

The Irony of Vietnam: The Johnson Administration's Tentative Bridge Building to China, 1965–1966

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Much to Lyndon Johnson's dismay, the Vietnam War directly or indirectly impinged on every facet of his presidency. It imposed limits on his vast ambitions for a Great Society; it defined his image among the American public; and it largely determined his place in history. Certainly any assessment of Johnson's policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) cannot be attempted without reference to Vietnam. Some historians have cited the administration's fixation on the war as one of the primary reasons for the apparent deadlock in Sino-American relations during these years. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, a leading scholar in the field, has argued that the Johnson administration's tendency to view the PRC through the prism of Vietnam precluded any policy innovation or movement toward normalization with the mainland.¹ The evidence presented in this article points to a different conclusion. One of the unexamined ironies of Vietnam, a war undertaken in part to check Chinese expansionism, is that it created pressures for an accommodation of sorts with Beijing and encouraged U.S. decision-makers who might not otherwise have been inclined to reassess the tenets of a policy of containment and isolation. Johnson's acute fear of Chinese intervention in the conflict and his attempts to mobilize public support for a limited war by burnishing his peace credentials yielded symbolic and substantive alterations in his policy toward China in 1965–1966. The culmination of this process was a nationally televised speech delivered by the president on 12 July 1966, in which he affirmed both his commitment to an eventual reconciliation with America's greatest Asian adversary and an interest in fostering the free flow of ideas, people, and goods between the two countries.

1. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "Threats, Opportunities, and Frustrations in East Asia," in Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1963–1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 99.

Although recent literature has departed from Tucker's thesis by drawing attention to these bridge-building efforts, it has failed to link this critical development to the Johnson administration's domestic and strategic objectives in Vietnam.² Sino-American relations certainly continued to be plagued by mutual mistrust and hostility during this period. Washington's suspicions of China's drive for regional hegemony and its support for North Vietnam accounted for the tentative nature of these conciliatory steps and ultimately derailed more ambitious proposals for policy innovation, particularly on the question of Chinese representation in the United Nations (UN). This article traces the evolution of the Johnson administration's policy toward China. It begins by highlighting the administration's initial reluctance to change the policy and then explains how the pressures of war led to a significant shift in strategy.

Reaffirmation of U.S. Policy toward China, 1963–1965

When Johnson assumed the presidency in November 1963, the broad outlines of U.S. policy toward China had changed little since the PRC's intervention in the Korean War in the fall of 1950. The bloodshed during the war solidified U.S. impressions of an implacable antagonist and yielded an enduring bipartisan commitment to contain and isolate the mainland. To be implemented, however, this strategy required the mobilization of international support. A pattern emerged during the 1950s whereby Washington grudgingly tolerated its allies' interests in establishing economic contacts with Beijing in return for their "adherence to a policy seen as more vital—that of non-recognitionED: and support of Taiwan in the United Nations."³ The emergence of newly independent African countries in the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as growing allied disenchantment with the rigid U.S. posture toward the PRC, compelled the Kennedy administration to search for alternative

2. For example, see Arthur Waldron, "From Nonexistent to Almost Normal: U.S.-China Relations in the 1960s," in Diane B. Kunz, ed., *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade: American Foreign Relations during the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Rosemary Foot, *The Practice of Power: U.S. Relations with China since 1949* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995); Robert Garson, "Lyndon B. Johnson and the China Enigma," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (January 1997), pp. 63–80; and Robert D. Schulzinger, "The Johnson Administration, China, and the Vietnam War," in Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds., *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954–1973* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). A brief reference to this link is provided in Victor S. Kaufman, *Confronting Communism: U.S. and British Policies toward China* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), pp. 196–197.

3. Foot, *The Practice of Power*, p. 80.

methods of keeping the mainland out of the world body. In December 1961, Washington managed to raise the bar higher for China's entry, persuading the General Assembly to elevate the issue of Chinese representation to an "important question" requiring a two-thirds majority in favor of changing the status quo.⁴

Johnson's first year in power coincided with dramatic changes in the PRC's relationship with the rest of the world, most notably French recognition of China in January 1964 and Beijing's explosion of a nuclear bomb in October of that year. The latter event in particular shattered any lingering illusions that the Communist government on the mainland was a passing phenomenon. Coming against the backdrop of escalating tensions in Southeast Asia, the Chinese nuclear test highlighted for many U.S. allies the urgency of reaching an accommodation with the region's ascendant power. A sampling of official and popular reaction among allied countries by the U.S. State Department in late October 1964 revealed "renewed calls for admitting Peiping to the United Nations" and for the United States to "take the initiative in trying to bring Communist China 'into the community of nations.'"⁵ Reports from Tokyo pointed to a definitive shift in favor of normalizing relations with the PRC and a consequent downgrading of ties with Taiwan.⁶ U.S. analysts held out little hope that even the new Japanese prime minister, Eisaku Sato, who was reputed to be wary of the mainland's influence, could halt the momentum within political and business circles toward a Sino-Japanese rapprochement. "His practical course of action," an intelligence report speculated, "may be limited to minimizing the effects and extent of such a movement, rather than preventing it completely."⁷ In a mid-November meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the Canadian ambassador explained that China's nuclear test had bolstered public support in Canada for the extension of UN

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–41; Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, 1945–1992: Uncertain Friendships* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994), pp. 48–50; and Noam Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated: China Policy during the Kennedy Years* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), pp. 61–69.

5. Thomas L. Hughes to Dean Rusk, 28 October 1964, in Lyndon Baines Johnson Library (LBJL), National Security File (NSF), Committee File, Box 5, China. See also Carl Rowan to LBJ, 19 October 1964, LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 290, United Nations Chinese Representation.

6. Department of State to Tokyo, Telegram No. 1125, 23 October 1964, in National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereinafter NA), Record Group (RG) 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 2012, POL 16 INDEPENDENCE CHICOM; Tokyo to Department of State, Airgram No. A-692, 10 December 1964, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 1614, DEF 12–1 CHICOM; and Tokyo to Department of State, Telegram No. 2044, 28 December 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 253 (1 of 2), Sato's Visit: Memos & Cables (2 of 4). For a general discussion of U.S.-Japanese tensions over China, see Michael Schaller, "Altered States: The United States and Japan during the 1960s," in Kunz, ed., *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade*, pp. 269–274.

7. Hughes to Acting Secretary, 10 November 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 250 (1 of 2), Japan Memos, Vol. II (2 of 2).

membership to the PRC. He noted that Ottawa was giving serious consideration to sponsoring a one-China, one-Taiwan declaratory resolution for the upcoming vote on Chinese representation.⁸

Even before receiving this unwelcome news, many in Washington were bracing themselves for a change in fortune. Surveying the international landscape, Harlan Cleveland, the assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs, thought it likely that the administration could eke out another victory on the “important question” formula in the next few weeks. Without a change in tactics after that, however, he predicted there would eventually be “a serious defeat on the issue.” Many countries on which the United States could once rely to uphold Taiwan’s status at the UN were now “impatient to get on some new track that is not vulnerable to the political charge [that] they are ‘ignoring’ the world’s most populous nation.” These countries, he added, were inclined to blame “the rigid posture of the United States” for “somehow preventing an accommodation with the CHICOMS [Chinese Communists].”⁹

Thus, by late 1964 the Johnson administration was confronted with the challenge of managing the PRC’s growing international stature. The striking divergence of opinion among U.S. officials revealed a deep split on the overarching question of whether the established strategy of containment and isolation was the best way to alter Chinese foreign policy. One group argued in favor of seizing the initiative and overhauling policy toward China. Advocates of change since the early 1960s, officials such as Robert Komer and James Thomson of the National Security Council (NSC) staff and Edward Rice, the consul general in Hong Kong, contended that recent international developments underscored the need to revise the policy. They reasoned that Washington could do little to prevent Beijing’s eventual admission into the UN and its wider acceptance as a key member of the international community. Continued emphasis on ostracizing the mainland would merely delay the inevitable and embitter valued allies. A shift toward a more flexible policy—through acquiescence in a variant of “two Chinas” at the UN (whereby both claimants to the Chinese government would be offered a seat), the loosening of travel restrictions to the mainland, and somewhat greater leeway for trade in non-strategic goods—would deflect allied criticism and shift the blame for continued friction between the two countries. Behind this defensive, short-term tac-

8. Norman St. Amour, “Sino-Canadian Relations, 1963–1968: The American Factor,” in Paul M. Evans and B. Michael Frolic, eds., *Reluctant Adversaries: Canada and the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 111.

9. Harlan Cleveland to George Ball, 31 October 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 290, United Nations Chinese Representation, pp. 2–4.

tic was a long-term strategy. These China “doves” believed that a policy of engagement would ultimately pave the way for reconciliation with a less doctrinaire second generation of Chinese leaders by alleviating their persistent fears of American enmity and exposing them to the outside world.¹⁰

Some of these themes had been foreshadowed in a speech delivered by Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman on 13 December 1963, in which he expounded on the virtues of an “Open Door” policy toward China based on “strength and firmness, accompanied by a constant readiness to negotiate.”¹¹ The address was the most conspicuous by-product of a policy review initiated by Hilsman in the last few months of John Kennedy’s presidency. Like Thomson, Komer, and Rice, the assistant secretary surmised that China’s warlike oratory belied tactical caution and that the threat from China to U.S. security interests had been exaggerated.¹² To fashion a strategy commensurate with this reality, Hilsman called for “a policy of contact as well as containment: contact to break down the Chinese isolation and containment to prevent any further Communist aggression.” Ultimately a focus on the former, he thought, would “hasten the changes which domestic economic pressures and international problems will force on Peiping.”¹³ Hilsman departed from the China doves in placing on Beijing the burden for any improvement in Sino-American relations,¹⁴ but the more memorable passages of his speech firmly ensconced him in the camp favoring a new policy. Most significantly, he made reference to a “second echelon” of leaders disillusioned with the excesses of Mao’s Great Leap Forward and possibly inclined to rapprochement with the outside world. To encourage these elements, Hilsman suggested that the United States offer inducements to Mao’s successors for good behavior, alerting them, as he put it, to the “the prospect that the way back into the community of man is not closed.”¹⁵ Explaining the rationale of his address to UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, Hilsman asserted that there was a need to justify the divergence between U.S. relations with the major Communist powers. Détente with the Soviet Union, he wrote, had

10. James C. Thomson Jr. to McGeorge Bundy, 28 October 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 238, China Memos, Vol. II; Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, 23 November 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 238, China Memos, Vol. II; and Hong Kong to Department of State, Airgram No. A-309, 6 November 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 238, China Cables, Vol. II.

11. “Address by Roger Hilsman,” 13 December 1963, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 237, China Memos, Vol. I, p. 8.

12. Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, pp. 225–226.

13. Hilsman to John M. Cabot, 25 October 1963, in NA, RG 59, Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, Office of the Assistant Secretary: Subject Files, 1964, Lot 66D93, Box 1.

14. Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, pp. 248–249.

15. “Address by Roger Hilsman,” 13 December 1963, pp. 3, 9.

arisen both from U.S. resolve in facing down the Kremlin and from a willingness to respond positively to signs of Soviet moderation. His hope was that, in signaling the administration's readiness to respond in kind to more moderate Chinese conduct, a similar state of affairs could emerge with the mainland.¹⁶

The most ardent advocates of a new approach, however, lacked the clout and standing of those who had the president's ear. The brash Hilsman had served with the blessing of John Kennedy, and the assassination of the president left him with few friends in high office. Although Hilsman's departure from government in February 1964 stemmed primarily from Johnson's and Rusk's resentment over his encouragement of the overthrow of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem the previous November,¹⁷ his views on China were clearly not shared by Johnson's entourage. Looking back on that period, former officials have recalled that the December 1963 address, by a quirk of bureaucratic politics, never received proper clearance from the White House, and that Rusk failed to inquire about its content. According to one former official who handled Asian affairs in the State Department, the speech caused Rusk "considerable agony" and "came as something of a shock to him."¹⁸ Hilsman was undoubtedly aware of the "uneasy" response of his superiors, and he was forced to backtrack somewhat from the implications of his remarks in subsequent media appearances.¹⁹ Johnson's most influential foreign policy advisers—Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy—shared Kennedy's suspicions of China's nuclear weapons program, its presumed sponsorship of revolutionary upheavals in the Third World, and its hostility toward Moscow's quest for "peaceful co-existence" with the West. The image of a reckless, militant, and expansionist China with no regard for American conceptions of international order was crystallized well before Johnson entered the Oval Office. This per-

16. Roger Hilsman to Adlai Stevenson, 19 December 1963, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, Vol. XXII, pp. 411–412 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers). Against Hilsman's hopes, Beijing reportedly interpreted the speech as a provocative endorsement of "two Chinas." See Foot, *The Practice of Power*, p. 98 n. 42.

17. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 356; and Kai Bird, *The Color of Truth: McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, Brothers in Arms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), p. 275.

18. Marshall Green, quoted in Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, ed., *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945–1996* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 196. See also James Thomson Oral History, in Oral History Collections, LBJL, pp. 38–39. Noam Kochavi concludes that there is no sure way of knowing whether Kennedy sympathized with Hilsman's views on China but notes that there is strong evidence that the president "never departed from a conflictual and zero-sum conceptualisation of Sino-American relations." For discussion, see Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, pp. 231–233.

