secret” briefing books prepared just before the July Moscow meeting. Although much is still classified, including a section labeled “Military and Other Sanctions Against Communist China,” one paper discussed at length possible Soviet responses to a United States proposal “to take radical steps, in cooperation with the USSR, to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear capabilities.” The paper reviewed the principal factors that would influence Soviet acceptance of a “joint program” with the United States, including the national security of the Soviet Union, the concept of United States–Soviet Union partnership in the world, and the impact on the Communist world. With regard to China, the paper indicated that if the Soviets accepted the American proposal, they would understand that “they would be obliged to see it through to the very end,” which might require “Soviet, or possibly joint US-USSR, use of military force” against China. The ramifications of using “military force against a Communist nation” on the position of the Soviet Union as “leader of the Communist world” would “assume significant,

³² See, Oran R. Young, “Chinese Views on the Spread of Nuclear Weapons,” in *Sino-Soviet Relations and Arms Control*, ed. Morton H. Halperin (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 22–24; Walter C. Clemens, Jr., “The Nuclear Test Ban and Sino-Soviet Relations,” *ibid.*, 149–150.

³³ By 1963, following the withdrawal of Soviet technicians in 1960, trade with the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries dropped to about 30% of China’s total. The Soviets announced that their trade with China fell by 67% during that period. See John Gittings, *Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute* (London, 1968), 129–34; and *New York Times*, July 15, 1963, p. 10. Robert McNamara to John F. Kennedy, draft memorandum, Feb. 12, 1963, Disarmament Proposals, Feb. 1963, Vice Presidential Security file, box 7, Johnson Papers.

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OUTGOING TELEGRAM Department of State
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DECLASSIFICATION DATE 3/15/76

ACTION: Amembassy MOSCOW PER Amintage OFFICE Eu AC Jul 15 9 01 PM '63

EADRC #01 CASE NO. 5-C-125

191

~~EXCESSIVE~~ FOR GOVERNOR HARRIMAN FROM THE PRESIDENT.

Your report is encouraging on limited test ban and you are right to press for that without repeat without link to MAP. You are also right to keep French out of initial treaty, though I continue to be prepared to work on French if Soviets will work on Chinese, and you should make this clear as occasion offers.

I remain convinced that Chinese problem is more serious than Khrushchev comments in first meeting suggest, and believe you should press question in private meeting with him. I agree that large stockpiles are characteristic of US and USSR only, but consider that relatively small forces in hands of people's like CHICOMS could be very dangerous to us all. Further believe even limited test ban can and should be means to limit diffusion

You should try to elicit Khrushchev's view of means of

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Classified by WH - JFKennedy:blr
Telegraphic transmission and classification approved by S/S - BERead
Comments WH - Mr. Bundy
S/S - Mr. Read

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FORM 5-61 DS-322

Kennedy's secret cable (here and on facing page) of July 15, 1963, directing Harriman to discuss the "Chinese problem" with Khrushchev. Freedom of Information Act release, in Benjamin Loeb's possession.

F760005-102E

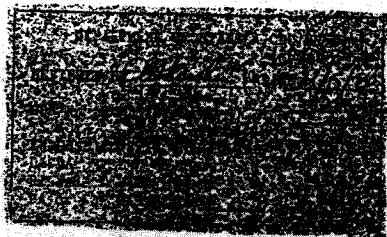
Page 2 of telegram to Ambassador, MOSCOW

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limiting or preventing Chinese nuclear development and his willingness either to take Soviet action or to accept US action aimed in this direction.

END

RUSK



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perhaps overriding, weight in determining whether or not to accept the US proposal." The paper did not speculate as to what the Soviet decision might be.³⁴

What kind of military force the administration may have contemplated is not made explicit in the documents that have been declassified so far. But the most

³⁴ Defense Department, "Harriman Trip to Moscow—Briefing Book, Vol. II," 6/20/63, Tab D, ACDA Disarmament, box 265, National Security files, Kennedy Papers; Arthur Barbar, "Briefing Book on US—Soviet Non-Diffusion Agreement for Discussion at the Moscow Meeting," June 12, 1963, vol. I, pp. 1-7, ACDA Disarmament, Harriman Trip to Moscow, *ibid.*

likely option was an air strike on China's facilities, which were located far in the western part of the country. According to one former high-level official in the Kennedy administration, a joint American-Soviet preemptive nuclear attack was actually discussed. One idea was to have a Soviet and an American bomber fly over the facilities at Lop Nor, with each dropping a bomb, only one of which would be set to go off. The official, who wished to remain unidentified, maintains that the idea did not get to the planning stage. However, in 1973 Joseph Alsop reported that the Kremlin had been well aware of Kennedy's interest in collaborating in an attack to destroy China's nuclear program. Alsop did not reveal how the Soviets learned such information.³⁵