19. Thomson to J.C.T. Files, 6 May 1964, in John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library (JFKL), Papers of James C. Thomson, Box 9, 12/13/63 San Francisco: Thomson Notes on Genesis and Reaction.

ception of a menacing China, a central feature of the Kennedy years, “only added fuel to the fire of Sino-American confrontation” and blocked high-level consideration of a number of proposals for changes in U.S. policy.²⁰

That perception continued under the new administration. Johnson’s advisers believed there was a direct correlation between the international community’s conciliatory gestures toward the PRC and the mainland’s threatening behavior. The “central question,” as Rusk defined it, was

the need to influence a half-dozen key people in China on the question of how China is doing, and whether its present policy is or is not on the right track. Such actions as the recognition of China by France or its future admission into the UN would, of course, be very bad in that it would persuade the Chinese that they were being successful. Unless other things demonstrate to the Chinese that they are not on the right track we will be faced with much greater danger in the future.²¹

Having come of age at the height of the West’s failed policy of appeasement in the 1930s, these officials rejected the notion that the behavior of a brazenly confident and aggressive adversary could be favorably influenced by the extension of olive branches. Gestures of this nature, they argued, would be misinterpreted as a sign of weakness and would only stimulate future probes of American resolve, perhaps setting off another global conflagration. Perceptions of a belligerent China were frequently contrasted with Soviet prudence. “The countries of the Warsaw and NATO pacts are now likely to work out their problems without recourse to war,” Rusk observed in October. “We can’t, however, say the same thing about Communist China.”²² Citing the recent example of the Cuban missile crisis, they insisted that the only way to ensure restraint in an opponent was through the judicious application of politico-military pressure.²³ This logic underlay Johnson’s hardline proclamation in April 1964: “so long as the Communist Chinese pursue aggression . . .

20. Kochavi, *A Conflict Perpetuated*, p. 250. See also James Fetzer, “Clinging to Containment: China Policy,” in Thomas G. Paterson, ed., *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: American Foreign Policy, 1961–1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 193–197; Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948–1972* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 217–252; and William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/2001), pp. 54–76.

21. Meeting on China Study, 27 August 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 61, Special State-Defense Study Group re China.

22. “Memorandum of Conversation between Dean Rusk and Halvard M. Lange,” 13 November 1964, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 1898, POL 1 ASIA SE.

23. Rusk to Department of State, 16 December 1963, in *FRUS*, 1961–1963, Vol. XXII, pp. 409–410. See also Rusk’s remarks in “Minutes of Cabinet Meeting,” 18 June 1965, in LBJL, Cabinet Papers, Box 3, p. 28.

[and] preach violence, there can be and will be no easing of relationships. . . . It is not we who must reexamine our view of China. It is the Chinese Communists who must reexamine their view of the world.”²⁴

This policy remained firmly intact in the fall of 1964 as the administration sought to deepen China’s international isolation. In September, the State Department ordered all U.S. ambassadors in the countries that still recognized Taiwan to urge the governments there “not [to] move closer” to the PRC at a time when it was “inciting aggression in Asia, encouraging rebellion in Africa and extolling militant revolution in much of the world.”²⁵ In November, UN ambassador Stevenson advised the president to shift toward a “two Chinas” policy, arguing that this would stave off an impending diplomatic defeat and ensnare the mainland in a web of interlocking relations with the world community. His proposal, however, ran contrary to a State Department policy paper drafted two months earlier, which warned that such a move would entail “serious losses and risks,” namely the dilution of Taiwan as a diplomatic counter to China. The paper added that a shift in U.S. policy would likely have unsettling effects on the morale of other East Asian allies—such as South Korea, South Vietnam, and Thailand—and create pressures for their accommodation with the PRC.²⁶ Rusk objected to Stevenson’s proposal on the grounds that it would send the wrong message to China: “If we appeared to falter before . . . Communist China, this would be interpreted as a reward for the track they have been following, and this would increase the chance of war.”

In siding with Rusk, the president remarked that he did not want to be party to “a pay-off for the . . . ChiCom hard line.”²⁷ McGeorge Bundy concurred with this rationale, reminding Johnson the following month that China’s “nuclear explosion and her aggressive attitudes toward her neighbors make her a major problem for all peaceful people. This is not the time to give her increased prestige or to reward her belligerence—at the UN or elsewhere.”²⁸ As it turned out, no vote was taken on Chinese representation at the

24. Remarks on Foreign Affairs at the Associated Press Luncheon in New York City, 20 April 1964, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1963–1964*, Vol. 1, p. 499 (hereinafter *PPP:LBJ*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

25. Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, 5 September 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XXX, p. 85.

26. “The Republic of China,” National Policy Paper, 11 September 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XXX, p. 93.

27. Meeting with the President on United Nations Matters, 18 November 1964, in *FRUS, 1964–1968*, Vol. XXX, pp. 126–127.

28. McGeorge Bundy to LBJ, 16 December 1964, in *LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President*, Box 2, Vol. 7 (1 of 2).

UN in 1964, because of a crisis over the funding of UN peacekeeping operations. Nevertheless, the administration remained vigilant. In a January 1965 meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Sato, Rusk stressed that it was “essential for the United States and Japan to maintain the closest contact” in preventing Beijing’s entry into the UN.²⁹

Despite holding the line on Chinese representation, some U.S. officials felt the need to give way on issues of less symbolic significance to defuse congressional and public criticism of the White House’s intransigence. A May 1965 report issued by a House subcommittee chaired by Democrat Clement J. Zablocki had called on the administration to give “consideration to the initiation of limited but direct contact with Red China through cultural exchange activities with emphasis on scholars and journalists.”³⁰ The following month, William Bundy, Hilsman’s successor as assistant secretary, proposed broadening the categories of Americans eligible to travel to the mainland to include scholars and graduate students. Although he realized that Beijing would most likely refuse to grant any visas, this step would at least demonstrate to domestic critics “that it is the Chinese Communists rather than ourselves who fear the exchange of ideas.”³¹ Rusk vetoed the idea and grudgingly opted instead for the more limited category of medical doctors and public health specialists. His recommendation to Johnson drew heavily on Bundy’s negative reasoning.³² In a meeting with senior aides, however, Johnson rejected this suggestion as well, on the grounds that “it would not be wise to change our current policy.”³³

For the first two years of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson did not enmesh himself in the details of policy toward China. He was far more preoccupied with the 1964 election, the passage of domestic legislation, and the unfolding war in Vietnam. Images of the PRC were bound up with all three, giving him little incentive to change the policy. The turbulent politics of the mid-1960s and painful memories of the “who lost China” debate of the early 1950s militated against a change in course. There was, according to one of the president’s most trusted aides, a “kinship, a kinetic energy between Johnson and

29. “Memorandum of Conversation between Rusk and Sato,” 12 January 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 253 (1 of 2), Sato’s Visit: Memos & Cables (3 of 4).

30. Thomson to M. Bundy, 2 June 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 238, China Memos, Vol. 3.

31. William Bundy to Rusk, 16 June 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 175.

32. Rusk to LBJ, 28 June 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 3, Vol. 11 (1 of 3).

33. M. Bundy to LBJ, 24 August 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 4, Vol. 13 (3 of 3). In this memorandum, Bundy makes reference to a 29 June 1965 luncheon at which this topic was discussed.

Rusk on the issue of the right wing and the injury done to the body politic by that right wing attack over China and Korea.”³⁴ Staying firm on China, moreover, was consistent with Johnson’s efforts to project a sense of continuity with the domestic and foreign policies of his predecessor. In 1964 the president’s overriding concern was to fend off an electoral challenge from the hawkish Barry Goldwater, and he was therefore eager to avoid being branded “soft” on Asian Communism. After Johnson’s sweeping victory in the presidential election, he was unwilling to invest substantial political capital in any risky foreign policy initiative that could undermine his domestic agenda. He repeatedly stressed to his aides that he viewed the early months of 1965 as a small window of opportunity to enact his Great Society program, knowing full well that his honeymoon with the public and Congress would not last indefinitely.³⁵

The Johnson administration’s interpretation of Beijing’s role in Southeast Asia contributed to the reaffirmation of U.S. policy toward China through the summer of 1965. Paradoxically, this threat was seen as an outgrowth of China’s relative weakness. Although U.S. officials acknowledged that the PRC had recovered somewhat by 1964–1965 from the disastrous Great Leap Forward, they were more impressed by the “monumental economic problems” still bedeviling Mao and his comrades. China’s rapidly growing population, inadequate arable land, low level of technology, and loss of Soviet aid in 1960 all made for a gloomy forecast. A national intelligence estimate predicted that “China will not become a modern industrial state for many years.”³⁶ Moreover, Beijing’s bellicose rhetoric was frequently contrasted with its prudent behavior and its reluctance to challenge U.S. military superiority. Intelligence analysts concluded that China would seek to avert another Korea-like confrontation and would retain a decidedly defensive military posture for the foreseeable future.³⁷

Yet these same officials claimed that China would adopt alternative methods in pursuit of hostile long-term ambitions. This threat was most coher-

34. Bill Moyers, quoted in Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961–1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 88.

35. Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 180.

36. “Economic Prospects for Communist China,” National Intelligence Estimates (NIE) 13–64, 28 January 1964, in LBJL, NSF, NIE, Box 4, Communist China (2 of 2).

37. “Possibilities of Greater Militancy by the Chinese Communists,” Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) 13–4–63, 31 July 1963, in LBJL, NSF, NIE, Box 4, Communist China (2 of 2); “Communist China’s Military Establishment,” NIE 13–3–65, 10 March 1965, in LBJL, NSF, NIE, Box 4, Communist China (2 of 2); and “Communist China’s Foreign Policy,” NIE 13–9–65, 5 May 1965, in LBJL, NSF, NIE, Box 4, Communist China (2 of 2).

ently and elaborately defined in the administration's June 1966 Long Range Study on China, prepared jointly by the State and Defense Departments. According to the study, the PRC's ultimate objective was to make itself "the center and guiding light of a Communist world." The prerequisites for securing this position were the gradual expulsion of American power and influence from Asia, the strengthening of China's own influence among the world's less-developed countries, and the displacement of Soviet leadership of the international Communist movement. In lieu of the conventional tactics of invasion and conquest for attaining these ends, the PRC had accommodated itself to its relative impotence vis-à-vis the United States and the Soviet Union and relied instead on a low-risk strategy of "indirect aggression, subversion and diplomatic maneuver, conceived as a totality and designed to drain the energies of their antagonists." The greatest danger facing Southeast Asia was "militant dissidence within the nations of the area, encouraged, supplied, or fomented by Communist China." In aiding local insurgencies, Beijing aimed to "usurp the functions of legitimate governments, to take them over, and to replace them with regimes permanently sympathetic or subservient to the Chinese Communists."³⁸ In short, the threat resulted from Beijing's alleged intentions, the zeal with which its leaders were devoted to exporting their values, and the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of its neighbors, rather than from any traditional measurement of power and capability.

U.S. officials believed the threat was greatest in Vietnam, where the administration was struggling to defend South Vietnam against an insurgency waged by the National Liberation Front (NLF) and its Communist patron, North Vietnam (the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRV). Johnson and his senior aides were temperamentally inclined to believe that the primary beneficiary of a North Vietnamese victory would be China. Their Cold War mindset tended to underplay the indigenous dimensions of the insurgency and to inflate China's role. Almost as soon as Johnson took office, he defined Vietnam as a test of American resolve and of his own determination to contain the spread of international Communism. He remarked to one assistant: "If we don't do something . . . it'll [Saigon] go under . . . The Chinese. The fellas in the Kremlin . . . [will] be taking the measure of us. They'll be wondering just how far they can go."³⁹ Despite Hanoi's prickly nationalism, U.S. officials perceived a DRV tilt toward Beijing in the Sino-Soviet dispute in 1963–1964, a shift they attributed to the North's disenchantment with Mos-

38. "Communist China—Long Range Study," June 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 245, pp. 35–38, 203.

39. Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 100.

cow's line of "peaceful co-existence" and its marginal support for national liberation struggles. Moreover, North Vietnamese leaders looked to China for heavier firepower and improved transportation and communications facilities, and they gained inspiration from Maoist military strategy and the Chinese revolutionary experience.⁴⁰ An interdepartmental Vietnam Working Group concluded in November 1964 that North Vietnam's dependence on China, and the PRC's objective of undermining America's influence in Asia, resulted in "close cooperation" between the two countries and frequent consultation "on major decisions regarding South Vietnam."⁴¹

Developments in 1965 crystallized this impression. Frustrated by the failure to bring Hanoi to the conference table even after the initiation of the Operation Rolling Thunder bombing campaign in February 1965, the Johnson administration believed that China's steadfast opposition to a negotiated settlement and its ardent backing of the North reinforced Hanoi's unwillingness to negotiate.⁴² Consequently, the notion that the DRV was merely Beijing's proxy acquired currency. Rusk was convinced that "Hanoi seemed now to be coming gradually more under Chinese influence."⁴³ He saw the PRC as the real enemy in Vietnam and warned Johnson that Saigon's collapse would give rise to further Chinese-inspired subversion: "If the Communist world finds

40. Papers of William P. Bundy (hereinafter referred to as WPB Papers), in LBJL, Box 1, ch. 16, p. 7; CIA Report, "North Vietnam's Military Establishment," 27 December 1963, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 48, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 1, p. 4; and CIA Report, "Chinese Communist Military Doctrine," 17 January 1964, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 237, China Memo, Vol. 1, p. 7. Hanoi's tilt toward Beijing in 1963–64 is covered in Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 122–129; and Yang Kuisong, "Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949–1973," Working Paper No. 34, Cold War International History Project, Washington, February 2002, pp. 25–29.

41. National Security Council (NSC) Working Group on Vietnam, "Section I: Intelligence Assessment: The Situation in Vietnam," 24 November 1964, in LBJL, Papers of Paul C. Warnke: John McNaughton Files, Box 8, Book 4: Department of State Material (1964), p. 14.

42. Summary Notes of 550th NSC Meeting, 26 March 1965, in LBJL, NSF, National Security Council Meetings (NSCM), Box 1, Vol. 3, Tab 32; Summary Notes of 553rd NSC Meeting, 27 July 1965, in LBJL, NSF, NSCM, Box 1, Vol. 3, Tab 35; Hughes to Acting Secretary, 12 May 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 238, China Memos, Vol. 3; CIA Memorandum, "Asian Communist and Soviet Views on the War in Vietnam," 25 May 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 50, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 6(B); "Communist China (Short Range Report)," 30 April 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 61, Special State-Defense Study Group re China, Section 2, pp. 5–6; Office of Current Intelligence to John McCone, 23 February 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. II, pp. 360–361; and William Raborn to LBJ, 12 June 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 61, Special State-Defense Study Group re China, Section 2, p. 770. This impression was by no means wholly unfounded. See, for example, James G. Hershberg, "Peace Probes and the Bombing Pause: Hungarian and Polish Diplomacy during the Vietnam War, December 1965–January 1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 32–67.