In Moscow, the test ban talks proceeded swiftly. General agreement on a limited treaty was reached within the first two days, although Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who represented the Soviet side, continued to press for a nonaggression pact. By July 18, Secretary of State Rusk instructed the United States ambassador to West Germany to inform the Bonn government that a three-environment test ban "is likely to be agreed upon" and that no commitment to a "nonaggression arrangement" would be made without consultation. On July 20 the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain announced that they had tentatively concluded an agreement on a limited test ban treaty, exempting underground testing. It was not linked to any other agreement. That same day Beijing's *People's Daily* condemned the Moscow talks with a statement by Chairman Mao Zedong exhorting the people of the world to defy nuclear blackmail. The Chinese denounced the test ban treaty as a fraud aimed at maintaining American nuclear superiority and at preventing China from acquiring its own capability. Deng Xiaoping's delegation left Moscow the same evening, ending the obviously unsuccessful party summit. In a rare move, the entire top leadership of the CPC came out to give Deng a hero's welcome at the Beijing airport. In a slap back at China, the Soviet Communist party accused Beijing of wanting to "build Communism on corpses."³⁶

Since Gromyko handled the negotiations for the Soviets while Khrushchev was busy with visiting Premier János Kádár of Hungary, Harriman did not have a chance to talk with the Soviet leader for several days. But Washington did not give up hope that something could be done with the Russians about the Chinese. Harriman believed that the Soviets wanted the treaty "to obtain leverage on Peking," but he doubted that the Soviets would entertain more radical solutions. On July 23 he cabled Washington that while it had become "crystal clear" the Soviets wanted to iso-

³⁵ The author gratefully acknowledges Gregg Herken's sharing of this information. Gregg Herken to David Thelen, March 4, 1987 (in Chang's possession); Joseph Alsop, "Thoughts out of China—1: Go versus No Go," *New York Times Magazine*, March 11, 1973, pp. 30–31, 100–105, 108. Just before the Chinese exploded their first atomic bomb in 1964, the *New York Times* reported it had learned that Kennedy officials had approached the Soviet Union about "the possibility of cooperating to prevent Chinese Communist nuclear-weapons development" during the 1963 test ban negotiations. The newspaper gave few specifics, other than that Khrushchev's response was not positive. *New York Times*, Oct. 2, 1964, p. 13.

³⁶ Rusk to American ambassador, Bonn, cable, July 18, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Loeb's possession); Kohler to Bundy, cable, July 21, 1963; *ibid.*; *New York Times*, July 20, 1963, pp. 1, 2; *Ibid.*, July 21, 1963, pp. 1, 2.

late China in the world, Khrushchev wanted the “pressure to appear to come on Chicoms from other countries, particularly the underdeveloped,” rather than from Moscow. Another Harriman message later in the day reiterated that Khrushchev and Gromyko “have clearly shown that their way of getting nondissemination is through adherence of maximum number of states to test ban treaty, thus isolating and bringing pressure on Chicoms.”³⁷

Kennedy was still not satisfied. That night he again pressed Harriman to raise the China issue with Khrushchev. The president, the directive read, “still hopes very much you will find an opportunity for private discussion with Khrushchev on China.” When Harriman finally succeeded in cornering Khrushchev, he did raise the subject of China’s acquisition of nuclear weapons and asked the Soviet leader what he would do if Chinese missiles were targeted at Russia. But Khrushchev did not respond. It is not clear whether Harriman actually presented Kennedy’s proposal for joint action against China, but Khrushchev was evidently not yet ready to take action with Washington.³⁸

Kennedy must have been sorely disappointed at the failure to gain Khrushchev’s cooperation in stopping China’s nuclear development, and the president could not resist taking some public swipes at the Chinese. In his announcement of the test ban treaty to the American people, Kennedy referred to China several times, even quoting from one of Khrushchev’s diatribes against Beijing the gibe that the Chinese Communists “would envy the dead” in the event of a nuclear war. In one last deliberate affront, Kennedy concluded his address with the Chinese proverb that “a journey of 1,000 miles must begin with a single step.”³⁹

William Buckley’s *National Review* condemned the Moscow treaty as a “diplomatic Pearl Harbor for America.”⁴⁰ But the magazine had it wrong: the treaty could have been the avenue for a surprise attack on China.