43. Record of Rusk-Harold Wilson Conversation, 14 May 1965, in Public Record Office, Kew, London, PREM 13/1890.

out we will not pursue our commitment to the end, I don't know where they will stay their hand."⁴⁴ The president was receptive and dismissed the possibility of a unified, communist Vietnam acting as a bulwark against China as "sheer [Senator J. William] Fulbright nonsense."⁴⁵ In a highly publicized address at Johns Hopkins University in April 1965, Johnson argued that China cast a shadow over the war and all of Asia. As part of "a wider pattern of aggressive purposes," the DRV was "urged on" by the mainland.⁴⁶ McNamara recollected that he "totally underestimated the nationalist aspect of Ho Chi Minh's movement. We saw him first as a Communist and only second as a Vietnamese nationalist."⁴⁷

Nevertheless, even as Johnson prepared to take a stand in South Vietnam to thwart Chinese ambitions, he recoiled from any action that threatened to ignite another Sino-American war. Memories of China's intervention in the Korean War instilled in the president an acute sensitivity to Chinese security interests and helped shape his approach to the war in Vietnam.⁴⁸ McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and most intelligence officials consistently argued that China's prudence afforded considerable leeway for U.S. military operations against the North and that only a direct threat to the existence of that regime or an attack on the PRC itself would trigger Chinese intervention.⁴⁹ Yet as Johnson escalated the war in 1965, he deliberately tailored his strategy to preclude an enlarged conflict, insisting on a gradual, controlled bombing program that steered clear of sensitive targets. On 6 April 1965, he signed an order that specifically forbade hitting M-19 aircraft bases near Hanoi, lest Chinese technicians working there be caught in the line of fire. Similarly, attacks on North Vietnamese airfields and surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites under construction were prohibited.⁵⁰

44. Meeting on Vietnam, 21 July 1965, in LBJL, Meeting Notes File, Box 1, p. 9.

45. Quoted in Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*, Rev. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 330.

46. Address at Johns Hopkins University, 7 April 1965, in *PPP:LBJ*, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 395.

47. Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p. 33.

48. For the influence of the Korean analogy on LBJ, see Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), ch. 5.

49. Joint Chiefs of Staff to Robert McNamara, 11 February 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. II, p. 241; SNIE 10-3-65, "Communist Reactions to Possible US Actions," 11 February 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. II, p. 248; Raborn to LBJ, 12 June 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. II, pp. 768-769; "Communist China (Short Range Report)," Section 1, April 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 61, pp. 3-4, 30; and McNamara to LBJ, 20 July 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 4, Vol. 12 (1 of 3).

50. Deborah Shapley, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), pp. 324-325; and Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), pp. 84-85.

In July 1965 the Pentagon, led by McNamara, pushed for an additional 100,000 troops in South Vietnam and recommended that the country be placed on a war footing by calling up the reserves and National Guard, by declaring a state of emergency, and by asking Congress for an increase in taxes. These steps, they argued, would convey a sense of determination and resolve to both the American people and the enemy in Vietnam.⁵¹ Once again, Johnson instinctively opted for the middle ground, approving the request for troops but rejecting the other items on the agenda (including an expansion of Rolling Thunder) that he deemed more provocative. His resistance to placing the country on a war footing stemmed in large part from his concern that a national debate about Vietnam would encourage opponents of his domestic legislation to use the war as a means of stifling the Great Society, particularly the Voting Rights Act and the Medicare bill then awaiting congressional approval.⁵² As he told his advisers, he wanted only “to do what is necessary to meet the present situation. . . . We will neither brag about what we are doing or thunder at the Chinese Communists and the Russians.”⁵³ In August, Johnson chided Senator John Stennis, a senior member of the Armed Services Committee, for publicly speculating on how much the country would have to spend to win the war. Johnson argued that this would merely induce Ho Chi Minh to ask Beijing for greater assistance. “I’m trying to keep from forcing the Chinese to come in,” the president explained.⁵⁴ Johnson’s restraint underscored his preference for *containing* rather than *confronting* the PRC.

Averting Chinese Intervention in Vietnam

Although an exaggerated reading of Chinese intentions and capabilities acted as a brake against changes in U.S. policy toward China and helped shape the decision for intervention in Vietnam, a rapid sequence of events in the fall of 1965 seemed to cast many of these assumptions in a new light. Most stunning was the reversal of Chinese fortunes in Indonesia. In 1964 and 1965, Washington had observed with dismay the gradual alignment between the foreign policies of Indonesia and China, as well as President Sukarno’s efforts to pro-

51. Larry Berman, *Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 103–104, 125–126.

52. Berman, *Planning a Tragedy*, pp. 147–149; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 276, 284; George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 140.

53. Meeting on Vietnam, 27 July 1965, in LBJL, NSF, National Security Council History, Box 43, Deployment of Major U.S. Forces to Vietnam, July 1965, Vol. 7, tabs 421–438.

54. Telcon, LBJ–John Stennis, 18 August 1965, in LBJL, Recordings of Telephone Conversations and Meetings, WH6508.05 PNO 11.

mote the influence of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) as a counterweight to the powerful army.⁵⁵ The PKI's ascendancy was of particular concern because U.S. officials assumed that the party took its inspiration and marching orders from Beijing, having "swung from Moscow to Peking" in the Sino-Soviet dispute.⁵⁶ Sukarno's line of "Confrontation" against Malaysia, his decision to withdraw from the UN in January 1965, and his efforts to convene a rival Conference of the New Emerging Forces were all interpreted as evidence of a flourishing Beijing-Jakarta axis that was hoping to expunge American influence from Southeast Asia.⁵⁷ A major report prepared by the roving U.S. ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in April 1965 endorsed many of these gloomy forecasts and recommended a curtailment of the American presence in Indonesia in light of the increasingly inhospitable climate for U.S. diplomats and businessmen.⁵⁸

At the end of September, however, a leftist faction within the Indonesian army, supported by the PKI, launched a revolt against the high command. The abortive coup was ruthlessly suppressed by the Strategic Reserve, headed by Major General Suharto, and then used as a pretext for a bloody purge of the PKI, the army's greatest rival for political influence in the country. The next few weeks and months also witnessed a wave of anti-Chinese demonstrations and a significant downgrading of Sino-Indonesian relations.⁵⁹ Apparently the purge was inspired mainly by an intra-army dispute rather than a PKI-inspired plot. The Indonesian army's charges of Chinese complicity, as

55. J. D. Legge, *Sukarno: A Political Biography*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 320–328; and Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 54–55.

56. Memorandum of Conversation, 27 October 1964, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVI, p. 175. This perception was widespread. For example, see Ellsworth Bunker to LBJ, n.d., in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVI, p. 255; and Marshall Green, *Indonesia: Crisis and Transformation, 1965–1968* (Washington DC: The Compass Press, 1990), p. 25. The PKI's relations with Beijing during this period are covered in David Mozingo, *Chinese Policy toward Indonesia, 1949–1967* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 216–220.

57. CIA memorandum, "Principal Problems and Prospects in Indonesia," 26 January 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 246, Indonesia memos, Vol. 3; Ball to LBJ, n.d., in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 247, Indonesia memos, Vol. 4; WPB Papers, in LBJL, ch. 28, p. 12, Box 1; Green, *Crisis and Transformation*, p. 12; and Rizal Sukma, *Indonesia and China: The Politics of a Troubled Relationship* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 32. Washington likely exaggerated the degree of convergence between Jakarta and Beijing. Mozingo writes that the 1963–1965 relationship was inherently unstable, held together mostly by shared opposition to the creation of Malaysia. Mozingo, *Chinese Policy*, pp. 194, 220–230.

58. Bunker to LBJ, n.d., in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXVI, pp. 255–263.

59. Sukma, *Indonesia and China*, p. 33. For the American reaction to these events (and a persuasive case for Washington's passive role in the affair), see H. W. Brands, "The Limits of Manipulation: How the United States Didn't Topple Sukarno," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (December 1989), pp. 785–808.

the U.S. intelligence community eventually acknowledged, could not be corroborated. The PRC's interests were in fact best served by its existing relationship with Sukarno, not by the orchestration of a violent rift between the PKI and the army.⁶⁰ As reports of Indonesia's anti-Communist campaign and Sukarno's marginalization poured in, U.S. officials sensed a major alteration in the balance of forces in the region. By February 1966 the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported that the PKI, which had seemed on the verge of seizing power only five to six months earlier, was now "reduced to an underground organization of unknown size," with the possibility of any revival "virtually nil for the next few years."⁶¹ Many in Washington believed that the greatest loser in this debacle was the PKI's presumed sponsor. The collapse of the Sino-Indonesian axis, the U.S. ambassador to Jakarta told President Johnson, amounted to "a great loss of international prestige for Peking."⁶² The dismal fate of the PKI, according to another CIA report, would impair China's standing in the international Communist movement: "Communists abroad sympathetic to Peking may begin to have second thoughts about too close an identification with the Chinese."⁶³

The dramatic events in Indonesia were seen as part of a wider pattern of Chinese setbacks in the developing world. The limits of China's influence were starkly illustrated at an Afro-Asian conference in Algiers in November 1965, when Beijing was forced to abandon its year-long effort to forge a unified bloc opposed to U.S. and Soviet power in the Third World. Several of the invitees balked at the exclusion of Moscow from the proposed meeting, fearing that this would jeopardize future deliveries of Soviet aid. Beijing's failure at the conference was welcomed in Washington.⁶⁴ By the following summer, U.S. officials estimated that Beijing's international status had declined so much that it could rely only on Albania and New Zealand's Communist party

60. For further discussion, see Mazingo, *Chinese Policy*, pp. 235–244. The CIA's dismissal of China's implication in the 30 September coup is in CIA memorandum, "Peking's Setbacks in Indonesia," 1 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 248, Indonesia memos, Vol. 6.

61. CIA memorandum, "Indonesian Communist Party," 29 April 1966, LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 248, Indonesia memos, Vol. 6.

62. Memorandum of Conversation, 15 February 1966, LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 248, Indonesia memos, Vol. 6.

63. CIA memorandum, "Peking's Setbacks in Indonesia," 1 April 1966.

64. WPB Papers, in LBJL, Box 1, ch. 28, pp. 7–9; and Hong Kong to Department of State, Airgram No. A-431, 31 December 1965, NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 2019, POL CHICOM-US, p. 5. In February 1966, the State Department's INR bureau prepared an extensive list of Beijing's recent reversals in foreign relations. See George Denney to Rusk, 25 February 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China cables, Vol. 5. China's effort to convene the conference is discussed in Andrew Hall Wedeman, *The East Wind Subsides: Chinese Foreign Policy and the Origins of the Cultural Revolution* (Washington DC: Washington Institute Press, 1987) pp. 119–126.

for unconditional loyalty in the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Soviet's leadership of the world Communist movement had seemed to be in peril in 1964–1965, but by 1966 it was restored. This development was attributed both to the PRC's "rigid dogmatism and political ineptitude" and to the Soviet Union's increased materiel assistance to North Vietnam. The weapons supplies demonstrated Moscow's support for armed revolutionary struggle, thereby neutralizing repeated Chinese accusations of Soviet collusion with the West.⁶⁵

The Soviet Union figured prominently in Washington's evolving understanding of the Sino-Vietnamese relationship. Hanoi's persistent requests for advanced Soviet weaponry, U.S. analysts argued, bore the hallmarks of a quasi-independent actor striving to lessen its reliance on China and to maintain its freedom of action by assuming a neutral stance in the Sino-Soviet competition.⁶⁶ Speculation abounded by the end of 1965 that the DRV's flourishing ties with the Soviet Union signified the ascendancy of the moderate and pragmatic wing of the North Vietnamese Communist party. Led by Premier Pham Van Dong, this pro-Soviet faction was thought to have some interest in an eventual negotiated settlement of the war. That stance, as one U.S. intelligence report concluded, was "a considerable step away from the Chinese Communist position that there should be no talks on any terms, and that the war must be carried through to a complete Communist military victory."⁶⁷

China's foreign policy defeats had a contradictory impact on the administration's thinking. Senior officials, perhaps betraying an ingrained need to highlight any sign of progress amid the protracted fighting in Vietnam, hailed these developments as a turning point. Within a year of making the fateful commitment to Americanize the war, President Johnson was now told that "Hanoi's operation, backed by the Chicoms, is no longer being regarded as the wave of the future out there."⁶⁸ William Bundy assured Rusk in March

65. CIA memorandum, "China's Growing Isolation in the Communist Movement," 5 August 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China memos, Vol. 6 (1 of 2).

66. CIA memorandum, "The Chinese Position in North Vietnam," 5 August 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China memos, Vol. 6 (1 of 2); CIA memorandum, "The Deterioration of Sino-Soviet Relations," 22 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 51, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 9 (1 of 2), p. 31; CIA memorandum, "Status of Soviet and Chinese Military Aid to North Vietnam," 3 September 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 50, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 8; and Hughes to Rusk, 9 August 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 2020, POL CHICOM-VIET N.

67. CIA memorandum, "The Militant and Moderate Elements in the North Vietnamese Communist Party," 1 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 43.

68. Walt Rostow to LBJ, 25 June 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 33, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 55 (1 of 2). See also William J. Jorden to Rostow, 24 June 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 8 (2 of 2), Vol. 7 (1 of 2).