³⁷ Rusk to Harriman, cable, July 24, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang’s possession); Harriman to Kennedy, cable, no. 277, July 23, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Loeb’s possession); Kohler to Rusk, cable, no. 294, July 23, 1963, *ibid.* George Bunn, general counsel of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) in the Kennedy administration, was struck by the attention Harriman’s cables from Moscow placed on Soviet concern about China. George Bunn conversation with Chang, Sept. 17, 1987 (in Chang’s possession).

³⁸ Rusk to Harriman, cable, July 23, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Loeb’s possession); Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 829. For other interpretations of the Kennedy administration’s possible military response to China’s nuclear acquisition, see Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power: An Inquiry into the Origins, Currents, and Contradictions of World Politics* (New York, 1974), 385–95; and Gerald Segal, *Great Power Triangle* (London, 1982), 124–25.

³⁹ *New York Times*, July 22, 1963, p. 2. Just hours before the president was to go before the nation, Washington sent Kennedy’s draft speech to Harriman for his opinion. The draft contained several references to China omitted from the final version. One of the most explicit and revealing was “I do not, of course, expect the Communist Chinese to sign this treaty. They have already denounced it as a Capitalist plot. But if the response to this treaty can serve to increase their isolation from the world community—if it can encourage other nations to apply sanctions against their nuclear development—then the outlook is not altogether gloomy.” A bitterness about the Chinese pervaded the draft that was absent from the final version. The draft was also more restrained about the importance of the treaty and included comments about how the “communist split” had played a major role in bringing about the U.S.-Soviet agreement. Rusk to Harriman, cable, July 26, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang’s possession).

⁴⁰ M. Stanton Evans, “At Home,” *National Review*, Aug. 20, 1963, p. 6.

Would Washington now accept the inevitability of China's acquiring the bomb, even though one of Kennedy's principal reasons in seeking the test ban had been to frustrate China's nuclear program? Apparently not. As Rusk had informed the United States ambassador to West Germany just after agreement had been reached on a ban, wide acceptance of the treaty would place "powerful pressures on Peiping not to go down the nuclear path." But if China persisted, Rusk stated, "other action might have to be taken to prevent this."⁴¹

Khrushchev's own attitude remained one principal consideration in deciding what might be done. At the July meetings in Moscow, he had not been receptive to the suggestion of taking action against China, but he could always change his mind. Administration officials believed that was a real possibility, depending on the course of the Sino-Soviet split. As Rusk testified in executive session before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which was reviewing the treaty, the Sino-Soviet split was "getting wider and deeper."⁴² The test ban treaty and subsequent amicable United States-Soviet relations could so aggravate the division in the Communist world that a variety of advantageous possibilities might develop for Washington. The prospect appeared sufficiently plausible and attractive that it helped win the military's endorsement of the negotiated treaty.

In June, during preparations for Harriman's trip to Moscow, top military personnel who testified before executive sessions of the Stennis Committee questioned the wisdom of a test ban treaty. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, air force chief of staff, doubted a treaty would stop the spread of nuclear weapons, particularly to China. Responding to a question about common American-Soviet interests in opposing China, LeMay discounted the possibility of reaching agreements and argued that at some point the Soviet Union might actually provide China with nuclear weapons. As late as two days before Harriman left for Moscow, at a White House meeting with the president, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, questioned even a limited test ban treaty. The JCS wanted further study as to whether an atmospheric test ban was in American interests, but Kennedy rebuffed Taylor.⁴³

In contrast, during the August Senate hearings on ratification of the treaty, the JCS rallied behind the Moscow agreement, endorsing it as in the national interest. Following the Moscow meeting, Kennedy, Rusk, and others had met repeatedly with JCS members to report on the Moscow events and current Soviet attitudes. The administration, in addition to using promises of weapons procurements to calm the military, also convinced them of the *political* desirability of the treaty. General Taylor admitted that, although the treaty contained certain military disadvantages, it also represented "major political achievements" having "important and favorable

⁴¹ Rusk to American ambassador, Bonn, cable, July 24, 1963 (Freedom of Information Act release, in Chang's possession).

⁴² U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, "Declassified Portions of *Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*," Aug. 28, 1963, p. 71, Records of the United States Senate, RG 46 (National Archives).

⁴³ Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Military Aspects*, June 26, 1963, pp. 300-305, *ibid.*, June 27, 1963, p. 376; Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban*, 228-29.



Before Senate and administration leaders, Kennedy signs the instrument ratifying the Limited Test Ban Treaty, October 7, 1963.

Courtesy John F. Kennedy Library.

military implications." Taylor vaguely listed restraining nuclear proliferation and reducing causes of world tension as positive aspects. But General LeMay, with his characteristic bluntness, better clarified what the "political advantages" were. He said he had spoken with Rusk and Harriman "at great length." They had pointed out that the United States would reap the largest advantage "if we could really divide the Chinese and Russians." Although he was less optimistic about achieving such division than they, LeMay agreed that if it occurred, it would be significant, and he was clearly more persuaded of the possibility of a Sino-Soviet split than before the Moscow meeting. Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chief of staff of the army, and Adm. David L. McDonald, chief of naval operations, expressed similar points of view. Wheeler observed that it was "always a sound military principle to divide your enemies if you can, or to contribute to any division that there may be between them." If the United States could do so, "this is a solid military advantage." He added that the Soviets would not like to see the replacement of the Communists

in China, but Khrushchev “would enjoy seeing the Chinese Communists get a bloody nose.” What kind of punch Wheeler envisioned, he kept to himself.⁴⁴

The Limited Test Ban Treaty sparked an explosion, exactly as the administration wanted: It split the Sino-Soviet rift wide open. Through the rest of 1963 and into 1964 the Soviet and Chinese Communist parties exchanged the most strident polemics in the history of the international Communist movement. American officials closely watched the unfolding battle and nervously monitored the development of China’s nuclear program. Yet Washington, worried that a United States strike against China might still reunite the two Communist giants, hesitated to take unilateral action against Beijing. The United States continued its strategy of playing toward the Soviets and waiting for Khrushchev to change his mind about possible joint action against China.

On September 15, 1964, shortly before China’s first atomic test (which American intelligence accurately predicted to within days of the explosion), President Johnson and the same advisers who had counseled Kennedy again discussed the problem of China’s nuclear weapons. The confident and concrete tenor of the conclusions indicates that the subject was a familiar one. Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy recorded the decisions:

We discussed the question of Chinese nuclear weapons today, first in a lunch at the State Department given by Secretary Rusk for McNamara, McCone, and myself, and later at a meeting with the President. . . .

At the luncheon we developed the following position:

(1) We are not in favor of unprovoked unilateral U.S. military action against Chinese nuclear installations at this time. We would prefer to have a Chinese test take place than to initiate such action now. If for other reasons we should find ourselves in military hostilities at any level with the Chinese Communists, we would expect to give very close attention to the possibility of an appropriate military action against Chinese nuclear facilities.

(2) We believe that there are many possibilities for joint action with the Soviet Government if that Government is interested. Such possibilities include a warning to the Chinese against tests, a possible undertaking to give up underground testing and to hold the Chinese accountable if they test in any way, and even a possible agreement to cooperate in preventive military action. We therefore agreed that it would be most desirable for the Secretary of State to explore this matter very privately with Ambassador Dobrynin as soon as possible. . . . [here several sentences have been “sanitized” from the memorandum]

These preliminary decisions were reported to the President in the Cabinet Room, and he indicated his approval. The Secretary of State now intends to consult promptly with the Soviet Ambassador.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*, 88 Cong., 1 sess., Aug. 19, 1963, pp. 274–75, 397; Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee, *Military Aspects*, Aug. 15, 1963, pp. 738, 676–77, 707.

⁴⁵ Bundy, Memorandum for the Record, Sept. 15, 1964, McGeorge Bundy—Memos to the President, vol. VI, 7/1–9/30/64, Aides files, box 2, National Security files, Johnson Papers. Stewart Alsop and Rep. L. Mendel Rivers,

It seems that a United States overture again came to naught. The Chinese detonated their first atomic device on October 16, 1964. At almost the same time, the Communist party of the Soviet Union replaced Nikita Khrushchev for reasons still not completely known, but which some observers believed were linked to the conflict with China.

Was Kennedy's extreme alarm about China justified?