1966 that U.S. resolve in Vietnam and the crushing of the PKI had created a “markedly healthier” atmosphere throughout the region and restored Asian allies’ faith in U.S. leadership.⁶⁹ None of this, however, altered the long-standing assumption that the PRC posed a major threat. As Bundy recollected, “the fact that China had suffered reverses in 1965 was not seen as changing the basic judgment that she was militant. . . . Although we in government had followed the Chinese setbacks . . . we had also seen more closely the extraordinary stiffness and arrogance of Chinese handling of each situation.”⁷⁰ The challenge posed by China had never been defined in purely conventional terms. The threat from the PRC was deemed to be mainly politico-psychological in nature, a product of the belligerency of Maoist ideology and the fragility of China’s neighbors. Even as the fortunes of the People’s Republic soured, most U.S. officials believed that Beijing’s hostile intentions and its capacity to stir trouble remained unchanged. In a February 1966 speech, William Bundy repeated this concern, reminding his audience that Mao was not “another Hitler, building a vast military machine with the aim of conquest by conventional warfare.” Instead, the Chinese leader would rely on “the instigation and support of movements that can be represented as local movements, designed to subvert and overthrow existing governments and replace them with regimes responsive to Peking’s will.”⁷¹

China’s behavior during the 37-day bombing pause, initiated toward the end of December 1965, reinforced these impressions. The sincerity of Johnson’s Vietnam “peace offensive” has been disputed by many historians. Most likely it was intended to shift the blame for continued hostilities to Hanoi, thereby securing political justification for the sustained military effort that he privately believed was unavoidable.⁷² As anticipated, the North Vietnamese were highly suspicious of U.S. motives and spurned offers of negotiation. In assessing North Vietnam’s intransigence, U.S. officials apportioned considerable blame to the PRC’s militant influence. They regarded Beijing as even fiercer in its opposition to peace talks than the DRV itself was, and they believed that China, by virtue of geography, shared ideology, and the volume of aid, was able to press its views on its ally, regardless of the inroads made by Moscow.⁷³ “Peking has actively intruded on any talks between Hanoi and

69. W. Bundy to Rusk, 14 March 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 1897, POL ASIA.

70. WPB Papers, in LBJL, Box 1, ch. 32, pp. 37–39.

71. William P. Bundy, “The United States and Communist China,” *Department of State Bulletin (DSB)*, 28 February 1966, p. 313.

72. Lloyd C. Gardner, *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995) pp. 269–280; and Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 342–347.

73. Denney to Rusk, 26 January 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. IV, pp. 148–149; Memorandum

[the] U.S.,” Rusk informed Johnson as the pause came to an end. “Hanoi appears to be somewhere between Moscow and Peking—but closer to Peking.”⁷⁴ Recent Chinese sources have confirmed that Beijing’s vehement objection to negotiations did in fact play a significant role in North Vietnam’s hostile response to an American fourteen-point peace plan delivered by Polish intermediaries.⁷⁵

Subsequently, Johnson’s aides continued to point to the threat of Chinese-inspired subversion as a major justification for the war in Vietnam. Despite the improved regional climate, they contended that the strategic considerations undergirding U.S. policy were still relevant. As part of a review of policy options in April 1966, the State Department advised Johnson that

for the next year or two any chance of holding the rest of Southeast Asia hinges on the same factors assessed a year ago, whether Thailand and Laos in the first instance and Malaysia, Singapore, and Burma close behind, would—in the face of a US failure for any reason in Viet-Nam—have any significant remaining will to resist the Chinese Communist pressures that would probably then be applied.

Administration officials worried that a U.S. defeat in Vietnam would be regarded throughout the region as “proof that Communism from the north was the decisive force in the area.”⁷⁶ Hence, steadfast containment of China remained the most logical course, especially because it could not be taken for granted that the PRC had been chastened by its diplomatic failures. “The Chicoms have had a bad time during the last 15 months,” Rusk noted. “The future will turn on whether they become more dangerous and strike out at their opponents or recoup and reconsider peaceful co-existence. We don’t know how this will come out.”⁷⁷

It was precisely this intangible element of Chinese unpredictability or perceived irrationality, rather than any reassessment of Chinese intentions and capabilities, that prompted the administration to supplement containment

by John Whitman and Lou Sandine, 29 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (B), Vol. 43; Hong Kong to Department of State, Telegram No. 12878, January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China cables, Vol. 5; and CIA memorandum, “Communist Views of the Present State of the Conflict in Vietnam,” 20 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 221, USSR memos, Vol. 11.

74. Notes of Meeting, 28 January 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. IV, p. 179.

75. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, p. 164. For the best discussion of China’s obstructionist role in various Vietnam peace initiatives, see Qiang Zhai, “Beijing and the Vietnam Peace Talks, 1965–68: New Evidence from Chinese Sources,” Working Paper No. 18, Cold War International History Project, Washington DC, June 1997.

76. Rusk to LBJ, 24 April 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. IV, p. 365.

77. Memorandum of Conversation, Rusk-Paul Hasluck, 11 April 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 2006, POL CHICOM 1966.

with new tactics toward the mainland in 1966. From a diplomatic post in Hong Kong, Edward Rice argued that Beijing's reckless adventurism had been concocted by a group of aging ideologues, men distrustful of their successors' revolutionary fervor and therefore desperate for "convincing external successes which would justify keeping China on course toward the same aims they have set after they have passed."⁷⁸ Chinese setbacks on the world stage, he claimed, had instilled within the leadership an "emotional state of great frustration," which was exacerbated by the scale of the U.S. presence in Vietnam.⁷⁹ Rice likened Beijing's profound anxieties in Vietnam to those it experienced just before the fall of Pyongyang to UN forces in 1950. He asserted that although Mao and his comrades probably hoped to avert any commitment to enter the fighting, further escalation of U.S. air attacks against the North would only "lend credence to their belief that we are acting under mechanistically increasing pressures to attack their country." Consequently, Rice urged the administration's war planners to heed the PRC's siege mentality and inherent need for domestic mobilization. The outcome in Vietnam, he argued, had become so inextricably linked to Mao's revolutionary ambitions at home and abroad that China ultimately would accept the full consequences of assisting Hanoi, even if this led to a clash with the Americans. Rice believed Mao might actually welcome a confrontation because it would rally the country behind his vision and imbue younger generations with a militant spirit. "Prudence," Rice warned Washington, "requires that we pursue a course designed . . . to disappoint any expectations of Communist China's leaders that we will play to their strength by fighting them on their own terrain."⁸⁰

Rice was only one of several officials who had pressed decision-makers in 1964 and 1965 to reduce Sino-American tensions by alleviating Beijing's paranoid fears of U.S. intentions. These voices had been effectively relegated to the sidelines as the Johnson administration focused its attention on defending the besieged government in Saigon, largely out of concern that any relaxation in the administration's posture toward the PRC would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and encourage further Chinese aggression. Nonetheless, once the United States was deeply involved in Vietnam and was confronted with the prospect of another Korea-like war against China, even the most enthusiastic advocates of intervention gradually became more receptive to some of the arguments advanced by the proponents of a new U.S. policy to-

78. Hong Kong to Department of State, Airgram No. A-431, 31 December 1965, p. 2.

79. Edward Rice to W. Bundy, 2 November 1965, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-66, Box 2006, POL CHICOM 1966.

80. Hong Kong to Department of State, Airgram No. A-454, 7 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF Country File, Box 239, China cables, Vol. 5, pp. 2-4, 6.

ward China. An interdepartmental group chaired by Ambassador-at-Large Llewellyn Thompson concluded in October 1965 that intensified bombing of the North ran the risk of provoking greater Chinese involvement and recommended a pause to test Hanoi's interest in talks.⁸¹ Robert McNamara privately expressed growing dismay over the evident stalemate on the battlefield during the latter half of the year, particularly after a draining fight in the Ia Drang Valley in November, and he wondered whether a military victory could be secured within acceptable risks.⁸² In December, McNamara told Johnson that "a substantial number of additional forces"—200,000 ground troops in 1966 and likely the same figure for the following year—would be needed "if we are to avoid being defeated." Drawing heavily on the latest CIA estimates, McNamara argued that there was only a slightly better than even chance that these deployments would "prevent the DRV/VC from sustaining the conflict at a significant level." But, he claimed, if the limits of the North's tenacity were reached, there was an "almost equal" chance that the Chinese, with their ideological and emotional interests invested in a North Vietnamese victory, would dispatch their own forces to salvage the situation. Thus there existed the grim possibility, the Defense Secretary concluded, that "we will be faced in early 1967 with a military standoff at a much higher level . . . with any prospect of military success marred by the chances of an active Chinese intervention."⁸³

McNamara's concerns were buttressed by a number of intelligence reports in the late fall of 1965 alerting Washington to signs of Chinese unease over U.S. designs in Vietnam. The CIA noted that there had been a steady flow of Chinese military support units into the DRV since the summer. The agency also surmised that the construction of new airfields in southern China and the deployment of Chinese jet fighters to Hainan in October had been triggered by the fear that U.S. airstrikes in northeastern North Vietnam would be extended to targets in the PRC.⁸⁴ Particularly ominous were reports of Beijing's extensive efforts to prepare the country psychologically—through an

81. Paper by the Ambassador-at-Large (Thompson), 11 October 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. III, pp. 442–445.

82. Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 358–359; and McNamara, *In Retrospect*, pp. 221–222.

83. McNamara to LBJ, 4 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 43. The analysis from which much of McNamara's report was derived is in Sherman Kent to Raborn, 2 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 43.

84. CIA memorandum, "Possible Change in Chinese Communist Military Posture Vis-à-vis Vietnam," 17 October 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 50, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 7; and CIA memorandum, "Chinese Communist Military Presence in North Vietnam," 20 October 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 50, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 7.

intensification of civil defense and mass propaganda campaigns—for a possible war with the United States. The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR) informed Rusk in early December 1965 that the regime was evacuating "non-essential persons," small factories, and many government facilities from urban and coastal areas to the remote regions of the country. Regional broadcasts and press reports were issuing frequent warnings to the population that U.S. actions against the DRV threatened Chinese security. Taken together, these actions indicated that "Peking itself estimates the possibility of . . . overt involvement [in the war] in 1966 to be a serious one."⁸⁵

Much of this analysis was well informed. China's elaborate preparations for war, particularly Mao's Third Front project of industrial development in the interior provinces, were indeed taken in response to Washington's retaliatory airstrikes after the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in August 1964 and the initiation of Rolling Thunder. The Johnson administration's military maneuvers shook China's leaders and forced them to counter a seemingly renewed U.S. strategic threat. Mao also realized that increased tensions could be exploited in his campaign to organize opposition against domestic "revisionism." As part of his plans for radicalizing China's political and social life (the impending "Cultural Revolution"), the Third Front was accompanied by a "Resist America and Assist Vietnam Movement" and a series of mass rallies.⁸⁶ For senior U.S. officials, however, the distinction between military mobilization and political propaganda remained blurred. At a meeting in early December, both Rusk and McNamara expressed "increasing concern about possible Chinese involvement" in Vietnam.⁸⁷

To defuse tensions, William Bundy proposed that the administration use an upcoming meeting in Warsaw on 15 December to inform Chinese diplo-

85. Hughes to Rusk, 3 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 43. See also Hughes to Rusk, 5 November 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 43; and Thomson to M. Bundy, 2 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 25, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 43. In a front-page article, the *The New York Times* reported that several Johnson officials feared that the U.S. and China "may be within months of a direct clash." See "Some U.S. Aides See Risk of Direct Clash with China," *The New York Times*, 3 December 1965, p. A1.

86. Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, pp. 140–146, 151–152; Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) pp. 214–215; and John W. Garver, "China and the Revisionist Thesis," in William Head and Lawrence E. Grinter, eds., *Looking Back on the Vietnam War: A 1990's Perspective on the Decisions, Combat, and Legacies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), pp. 110–111.

87. M. Bundy to LBJ, 3 December 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 5, Vol. 42 (2 of 3). McGeorge Bundy reported that his own thinking diverged somewhat from his colleagues. He wrote Johnson, "[the] Chinese Communists will not fight for South Vietnam but only for what they regard as [the] survival of North Vietnam."

mats that the United States was taking a number of unilateral steps to reassure Beijing that “we still seek to avoid a major confrontation.” Bundy’s suggestions included an initiative to “admit Chinese journalists to the United States without reciprocity” (since 1959, Washington had insisted on only a *mutual* exchange of news reporters) and the suggestion that the two countries “jointly examine their [the PRC’s] charges of air and sea violations of their territory and attacks on Chinese vessels on the high seas.” Most important was a relaxation of travel controls that would permit doctors and scientists in the fields of public health and medicine to visit the mainland.⁸⁸ This particular measure had been vetoed by Johnson in June, but its fortunes were revived when Paul Dudley White, Dwight Eisenhower’s physician, wrote to Johnson on 10 August briefly describing his contacts with some Chinese colleagues living on the mainland and offering his services “in helping to break our deadlock with China.”⁸⁹ Johnson immediately expressed interest in the travel package.

Part of the reason for this policy reversal was spelled out in a memorandum from McGeorge Bundy to the president regarding White’s letter. Bundy contended that new circumstances—responding to an appeal by a noted Republican “at a time when our policy in Vietnam has reached a new level of clarity and firmness”—augured well for the adoption of a measure that would address domestic criticism of the administration’s policy toward China.⁹⁰ Any concerns about appearing “soft” on Asian Communism, he argued, had been offset by the Vietnam decisions of July. Johnson also undoubtedly perceived this conciliatory measure as a symbolic rebuttal to elements within Congress, the press, and the academic community who bemoaned the president’s resort to military force in Southeast Asia.⁹¹ The travel initiative was delayed in the State Department until late November, when supporters of the idea orchestrated another White letter, this one addressed to Rusk.⁹² When the initiative

88. W. Bundy to Rusk, 4 December 1965, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 2018, POL CHICOM-US.

89. Paul Dudley White to LBJ, 10 August 1965 (enclosure), in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 4, Vol. 13 (1 of 3). For an indispensable insider’s account of the 1965 travel initiative and of the political and bureaucratic impediments to changes in U.S. policy toward China within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, see James C. Thomson Jr., “On the Making of U.S. China Policy, 1961–9: A Study in Bureaucratic Politics,” *China Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (April–June 1972), esp. pp. 232–238.

90. M. Bundy to LBJ, 24 August 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 4, Vol. 13 (1 of 3).

91. For Johnson’s concern over domestic criticism of the Vietnam War in 1965, see Melvin Small, *Johnson, Nixon, and the Doves* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), ch. 2; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 257–262, 285–286; and George C. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 125–126.

92. Thomson, “On the Making of U.S. China Policy,” pp. 235–238.

finally was announced on 29 December, it marked a subtle yet significant departure from the Johnson administration's previous insistence that there could be no modification of policy toward China until the PRC had learned to co-exist peacefully with its neighbors. The measure was intended in part to deflect criticism of this unyielding stance, and it clearly was seen as a way to convey a sense of moderation to Beijing and reduce the chances of any miscalculation or misunderstanding that could ignite a wider conflagration in Vietnam. The ban on travel to China was further relaxed in March, when scholars and writers were exempted from any restrictions.⁹³

Some historians have argued that both countries, by displaying mutual restraint in Vietnam, reached a tacit understanding in early 1966 that kept the war limited.⁹⁴ A closer look at the record, however, indicates that Johnson and his advisers were still struggling at that time to reconcile the objective of forcing Hanoi to the negotiating table with the strategic imperative of averting Chinese intervention. In a series of meetings in late January, Johnson was encouraged to resume the bombing of the North. McNamara, who had earlier been one of the chief proponents of the bombing pause, reported that the Communists had taken advantage of the lull to build up their forces for "intensified action in South Vietnam." Prolonging the pause, he claimed, would send the "wrong signal to Hanoi, Peking and our own people." Rusk concurred, remarking that without new bombing, the PRC would be led to believe that "a sanctuary has been approved and they can do more than ever."⁹⁵ Because the president all along had been skeptical of the value of a bombing halt and irritated by Hanoi's refusal to respond positively to his overtures, he needed little prodding.⁹⁶ Yet officials expressed considerable anxiety over Beijing's likely reaction to a renewed offensive. Under Secretary of State George Ball bluntly asserted in a 25 January memorandum to Johnson that a resumption of air attacks against the DRV would "more than likely lead us into war with Red China—probably in six to nine months." As frustration mounted over the North's continued resistance, he warned, the administration would be tempted to include increasingly sensitive targets—such as Haiphong harbor or petroleum, oil, and lubricants (POL) supplies—in its bombing program. In such an event, China could hardly be expected "to stand by and let us destroy the industrial life of North Viet-Nam without in-

93. *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 271 n. 2.

94. Frank E. Rogers, "Sino-American Relations and the Vietnam War, 1964–66," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 66 (June 1976), pp. 307–311; and Foot, *Practice of Power*, p. 160.

95. Meeting in the Cabinet Room, 22 January 1966, in LBJL, Meeting Notes File, Box 1, pp. 5–7.

96. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 349–350.

creasing its assistance to the point where, sooner or later, we will almost certainly collide with Chinese interests.” The PRC’s internal war preparations suggested that it was bracing for this possibility.⁹⁷

Although Johnson’s top advisers were not prepared to surrender their trump card, they agreed, as Rusk put it, that new bombing should “be kept under firm control . . . [because of the] dangers of the Chinese coming in.”⁹⁸ When Rolling Thunder was relaunched on 31 January 1966, Johnson prohibited attacks on any target within a thirty-mile radius of the center of Hanoi and within a ten-mile radius of the center of Haiphong.⁹⁹ The uncertainty surrounding Chinese intentions in the war factored heavily in the selection of military targets. Intelligence sources at the time documented the PRC’s growing military presence in North Vietnam. Johnson was informed at the end of February that as many as 47,000 Chinese military personnel, most of them engineering troops, were serving in the DRV. As a calculated act of deterrence, these forces made little effort to conceal their identity and used non-secure methods of communication. U.S. intelligence agencies also discovered that a central authority had been set up in the vicinity of Hanoi, which could possibly be used as “a theater logistic command to support the introduction of a Chinese combat force.”¹⁰⁰ The State Department’s INR bureau reported the following month that there had been a marked increase in the number of statements making reference to a Chinese obligation to send men to the North. On the basis of this bellicose rhetoric, China’s leaders appeared to “consider the danger of an ‘imminent’ war to be as great as before and . . . they are more than ever convinced that some sort of war with the US at some time is ‘inevitable.’”¹⁰¹

Heightened sensitivity to the PRC’s perception of U.S. policy in Vietnam

97. Ball to LBJ, 25 January 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 26, Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 46.

98. Notes of Meeting, 27 January 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. IV, p. 164. Jack Valenti, one of Johnson’s most trusted political aides, also recommended that renewed bombing be done “on a surgical basis—picking out strictly military targets, and avoid, if we can, any target that summons up a direct response from the Chicoms.” Jack Valenti to LBJ, 25 January 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. IV, p. 139.

99. Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, p. 92.

100. CIA memorandum, “Chinese Communist Military Presence in North Vietnam,” 28 February 1966 (enclosure), in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 51, Southeast Asia Special Intelligence Material, Vol. 9 (1 of 2). See also Garver, “China and the Revisionist Thesis,” p. 109.

101. Hughes to Rusk, 29 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China memos, Vol. 6. See also “CPR Statements on Its Encirclement,” in NA, RG 59, Briefing Books, 1958–1976, Lot 70D187, Box 26, Secretary’s Appearance before the House Foreign Affairs Far East Subcommittee, 3/16/66; Hong Kong to Department of State, Telegram No. 1539, 19 February 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China cables, Vol. 5; and Komer to M. Bundy, 16 February 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of McGeorge Bundy, Box 14, CHRON File: 1–28 February 1966 (2 of 3).

spurred the administration to be more circumspect in its handling of a number of other initiatives that were thought to be unduly provocative to China. One example was Taiwan's ongoing efforts to enlist U.S. support for an invasion of the mainland. During a visit to Washington in September 1965, Taiwan's Defense Minister Chiang Ching-kuo revived his father's idea of seizing the PRC's five southwestern provinces. Chiang claimed that Beijing's hold on this region was weak and its rule deeply unpopular. He assured his hosts that there would be no need for extensive American participation, only air and naval cover. McNamara was cool to the idea, thinking that it eerily resembled the Bay of Pigs disaster insofar as "it obviously contemplated [a] large scale popular uprising against the Communists" with no palpable evidence that the conditions were ripe for such a revolt.¹⁰² The JCS were no more enthusiastic, branding the plan "militarily unsound." Because of Taiwan's limited capacity to strike airfields in southern China, a successful outcome would require the full use of U.S. air and naval power. The JCS recommended that the administration continue discussing the matter with Chiang Kai-shek, if only to give him the impression that his views were taken seriously and to maintain him as "a fully cooperating partner rather than as a . . . potential disruption to our policies and objectives in Asia."¹⁰³ The embassy in Taipei reported at the end of January that this hands-off approach had engendered "considerable disappointment and irritation" among the country's leaders and counseled Washington to ease this anger by promising to reexamine the question of an assault on the mainland if other options in Vietnam were exhausted and there appeared to be no hope for a peaceful settlement.¹⁰⁴ The suggestion came just as Johnson was hoping to keep a lid on the hostilities in Vietnam. Accordingly, the State Department vetoed the idea on the grounds that it "would not only encourage further GRC [Government of the Republic of China] mainland attack plans . . . but would also be subject to misinterpretation and possible anticipatory action by [the] ChiComs should they learn of [the] statement, as is entirely possible."¹⁰⁵

Similar considerations derailed plans for the CIA to establish a "gray" radio targeted at the PRC, a project first proposed in October 1965 and tenta-

102. Memorandum of Conversation, 22 September 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 211, 213.

103. Joint Chiefs of Staff to McNamara, 16 November 1965, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 224–225.

104. Telegram, Taipei to Department of State, 25 January 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 242–245.

105. Telegram, Department of State to Taipei, 28 January 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 246.

tively endorsed the following April.¹⁰⁶ As the plan made its way through the bureaucratic channels, a number of China hands weighed in with their objections. Both Rice and James Thomson contended that Beijing's leaders would interpret a new wave of radio propaganda as proof of America's determination to encircle and overthrow their regime, a perception that would undermine U.S. efforts to head off a possible confrontation.¹⁰⁷ Citing these concerns, as well as the substantial costs of such a large-scale investment, a meeting of the 303 Committee in July concluded that the project should be shelved and that the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), which oversaw Voice of America (VOA), instead continue its broadcasts to the mainland.¹⁰⁸

Important as the USIA/VOA decision was, what truly distinguished the administration's attempts to prevent China's overt involvement in Vietnam in the early months of 1966, aside from the restrained bombing of the North and the effort to forestall heightened tensions, was a concerted political and diplomatic campaign to disabuse the PRC of its sense of American hostility. To address the troubling questions raised by Ball's memorandum, McNamara insisted that it was necessary to "tell China we do not intend to destroy the political institutions in NVN [North Vietnam]."¹⁰⁹ The result was a shift from the alarmist, vaguely threatening rhetoric employed against Beijing in 1963–1965 to a decidedly more conciliatory tone. Depictions of a Chinese menace in Southeast Asia and solemn pledges to contain it were deemphasized in favor of assurances of Washington's limited aims in Vietnam. Directing his remarks toward Beijing, Johnson declared in a speech on 23 February: "We have threatened no one, and we will not. We seek the end of no regime and we will not. Our purpose is solely to defend against aggression."¹¹⁰ The embassy in Warsaw was instructed to emphasize the desire for peaceful relations in its periodic meetings with Chinese diplomats.¹¹¹

More important, senior U.S. officials signaled their interest in new approaches to Beijing. In a prepared statement to the House Subcommittee on the Far East and the Pacific on 16 March, Rusk asserted: "We must avoid as-

106. *Ibid.*, p. 354 n. 2.

107. Rice to Rostow, 15 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China memos, Vol. 6; and Thomson to Rostow, 3 May 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 18, Special Group Memoranda.

108. Memorandum for the Record, 8 July 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 355.

109. Memorandum of Conversation, 26 January 1966, in LBJL, Meeting Notes File, Box 1.

110. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Viet-Nam: The Struggle to Be Free," *DSB*, 14 March 1966, p. 393.

111. Department of State to Warsaw, Telegram No. 1303, 10 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 202, Gronouski-Wang Talks 12/65–7/68; Telegram, Department of State to Warsaw, 23 May 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 308–313; and Telegram, Department of State to Warsaw, 31 August 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 374–378.

suming the existence of an unending and inevitable state of hostility between ourselves and the rulers of mainland China.” He outlined a two-pronged policy toward China, coupling the traditional goal of containment with a new emphasis on expanding “the possibilities for unofficial contacts between Communist China and ourselves—contacts which may gradually assist in altering Peiping’s picture of the United States.” As part of the latter strategy, Rusk advocated steps “to reassure Peiping that the United States does not intend to attack mainland China,” continued talks in Warsaw, and a dialogue with Chinese officials on matters concerning disarmament and non-proliferation. Looking toward the future, he speculated that a younger generation of leaders would draw the appropriate lessons from Mao’s failed foreign policies and adopt a more pragmatic approach to the world. Rusk argued that the United States would “welcome an era of good relations” with a responsible China.¹¹² This implicit courting of a less doctrinaire ruling circle broadly resembled Roger Hilsman’s landmark address of December 1963, which the Johnson administration had neither repudiated nor embraced. McNamara elaborated on this theme in a speech in May, 1966, calling for “practical alternatives” to the current relationship with the PRC and the adoption of concrete measures to reduce “the danger of potentially catastrophic misunderstandings” between the two countries. He had in mind “properly balanced trade relations, diplomatic contacts, and in some cases . . . exchanges of military observers.”¹¹³ In September, the State Department reversed its previous policy and authorized diplomatic officers abroad to “establish informal social contacts with the Chinese Communists when this can be done without publicity . . . [or] conveying the public impression of a change in the US policy of non-recognition of Communist China.” The hope was that increased interaction would enable the United States to gauge Chinese attitudes better and to provide a forum for countering “the ‘devil image’ of the United States that Peking inculcates in all its cadres.”¹¹⁴

The strategic logic of this tentative bridge-building was elucidated in the administration’s State-Defense Long Range Study on China, completed in June. The report examined three options for managing Chinese power: disengagement, showdown, and containment. The drawbacks inherent in the first

112. Statement by Secretary Rusk, “United States Policy toward Communist China,” *DSB*, 2 May 1966, pp. 686–695.

113. Robert McNamara, “Security in the Contemporary World,” *DSB*, 6 June 1966, pp. 880–881. Johnson’s resentment over McNamara’s 18 May address in Montreal stemmed primarily from the sense that he was being upstaged by his Defense Secretary’s peace posturing. The passage concerning China was in fact consistent with the administration’s rhetoric at this time. For further discussion, see Shapley, *Promise and Power*, pp. 383–384; and Gardner, *Pay Any Price*, p. 305.