Others in the Kennedy administration did not share the president's dread. Some junior officials in the White House and State Department wanted the United States to adopt a less, not a more, hostile stance toward China. Roger Hilsman, director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, commented in public in 1962 that as "dramatic" as the prospect of China's exploding a nuclear device might seem, "it [would] not change the balance of power in Asia, much less throughout the world." He pointed out that the Chinese had actually been rather cautious in the Taiwan Strait. In late July 1963, after the Limited Test Ban Treaty had been concluded, a CIA report on China's anticipated response to the agreement observed that "over the past few years, in spite of their warlike oratory, they have followed a generally cautious policy." "The Chinese have thus far shown marked respect for US power, and we do not expect them to change this basic attitude." The CIA discounted the possibility of increased Chinese aggressiveness. During the Senate ratification hearings, General Taylor stated that he had seen no evidence showing that the Chinese believed they would gain from a nuclear war, a claim both Kennedy and Khrushchev had made to scare the world. Taylor also observed that there was "a pretty hardheaded group of Chinese in Peking" who would not do something reckless. The military generally downplayed the significance of China's acquisition of nuclear weapons.⁴⁶

The administration had even received overtures from Beijing not long after Kennedy had taken office in 1961. Ambassador Wang Bingnan of the People's Republic of China, who was meeting with American representatives at ongoing bilateral talks, made "friendly gestures" at Geneva and Warsaw. In 1962, Kennedy received reports showing a Chinese belief that the United States was not necessarily wedded to a policy of hostility toward China. But the United States discounted those

chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, publicly called for U.S. strikes against China's nuclear facilities at about that time. See Foster Rhea Dulles, *American Policy toward Communist China, 1949-1969* (New York, 1972), 222-23. After the Chinese test explosion, a panel headed by Under Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric considered recommending a "surgical strike," among other options, to stop China's further nuclear development. See Segal, *Great Power Triangle*, 127.

⁴⁶ Warren I. Cohen, *Dean Rusk* (Totowa, 1980), 169; U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin*, Nov. 26, 1962, pp. 807-11; Central Intelligence Agency, "Possibilities of Greater Militancy by the Chinese Communists - SNIE 13-4-63," July 31, 1963, Possibilities of Greater Militancy by the Chinese Communists, Vice Presidential Security file - Nations and Regions, box 11, Johnson Papers; Committee on Foreign Relations, *Nuclear Test Ban Treaty*, Aug. 15, 1963, pp. 337, 342; declassified deletions from *Nuclear Test Ban Treaty* enclosed in M. Graeme Bannerman, Staff Director, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, to Chang, Feb. 3, 1986 (in Chang's possession).

tentative approaches and pursued its policy of siding with the Soviets and further estranging China.⁴⁷

Kennedy's foreign policy was touted as a "strategy of peace," a phrase from the title of his 1960 campaign book. Kennedy's boosters, too, promoted the Limited Test Ban Treaty as a breakthrough in the struggle to make the world stable and to end the threat of war. But behind the rhetoric, Kennedy and his associates sought to aggravate tensions between the Soviet Union and China to the point that the Soviets might possibly join with the United States even in military action against China, an action that certainly would have thrown Asia into greater turmoil than any other single act since the Korean War.

The United States could have tried to improve relations simultaneously with both the Chinese and the Soviets, but there is no evidence that the Kennedy administration seriously considered that possibility. That was something that Richard M. Nixon would attempt in the next decade. Instead, Kennedy's policies sharpened the Sino-Soviet split, which eventually resulted in armed clashes between the two states. His policies increased the pressures on the Soviets by a provoked Chinese leadership, and began to construct a United States-Soviet stewardship over the world. Administration officials clearly understood those would be among the results of the Limited Test Ban Treaty.⁴⁸ While it might be argued that Kennedy's policies toward China, the Soviet Union, and the bomb were sophisticated and in the imperial interests of the United States, it is doubtful that they were consistent with the interests of international peace. Indeed, the Kennedy administration came dangerously close to giving an affirmative answer to the question posed by the *National Review*: "Should we bomb Red China's bomb?"

⁴⁷ Bundy, Item no. 7, Miscellaneous Papers for Hyannisport, July 21-23, 1961, Index of Weekend Papers 1/61-12/61, box 318, National Security files, Kennedy Papers; Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Current Intelligence, "The Signs of Chinese Communist Friendliness," July 17, 1961, China General 7/15/61-7/24/61, box 22, *ibid.*; Bundy, *Week End Reading*, vol. II, July 21, 1962, Index of Weekend Papers 1/62-6/62, box 318, *ibid.*; Hilsman to Walter P. McCaughy, July 7, 1961, China General 8/1/61-8/10/61, box 22, *ibid.*; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, 893-918; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 724-40.

⁴⁸ Hilsman to Harriman, Aug. 13, 1963, Test Ban Treaty 7/63, box 5, Hilsman Papers.