114. Administrative History of the Department of State, in LBJL, Box 3, ch. 7, sec. C, pp. 49–50.

two choices were thought to outweigh any benefits. A policy of disengagement from the Pacific would effectively “ensure domination of much of Asia by a single hostile power,” and the pursuit of a showdown with the PRC would “lead to a war which would impose on us uncertain, but probably large, costs in blood, treasure and prestige for highly uncertain gains.”¹¹⁵ It therefore followed that American objectives in Southeast Asia would best be secured by maintaining a sizeable military presence in the region to check the spread of Chinese influence and by strengthening non-Communist Asia so that it could successfully rebuff probes from the mainland. The fight to preserve an independent government in Saigon was seen as consistent with both of these ends. Over time, the authors posited, Mao’s successors would discover that there was an unbridgeable gap between Chinese aspirations and capabilities. Greater awareness of this dynamic would engender “a cautious and conservative approach to problems of foreign policy.”¹¹⁶

Yet the study also advanced the notion that the administration could seek to facilitate this transition and “induce moderation of Peking’s current expansionist policies.” The United States could influence the direction of Chinese foreign policy by encouraging present and future leaders to reappraise U.S. intentions and, in the long term, by enhancing the PRC’s stake in a constructive relationship. This strategy called for confidence-building gestures, such as declarations of Washington’s interest in peace and the avoidance of any actions that would unnecessarily irritate or harass the mainland, and more substantial alterations in policy, such as the gradual loosening of the travel ban and the offer of “a general step-by-step relaxation of our economic controls in the context of reciprocal Chinese moves toward improved relations.” The report claimed that once Beijing was engaged in commerce with lucrative U.S. markets, the Chinese would be “less free to act in ways which might threaten to cut off that source of scarce foreign exchange” and would therefore develop “a practical interest in developing and maintaining a measure of détente.”¹¹⁷ To be sure, the report did not advocate immediate implementation of many of these latter initiatives; China’s militant conduct precluded such a dramatic shift in policy.¹¹⁸ By conditioning significant policy reform on an improvement in China’s behavior, the Long Range Study struck a cautionary note and departed from the China “doves” who favored quicker movement on these

115. “Communist China—Long Range Study,” pp. 1–2.

116. *Ibid.*, pp. 225–226.

117. *Ibid.*, pp. 216–218.

118. *Ibid.*, Annex 4, p. 1. This annex is titled Non-Military Means of Influencing the Chinese Communists.”

items. Nevertheless, interdepartmental endorsement of the broad outlines of a more conciliatory agenda signified an important turn in the administration's debate about China.

The Political Context

The second major factor accounting for the emergence of a more flexible policy toward China was another outgrowth of the Vietnam War—namely, the growing public pressure at home. Agitation from some quarters in Congress and among elite opinion shapers in the media and the academic community played a significant role in the adoption of the December 1965 travel package. Samplings of public attitudes in 1964 and 1965 hinted at a greater tolerance for broadening contacts with the PRC and a vague willingness to acquiesce in a presidential initiative.¹¹⁹ Until the fall of 1965, however, this latent sentiment had not been effectively mobilized by the proponents of a new approach vis-à-vis China. U.S. policy toward China had not been elevated to a pressing item on the American political agenda. In the absence of any discernible political advantage in moving forward, Johnson was averse to undertaking any bold gestures.

By 1966, however, popular views of Sino-American relations were intertwined with Vietnam. Consequently, Johnson's eagerness to sustain backing for the war effort all but demanded that he demonstrate an interest in forging constructive ties to the mainland. One of the administration's pollsters concluded in December 1965 that the American people supported the measured use of military force in Vietnam as a prerequisite for obtaining a position of strength from which to negotiate. A clear majority opposed more provocative actions, such as extending the ground war to the North or bombing the PRC. Blunting the public's mounting frustration and impatience with the protracted hostilities required "a series of moves—preferably dramatic—to assure them that we are active in the pursuit of peace."¹²⁰ Even as Johnson abandoned the bombing pause (his most "dramatic" peace offering to date) at the end of January, he stressed to his aides the political necessity of "keeping the peace emphasis on."¹²¹ That this peace emphasis should incorporate China was borne out by popular anxiety over the prospect of an enlarged war. A

119. Rosemary Foot, "Redefinitions: The Domestic Context of America's China Policy in the 1960s," in Ross and Changbin, eds., *Re-examining the Cold War*, pp. 277–278.

120. Hayes Redmon to Bill Moyers, 27 December 1965, in LBJL, Office Files of Bill Moyers, Box 11, Memos to the President.

121. Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, p. 351.

poll in March revealed a 46 to 27 percent plurality anticipating Chinese intervention in Vietnam.¹²² Thus the constant reiteration of the administration's limited war aims served to relieve the fears of both Beijing and the U.S. population.

In March, U.S. policy toward China was subjected to the most intense public scrutiny in well over a decade. J. William Fulbright, the Democratic chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was dismayed by the failure of Johnson's "peace offensive" and alarmed by what he characterized as a drift toward a Sino-American confrontation. Fulbright presided over three weeks of hearings devoted to China in a bid to promote enhanced understanding of the PRC.¹²³ Among the prominent Sinologists invited to testify were A. Doak Barnett, John K. Fairbank, and Donald Zagoria. Although most of the witnesses carefully voiced support for the Vietnam War and highlighted Beijing's unremittingly belligerent behavior in their statements, they questioned the wisdom of Washington's determination to quarantine the PRC. Barnett in particular popularized a strategy of "containment but not isolation," which would "aim on the one hand at checking military or subversive threats and pressures emanating from Peking but at the same time would aim at maximum contacts with and maximum involvement of the Chinese Communists in the international community." Along these lines, he advocated removing the embargo on all non-strategic trade and a "two Chinas" solution to Chinese representation in the UN. Although he did not anticipate reciprocal action from Beijing, he believed a new policy toward China would reap long-term rewards in pacifying the PRC's worldview.¹²⁴ These ideas were subsequently endorsed in a declaration signed by 198 academic experts.¹²⁵ Fulbright's China hearings marked something of a watershed. The highly publicized forum effectively legitimized the airing of views that would have been considered heresy in the Red-baiting climate of the 1950s. Moreover, as James Thomson recollected, the hearings emboldened those, both inside and outside the government, who wanted to change U.S. policy toward China.¹²⁶

122. Leonard A. Kusnitz, *Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: America's China Policy, 1949–1979* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 114.

123. Randall Bennett Woods, *Fulbright: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 412–413; William C. Berman, *William Fulbright and the Vietnam War: The Dissent of a Political Realist* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1988), pp. 59–60; and "Fulbright Warns of U.S.–China War as Growing Peril," *New York Times*, 7 March 1966, p. A1.

124. U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *China, Vietnam, and the United States: Hearings*, 88th Cong., 2nd Sess., March 1966, pp. 16–17. For the administration's summary of the hearings, see David Dean to W. Bundy, 4 April 1966, NA, RG 59, Office of the Country Director for the Republic of China, 1963–1966, Lot 69D28, Box 1.

125. "Experts on China Urge U.S. to Seek a Peking Accord," *New York Times*, 21 March 1966, p. A1.

126. James C. Thomson, interview, 18 February 2002.

Polling results throughout the spring and summer revealed a growing public willingness to expand relations with the PRC. In a Harris survey taken in June, 57 percent of the respondents favored recognizing Beijing, and 55 percent supported the mainland's admission to the UN if this would foster peace in the Pacific.¹²⁷

The spotlight cast on policy toward China provoked somewhat divergent responses within the president's entourage. Rusk, Johnson's most influential adviser on Asian affairs, remained deeply concerned about China's obstructionist and bellicose role in Vietnam and was hesitant to alter established strategy toward the mainland for the sake of mollifying public opinion. Just after the beginning of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings, Rusk confided to Vice President Hubert Humphrey that he was "reluctant to see the Administration involved in this China business."¹²⁸ The secretary of state displayed little enthusiasm for revisiting the matter of Chinese representation in the UN, arguing that "with the Southeast Asian situation as it is, it remains very difficult for us to see Peiping seated in the United Nations."¹²⁹ By contrast, senior White House officials counseled Johnson to address some of the pointed questions raised by the China hearings. When an apparently freelancing Humphrey expressed his approval of Barnett's proposal during a nationally televised appearance, Robert Komer, who was serving as McGeorge Bundy's interim replacement, advised Johnson not to disavow the remarks and instead to let them stand as a trial balloon. "To withdraw from what was rather grossly overplayed by the press would only start another debate with our VN [Vietnam] critics," he reasoned.¹³⁰ Komer posited that demonstrating flexibility in relations with Beijing would disarm domestic and foreign critics of U.S. policy and would go some way toward recapturing segments of the Democratic party that were disenchanted with the involvement in Vietnam.¹³¹

Arguably the most influential voice in this internal debate belonged to

127. "57% Would Recognize Mao while Keeping Chiang Ties," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 27 June 1966, in LBJL, Office Files of Fred Panzer, Box 179, China.

128. Telcon, Rusk-Hubert Humphrey, 10 March 1966, NA, RG 59, Records of Secretary of State Dean Rusk: Transcripts of Telephone Calls, Lot 72D192, Box 55.

129. Memorandum of Conversation, Rusk-Ambassador Ryuji Takeuchi, 13 April 1966, NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-66, Box 3330, UN 6 CHICOM.

130. Komer to LBJ, 14 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 6 (2 of 2), Vol. 21 (2 of 3). Of twenty-two newspapers that commented editorially on the vice president's remarks, twenty endorsed them. Thomson to Komer, 22 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Robert W. Komer, Box 2, Memos to the President: March-June 1966. Humphrey's comments were reported in "Humphrey Hints U.S. Is Altering Policy on China," *New York Times*, 14 March 1966, p. A1.

131. Komer to LBJ, 2 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Robert W. Komer, Box 1, Chrono: 1-20 March 1966; Komer to LBJ, 27 March 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Robert W. Komer, Box 1, Chrono: 21-31 March 1966.

Johnson's chief political lieutenant, Press Secretary Bill Moyers, whose contribution to foreign policy deliberations reached its peak in 1966.¹³² The avid interest he took in policy toward China reflected the extent to which this issue had become politicized and enmeshed in the larger goal of mobilizing domestic support for the war in Vietnam. More important, Moyers's support of a change of policy exposed Johnson to a view that hitherto had been shunned by his inner circle. Moyers was convinced of the urgency of presenting the peaceful side of America's face in Asia for U.S. domestic consumption. At the end of February, Moyers notified Johnson that the latter's approval rating for his handling of the war had fallen from 63 percent to 49 percent in the aftermath of that month's televised Senate hearings on Vietnam.¹³³ Moyers saw China as one of the "issues that history may judge absolutely critical to the Johnson Administration. How we increased the 'thaw' toward China is just that."¹³⁴ The young aide enthusiastically forwarded polling data to the president supporting his claims and pushed for an infusion of expertise at the State Department to assist in the formulation of a new strategy toward China.¹³⁵

Johnson was troubled by the prospect of Chinese intervention in Vietnam and was acutely sensitive to scrutiny of his foreign policy leadership. He sensed a compelling political need to respond to the shift in popular moods and therefore was receptive to Moyer's arguments. The result throughout the spring and summer was an unprecedented degree of personal engagement with U.S. policy toward China. In April, Walt Rostow, the president's new national security adviser, informed Rusk of Johnson's interest in "imaginative ways of handling the China problem, which would get us off the defensive, and deal with the Chirep [China representation] issue in the next General Assembly. . . . [T]he President emphasized he wants fresh study groups, including the best people in the country in and out of the government."¹³⁶ The idea for a "Chinese Tommy Thompson"—that is, a senior expert on China who would enjoy the president's confidence as Llewellyn ("Tommy") Thompson did on matters pertaining to the Soviet Union—received "highest level bless-

132. John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), p. 154. For brief references to Moyers's central role in policy toward China during 1966, see Thomson, "On the Making of U.S. China Policy," p. 239; and Kusnitz, *Public Opinion*, p. 115.

133. Woods, *Fulbright*, p. 410.

134. Moyers to Rostow, 17 June 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Name File, Box 7, Moyers memos.

135. Moyers to LBJ, 18 January 1966, in LBJL, White House Central Files, Countries, Box 21, CO 50 China.

136. Rostow to Rusk, 23 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Walt W. Rostow, Box 15, Non-Vietnam: April–July 1966.

ing” at the White House in the spring.¹³⁷ When Senator Edward Kennedy called for the establishment of a commission of distinguished academics to make recommendations for fresh approaches to Beijing, Johnson sought to nip this implicit criticism in the bud. Through Moyers, the president urged Rusk to speak to journalists about “the Kennedy suggestion re reviewing China policy and point out we have been doing this for a long time. . . . [T]here was [a] constant review of our relations with China; [the] President thought we should be pretty tough on this at the briefing.”¹³⁸ For a diplomatic session in Warsaw scheduled for 25 May, Johnson had a “personal interest and desire to clear the instructions,” which were to place special emphasis on “our peaceful intentions toward Communist China.”¹³⁹

This same fusion of strategic and domestic factors yielded the most significant bridge-building initiative of the Johnson presidency, the president’s 12 July address to the American Alumni Council. As early as March, Johnson was seriously considering a proposal to include POL storage facilities in Hanoi and Haiphong as targets in the bombing of the North, in the hope that this would cripple the DRV’s capacity to supply the insurgency in South Vietnam.¹⁴⁰ An escalation of the air war was thought to be feasible in part because of a cautiously optimistic reading of the PRC’s intentions in Vietnam. As one State Department specialist on China observed in June,

there had been a significant shift in Chicom attitudes since February, which . . . [was] attributed to their belief that we would resume bombing after the pause with a real “bang.” When we had not done so . . . the Chicoms had drawn the correct conclusion that we were not moving to wipe out North Vietnam, or threaten China, and their “war warning” propaganda had since become considerably less strident than before.¹⁴¹

At an NSC meeting on 17 June, both Rusk and CIA Director William Raborn dismissed the possibility of a Chinese military reply to an expansion of Rolling Thunder. Only Arthur Goldberg, the ambassador to the United Nations, dissented from this assessment. Johnson did not respond directly to this point, but he underscored his determination to secure his military objec-

137. Thomson to Jorden, 18 May 1966, in NA, RG 59, Records of Secretary of State Dean Rusk: Transcripts of Telephone Calls, Lot 72D192, Box 56.

138. Telcon, Rusk-Moyers, 3 May 1966, NA, RG 59, Records of Secretary of State Dean Rusk: Transcripts of Telephone Calls, Lot 72D192, Box 56.

139. W. Bundy to Rusk, 20 May 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 306.

140. Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power*, p. 95.

141. Paul Kreisberg, quoted in Memorandum for the Record, 22 June 1966, NA, RG 59, Subject Files of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 1961–74, Lot 85D240, Box 3, p. 7.

tives “with minimum loss and minimum danger of escalating the war.”¹⁴² It was within the context of these deliberations over increased bombing that the Johnson administration saw some value in signaling U.S. restraint as a hedge against Chinese intervention. When Donald Zagoria sent a proposal to the White House in April for a presidential speech on China, the State Department welcomed the idea as an ideal “opportunity for the United States to demonstrate that its aims toward Peking are not hostile and belligerent.”¹⁴³ Similarly, Rostow thought it advisable that the bombing of petroleum and lubrication sites be accompanied by a “communication to the Chinese Communists indicating our intentions remain limited.”¹⁴⁴

As expected, China’s reaction to the new bombing, which began on 29 June, was relatively mild. Although Beijing repeatedly denounced the action as an act of aggression against the mainland and asserted China’s readiness to undertake any sacrifice in providing aid to the DRV, U.S. analysts were impressed by the “controlled and hedged nature” of these remarks and regarded them more as an attempt to deter further American encroachment than as a commitment to enter the war.¹⁴⁵ A Special National Intelligence Estimate concluded in early August that the recent air strikes had not altered the PRC’s reluctance to join the fighting. Overt involvement in the war would be triggered only by a U.S. invasion of North Vietnam or the imminent collapse of that regime. Otherwise, China’s leaders would limit their role to one of diplomatic and materiel support for their ally and the provision of troops for logistical and engineering functions.¹⁴⁶

Thus Johnson’s address in July 1966, coming at a time when fears of Chinese intervention had somewhat abated, cannot be explained by strategic con-

142. Summary Notes of 559th NSC Meeting, 17 June 1966, in LBJL, NSF, NSCM, Box 2, Vol. 3, tab 41.

143. Benjamin Read to Rostow, n.d., in NA, RG 59, Subject Files of the Office of Asian Communist Affairs, 1961–73, Lot 71D423, Box 1. For Zagoria’s proposal, see Valenti to Moyers, 5 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China memos, Vol. 6.

144. Rostow to LBJ, 10 May 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 31 (2 of 2), Vietnam memos (A), Vol. 52 (1 of 2). One day after the intensification of Rolling Thunder, Johnson declared, “There is nothing we want in Communist China. There is nothing the American people want from Communist China.” See “Two Threats to Peace,” 30 June 1966, in *PPP:LBJ*, 1966, Vol. 1, p. 683.

145. Hughes to Rusk, 22 July 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China memos, Vol. 6 (1 of 2); Hong Kong to Department of State, Telegram No. 43, 4 July 1966, in NA, RG 59, Records of Negotiations about Vietnam, 1965–69, Lot 69D277, Box 6, Communist Positions and Initiatives: Communist China 1966; and Hong Kong to Department of State, Telegram No. 200, 12 July 1966, in NA, RG 59, Records of Negotiations about Vietnam, 1965–69, Lot 69D277, Box 6, Communist Positions and Initiatives: Communist China 1966.

146. “Current Chinese Communist Intentions in the Vietnam Situation,” SNIE 13–66, 4 August 1966, in NA, RG 59, Policy Planning Council: Subject and Country Files, 1965–1969, Lot 72D139, Box 309, Vietnam 1966.

siderations alone. Indeed, the idea for a speech on Asian policy took shape as the president's aides were searching for ways to counter popular restlessness over the war and to bolster Johnson's sagging political standing before the midterm congressional elections in the fall. By that summer, Americans were roughly evenly split between those favoring withdrawal from Vietnam and those who wanted to maintain the commitment.¹⁴⁷ The protracted fighting, more specifically Johnson's inability to put forward a timetable for its completion or to articulate a statesmanlike vision of peace, pleased neither of these groups and was seen by the White House as a major cause for concern.¹⁴⁸ Even if new bombing might satisfy those who wanted to end the war by force, it raised anew the problem of how to placate the advocates of negotiations. As Rostow admitted to Johnson, "Bombing POL will look like an Administration move to the hard side—giving in to the JCS, etc. We need something new on the dove side to balance our account."¹⁴⁹ In these circumstances, extending the hand of friendship to America's greatest Asian adversary would confirm that Johnson was looking beyond the war and would offer dramatic proof of his interest in peace, even as he expanded Rolling Thunder. This notion of using an overture to China as a manifestation of peaceful intent was perhaps best captured in a memorandum from Ambassador-at-Large Averell Harriman to a sympathetic Moyers in June. The document forcefully stated that it was

difficult to carry the worldwide unpopularity and misunderstanding of Vietnam along with an unpopular China policy inherited primarily from [John Foster] Dulles. I feel the President could well gain in most parts of the world by a spectacular change in attitude toward Red China. It would then . . . be easier to gain better understanding of Vietnam.¹⁵⁰

Johnson's speech on policy toward Asia, codrafted by Moyers and Thomson,¹⁵¹ touched on the importance of events in the region—especially the campaign to defend Saigon against Communist aggression—for U.S. security. In the most intriguing passage, the president affirmed that peace and stability in the Pacific ultimately rested on "reconciliation between nations that now call themselves enemies." As a counterpoint to the bloodshed in

147. Herring, *LBJ and Vietnam*, p. 138; and Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, pp. 364–365.

148. Redmon to Moyers, 9 June 1966, in LBJL, Office Files of Bill Moyers, Box 12, BDM memos June–July 11, 1966.

149. Rostow to LBJ, 10 May 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Vietnam Country File, Box 31 (2 of 2).

150. Averell Harriman to Moyers, 3 June 1966, in Library of Congress, Papers of W. Averell Harriman, Box 488, Moyers, Bill D.

151. Thomson's account of the 12 July speech is provided in Thomson, "On the Making of U.S. China Policy," pp. 241–242.

Vietnam, Johnson declared his willingness to use diplomatic means in pursuit of this long-term objective. To move the PRC “toward understanding of the outside world and . . . policies of peaceful cooperation,” he told his audience that “the greatest force for opening closed minds and closed societies is the free flow of ideas and people and goods.”¹⁵² This theme had been propounded in one form or another by senior officials throughout the spring. Moreover, the deliberately vague nature of the president’s remarks comported with the prudence of a consummate politician who was willing to identify himself with an agreeable principle without committing his prestige to specific measures that potentially would be controversial. The true significance of the speech was that it represented the first presidential articulation of the rationale for a new policy toward China. As such, it contributed in no small part to laying the rhetorical foundation and justification for redefining America’s relationship with the mainland.

When Johnson toured Asia in October and took part in the Manila Conference, he publicly reiterated his hope for a new era in relations with the PRC.¹⁵³ Although he was anxious to secure the backing of regional allies for the war, he made a conscious effort to ensure that the meeting in Manila did not assume anti-Chinese overtones or exacerbate tensions. William Bundy insisted to the president’s speechwriters that any “references to aggression [in Vietnam] should focus on North Vietnam, with Communist China being referred to only in a supporting role and no implication that the [Manila] group is a new alliance to combat the over-all menace of Communist Chinese aggression.”¹⁵⁴ To avoid expanding the war, the administration needed to project restraint to Beijing.

The Limits of Bridge-Building

Even though Vietnam defined the imperative of bridge-building, it also imposed clear limits on the process. Even as domestic and strategic pressures arising from the war compelled the Johnson administration to adjust tactics

152. Remarks to the American Alumni Council: United States Asian Policy, 12 July 1966, in *PPP:LBj*, 1966, Vol. 2, pp. 721–722.

153. For references to China during LBJ’s tour of Asia, see Manila Summit Conference Documents, 25 October 1966, in *PPP:LBj*, 1966, Vol. 2, p. 1259; Remarks upon Arrival at Bangkok, 28 October 1966, in *PPP:LBj*, 1966, Vol. 2, p. 1274; and Remarks at the State Dinner in Parliament House, Kuala Lumpur, 30 October 1966, in *PPP:LBj*, 1966, Vol. 2, pp. 1282–1283.

154. W. Bundy to Moyers, John Roche, Harry McPherson, and Douglass Cater, 6 October 1966, in LBJL, NSF, National Security Council History, Box 46, Vol. 4: Backup Material Not Referenced in Narrative [I], p. 2.

toward China, the preoccupation with U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia and the PRC's hostile intentions stifled more substantive policy innovation. Moreover, the administration was concerned that any hint of accommodation with Beijing would alarm steadfast Asian allies and undermine their will to withstand Chinese pressure. In the spring of 1966, the U.S. embassies in Taipei and Seoul reported that the Fulbright hearings and U.S. media speculation about a change in policy toward China had cast doubt on the administration's devotion to containing Communist expansion.¹⁵⁵ Senior U.S. officials catered to allies' sensitivities by firmly denying the grounds for these charges.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, the State-Defense Long Range Study cautioned that any conciliatory moves toward the mainland had to be "applied with proper attention to timing, in order to avoid causing our Communist adversaries to believe that their expansionist policies are succeeding and our Asian friends to fear that we are wavering in our resistance to these policies."¹⁵⁷

One casualty of this logic was a proposal Bundy sent to Rusk in May for a Sino-American meeting at the ministerial level. Although Bundy did not believe that an affirmative response from Beijing was likely, he argued, perhaps with plans for the bombing of POL sites in mind, that some approach was "essential . . . to avoid a wider war growing out of tensions or miscalculations in the Far East."¹⁵⁸ Had his idea been approved, it would have accorded the PRC unprecedented diplomatic status and prestige by departing from the established practice of confining official dialogue to the ambassadors' talks in Warsaw. Policymakers, however, were wary of an ambitious policy initiative that, in their eyes, threatened to derail larger objectives in Vietnam. Within a week, Bundy withdrew the recommendation, arguing that "in the existing political circumstances in South Vietnam such a message at the present time would only be construed as a sign of weakness by Peiping, and would not have the positive effect we had envisaged."¹⁵⁹

The most glaring example of resistance to a change of policy concerned the UN representation. Johnson only briefly flirted with a "two Chinas" solution in the spring and summer of 1966. UN Ambassador Arthur Goldberg

155. Taipei to Department of State, Telegram No. 1086, 6 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China cables, Vol. 6 (2 of 2); and Seoul to Department of State, Telegram No. 1092, 30 March 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-66, Box 1897, POL ASIA.

156. Department of State to Seoul, Telegram No. 1040, 22 April 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-66, Box 1897, POL ASIA; and Department of State to Taipei, Telegram No. 1048, 14 April 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-66, Box 2018, POL CHICOM-US.

157. "Communist China—Long Range Study," p. 219.

158. W. Bundy to Rusk, 13 May 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. XXX, p. 299.

159. W. Bundy to Rusk, 20 May 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. XXX, p. 307.

was foremost among those calling for an overhaul of tactics at the UN. When a vote on the dreaded Albanian resolution to expel the Nationalists and seat the PRC in their place ended in a 47–47 tie (with 20 abstentions) in the General Assembly in November 1965, Goldberg saw this as a disquieting harbinger of things to come. He warned the president that the next vote could well result in Taipei's ejection unless the administration shifted its discredited focus on excluding Beijing from the world body to one of guaranteeing Taiwan's inclusion.¹⁶⁰ This pessimism was widely shared. In February, both Bundy and Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs Joseph Sisco averred that there was little hope of sustaining majority support in the General Assembly for the notion that the status of China was an "important question" requiring two-thirds approval. They suggested to Rusk that Bundy use an impending visit to Taipei to convey this view and float the option of "some arrangement that would reaffirm Taipei's seat but that would permit—by the initiative of others—some form of proposal involving an offer of membership for Peiping as well."¹⁶¹ The rationale for a "two Chinas" strategy, then, was strictly negative in that it was seen as the only means of averting a diplomatic debacle and a diminution of Taiwan's status as a bulwark of anti-Communism. A decidedly skeptical Rusk balked, reasoning that it was not the appropriate time "to take this issue up with the President," and he limited Bundy's mandate to merely ascertaining the opinions of his Taiwanese hosts on the voting prospects at the UN.¹⁶²

This bureaucratic ferment coincided with Johnson's own heightened interest in new approaches toward the PRC. Komer emphasized to the president that a new policy at the UN could advance this objective. A switch to "two Chinas," Komer wrote, would "show that 'LBJ is not a stick-in-the-mud' . . . all the hints about new flexibility in our China policy have netted out a big plus so far."¹⁶³ When Bundy and Goldberg presented their views at a White House meeting, Bundy recollected that Johnson was intrigued and "didn't fight the problem for a minute."¹⁶⁴ At the president's invitation, the UN ambassador set down his thoughts on paper. Once again Goldberg underscored the dismal prospects for maintaining Taiwan's exclusive hold on the China seat, pointing to the enthusiasm of allies such as Japan and Canada for admit-

160. Arthur Goldberg to LBJ, 20 November 1965, in LBJL, NSF, Agency File, Box 71, Goldberg correspondence (2 of 2).

161. William Bundy and Joseph Sisco to Rusk, 16 February 1966, in NA, RG 59, Office of the Country Director for the Republic of China, 1963–1966, Lot 69D28, Box 1.

162. Samuel Berger to W. Bundy, 23 February 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 261.

163. Komer to LBJ, 19 April 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 285.

164. William Bundy Oral History, in LBJL, Tape 5, pp. 22–23.

ting the mainland. To secure Taiwan's membership and to place the burden on Beijing for its isolation, he urged that the United States recognize both the PRC and Taiwan as "Successor States" with equal entitlement to representation in the UN.¹⁶⁵

Goldberg's suggestion provoked familiar misgivings. A report prepared by the Far East bureau of the State Department contended that a change in policy would "encourage the ChiComs, raise Hanoi's morale, downgrade US prestige and depress Asian and other friendly states. While the ChiComs are aiding and abetting the aggression in Viet-Nam, it would be unthinkable for us to support or "not oppose" or seek to initiate a proposal to give the ChiComs UN representation."¹⁶⁶ Walt Rostow echoed these concerns, alerting Johnson to the potential side effects of such a move on the alliance with Taiwan and the war in Vietnam.¹⁶⁷ Evidently struck by the thrust of Goldberg's analysis, Johnson asked Rusk to review the administration's options at the UN. The result was a 14 May memorandum in which the secretary of state posited that reliance on previous tactics posed "an unacceptable risk of defeat and expenditure of U.S. influence." As an alternative to the Albanian resolution, a "two Chinas" approach offered the best possibility of preserving Taiwan's presence in the UN. Moreover, Beijing's anticipated rejection of such a compromise would only highlight its own belligerence and deflect growing allied criticism of the U.S. position. To minimize any fallout among friendly Asian countries, the United States could ask another government, perhaps the Canadian, to take the lead in guiding a resolution through the General Assembly. Before taking this step, however, Rusk insisted that Taipei had to be convinced of the gravity of the situation and encouraged to "stand steady, rather than withdraw from the UN" as the administration modified its tactics.¹⁶⁸

The plan foundered in part on the rocks of Chiang Kai-shek's intransigence. At a meeting with Ambassador Walter McConaughy in early July, the Taiwanese leader expressed confidence that Washington could keep its allies in line on a new vote and warned that passage of a "two Chinas" resolution would "cause disillusionment in Taiwan . . . [and] would also be a betrayal of the majority of the people in mainland China who look to [the] GRC as a symbol of hope and steadfastness." Under such circumstances, he would have

165. Goldberg to LBJ, 28 April 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964-66, Box 3330, UN 6 CHICOM.

166. Ruth Bacon to W. Bundy, 4 May 1966, in NA, RG 59, Subject Files of the Office of Asian Communist Affairs, 1961-73, Lot 72D41, Box 2.

167. Rostow to LBJ, 30 April 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 7, Vol. I (1 of 3).

168. Rusk to LBJ, 14 May 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964-1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 301-303.

no other choice but to walk out of the UN.¹⁶⁹ Chiang reiterated this warning when Rusk visited Taipei only days later. The Taiwanese leader pressed Rusk for a public statement reaffirming continued U.S. support for the “important question” formula, but Rusk demurred, explaining that no commitment to any specific tactic could be made “without a better idea of the outcome.”¹⁷⁰ Although Rusk was striving to keep Johnson’s options open, he was dismayed by Chiang’s threats and by the lukewarm reactions of other allies in the region to a possible change in U.S. policy at the UN. He relayed his impressions of the trip to the Canadian foreign minister, Paul Martin, noting that the “Asian countries who face the militancy of Communist China would feel great pain if she were admitted” to the UN and wondered whether such an initiative should be taken “merely to please sentiment in Canada and European countries.”¹⁷¹

Chaotic events on the mainland at the outset of the Cultural Revolution added an unforeseen element to the administration’s deliberations during the summer. Reports of Red Guard assaults on Chinese Communist Party authorities throughout the country were widely perceived as an orchestrated purge of a party that did not share Mao’s zeal for continuous revolution.¹⁷² In August, Rostow was notified by Alfred Jenkins, a China expert on the NSC staff, that enthusiasm for a “two Chinas” motion had waned among midlevel State Department officials “at the time when the hard liners are riding high in Peking.”¹⁷³ The uncertain fate of what appeared to be an intraparty dispute reinforced the inherent caution of U.S. decision-makers. Rusk, for one, believed it would be “tragic if the militant factions felt that their militancy was rewarded by an embrace in the form of an invitation to the UN, to the detriment of the factions opposing the hard militancy of Peking.”¹⁷⁴

Political considerations, never far from Johnson’s mind, served as another

169. Telegram, Taipei to Department of State, 1 July 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 346.

170. Administrative History of the Department of State, in LBJL, Box 4, ch. 10 (2 of 2), pp. 23–24.

171. Telegram, Department of State to Ottawa, 25 July 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 359.

172. Rostow to LBJ, 28 July 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 239, China memos, Vol. 6; Text of Cable from Hong Kong (1988), 19 September 1966 (enclosure), in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China memos, Vol. 7; and Office of National Estimates, Special Memorandum 14–66, 23 September 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China memos, Vol. 7. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a full discussion of how the Johnson administration interpreted the Cultural Revolution. For preliminary treatments of this topic, see Garson, “Johnson and the China Enigma;” and Kaufman, *Confronting Communism*, ch. 8.

173. Alfred Jenkins to Rostow, 27 August 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Alfred Jenkins, Box 1, CHICOM—General.

174. Memorandum of Conversation, Rusk-President Senghor, 28 September 1966, in NA, RG 59, Central Files, 1964–66, Box 3331, UN 6 CHICOM.

inhibiting influence. With the midterm elections on the horizon, Johnson saw potential hazards in moving forward on an issue that had for long stirred emotions at home. As he explained to Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson in August 1966, “American public opinion had moderated somewhat as a result of the Fulbright hearings. . . . He thought, however, that opinion could quickly swing back, although he was not sure that would be good if one believes the UN should include those who disagree with one’s position.”¹⁷⁵

All of these factors came into play when the president met with his top aides to discuss UN affairs on 13 September.¹⁷⁶ No record of this session was kept, but U.S. embassies around the world were informed three days later that there would be no change in U.S. policy for the upcoming vote on Chinese representation and that efforts would be concentrated on defeating the Albanian resolution and affirming the “important question” motion. Among the reasons given for this decision were the “militancy and unyielding mood” of the ascendant Maoist faction and the “hardening of attitude toward Communist China among those Asian governments which are most directly exposed to [the] dangers of activity advocated and supported by [the] ChiComs as in Vietnam.”¹⁷⁷

Washington’s hostile reaction to a Canadian initiative in early November underscored U.S. determination to preserve the status quo. Ottawa’s plan called for the introduction of a one-China, one-Taiwan motion specifically allotting China’s seat on the Security Council to the PRC. Alluding to political pressures at home for a fair settlement of the Chinese representation problem, the Canadian ambassador explained that his government could no longer justify its opposition to the Albanian resolution without offering its own constructive proposal.¹⁷⁸ Rusk was taken aback. A Canadian abstention on the Albanian formula, he told Johnson, would trigger a bandwagon effect, encouraging other allies to do the same and thus guaranteeing majority approval of the resolution for the first time. Although the administration could fall back on the “important question” procedure to block passage of the measure, a dangerous precedent would be set. The challenge, then, was to persuade Ottawa to sponsor a resolution that would be “a less radical departure from past tactics” and ultimately “more palatable to our close Asian allies.” Rusk

175. Memorandum of Conversation, 21 August 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 373.

176. *Ibid.*, p. 387 n. 2.

177. Circular Telegram from the Department of State to Certain Posts, 16 September 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 391.

178. Memorandum of Conversation, 3 November 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, pp. 412–414. For the Canadian perspective, see St. Amour, “Sino-Canadian Relations,” in Evans and Frolic, eds., *Reluctant Adversaries*, pp. 115–121.

proposed a resolution calling for the formation of a study committee that would examine the issue and report its findings to the UN General Assembly.¹⁷⁹ He fully understood that this amounted to nothing more than a holding action and that the committee could very well recommend a variant of “two Chinas.” At the very least, however, tying up Chinese representation in deliberations could buy the United States some time and perhaps “complicate” the issue for a year or two.¹⁸⁰

With Johnson’s approval, Rusk sent an uncharacteristically blunt letter to Pearson outlining U.S. objections to the Canadian idea. An offer of membership to Beijing now, Rusk stated, would effectively embolden the radical Maoist forces and thereby undermine any prospects for peace in Vietnam. Accordingly, the administration would “exert every ounce of our influence to defeat” the Canadian proposal “by the heaviest possible margin.” He stressed to Pearson “the seriousness of such a split between our two nations” and suggested that the Canadians instead throw their weight behind the study committee proposal, which would still represent “clear forward movement on the issue along the line that your government feels under political pressure to obtain.”¹⁸¹ Although Rusk’s threats did not have their desired effect, the United States in the end managed to recruit Italy, Belgium, and Chile as cosponsors of the resolution it favored. Sensing that the one-China, one-Taiwan measure would not pass, the Canadian government abandoned its own project. The 1966 vote came as a relief to the U.S. administration. In a reversal of the embarrassing results from the previous year, the Albanian resolution was soundly defeated (46 for, 57 against, 17 abstentions); the “important question” was reaffirmed (66–48–7); and the study committee proposal was decisively rejected (34–64–25), having fallen victim to competing proposals.¹⁸² Johnson and his aides well understood that the turmoil on the mainland had worked to their advantage, helping to dilute the support that appeared to be gaining momentum for Beijing’s entry into the UN.¹⁸³ The last-minute encouragement of the study committee was foreshadowed by the administration’s decision in September to come up with a proposal that would be an acceptable al-

179. Rusk to LBJ, 5 November 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 30, pp. 418–419.

180. *Ibid.*, p. 418 n. 3. As a State Department cable explained: “Our support for [a] study committee resolution was to prevent support building up for [the] Canadian resolution. Our tactic was designed to cut the ground from under the Canadian resolution, which represented a new danger this year.” Telegram, Department of State to Taipei, 21 November 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 30, p. 444.

181. Telegram, Department of State to Ottawa, 9 November 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. 30, p. 423.

182. St. Amour, “Sino-Canadian Relations,” pp. 120–121.

183. Bacon to W. Bundy, 1 December 1966, in NA, RG 59, Subject Files of Office of Asian Communist Affairs, 1961–73, Lot 72D41, Box 2.

ternative to a “two Chinas” approach. U.S. officials, who were ever more distracted by Vietnam and discouraged by Chinese militancy, wanted to preserve the status quo in policy toward China, but when they feared that change might be inevitable, they sought to channel and circumscribe it. The limits of bridge-building were thus established.

No major initiatives in policy toward China were in fact approved for the remaining two years of Johnson’s presidency, when the mainland was engulfed by the madness of the Cultural Revolution. Bewildered and taken aback by the chaotic and violent political struggle in China, Johnson and his advisers were disinclined to adopt substantive bridge-building measures. Although the administration did not discard the new emphasis on broadening contacts with Beijing, proposals for a further loosening of the travel ban and a relaxation of trade restrictions were put on hold. Alfred Jenkins, who assumed an increasingly influential role in matters concerning the PRC, argued persuasively to his superiors that any fundamental reappraisal of strategy should be deferred “until we can make a much better judgment as to the course of events in China.”¹⁸⁴ Rostow enthusiastically endorsed this view, likening China to “a dragon with a bellyache. . . . They were caught up in a great debate and struggle as to how they should behave with respect to themselves and the rest of the world. They were not in a mood or in a position to talk to us.”¹⁸⁵

Nevertheless, although prospective changes in policy toward China were relegated to the back burner, there were intriguing indicators of long-term thinking. Inherent in the administration’s posture of aloofness toward the Cultural Revolution was a significant degree of sophistication and foresight. Senior officials acknowledged that their capacity to shape events to their liking was severely limited, and they were fearful that any hint of U.S. interference in Chinese politics would unwittingly discredit “moderate” factions that might succeed the Maoist forces.¹⁸⁶ In lieu of any forward movement on the policy front, the Johnson administration upheld the conciliatory rhetoric of 1966.¹⁸⁷ Without getting directly involved in China’s political debate, the administration hoped to influence the situation in subtle ways by signaling that

184. Jenkins to Rostow, 3 February 1967, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China Memos, Vol. 8.

185. Rostow Oral History, Interview 1 in LBJL, pp. 95–96.

186. Rostow to LBJ, 9 November 1966, in LBJL, NSF, Country File, Box 240, China Memos, Vol. 7; Rostow to LBJ, 7 July 1967, in LBJL, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 18 (2 of 2), Vol. 33 (2 of 4); and Jenkins to Rostow, 8 November 1967, in LBJL, NSF, Files of Alfred Jenkins, Box 1, CHICOM-Warsaw Talks.

187. Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, 10 January 1967, in *PPP:LBJ* 1967, Vol. 1, p. 13; and Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, 17 January 1968, in *PPP:LBJ* 1968–69, Vol. 1, p. 26.

an opportunity still existed to improve relations between the two countries. One can plausibly surmise that the tendency of many in Washington to exaggerate the extent of high-level opposition to Mao betrayed not only an inherent distaste for the Chinese leader's radicalism but also an underlying desire to coexist peacefully with a reformed China and to search for signs of common interest.

Conclusion

Although U.S. policy toward China during the Johnson years was essentially a by-product of the Vietnam War, this does not mean that it remained stagnant. The administration's approach to the mainland steadily evolved. As Johnson led the country into war in the summer of 1965, the line of containment and isolation bequeathed by his predecessors was firmly intact. That line reflected the president's sincere belief that Chinese support of North Vietnam was part of a larger strategy of indirect aggression aimed at expelling U.S. influence from Southeast Asia. U.S. relations with China underwent considerable change in the year following the Vietnam decisions of 1965. For some contemporary observers, the destruction of Beijing's "proxy" in Indonesia and the deterioration of its influence in the international Communist movement called into question the urgency of checking the PRC's ambitions in Southeast Asia.¹⁸⁸ U.S. officials were concerned, however, that China's probes, though unsuccessful, confirmed the image of a bellicose, implacable adversary. According to this widely held view, the PRC still posed a politico-psychological threat to its neighbors. In early 1966 Rusk contended that the Chinese leadership's "experience over the past forty years, their deep-seated beliefs, their dispute with the Soviets and their projection of Viet-Nam as a test-case, their vision of the future, and their nationalistic aspirations have combined to convince them that their current policies are right regardless of the consequences."¹⁸⁹

Of far greater importance to the future of U.S. policy toward China was the Johnson administration's realization in 1965 and 1966 that a strategy of containing the spread of Communism in Vietnam entailed the risk of unwittingly setting off a regionwide catastrophe. Although senior U.S. officials were determined to thwart Hanoi's support of the insurgency in South Vietnam

188. On this point, see George Kennan's testimony in Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, *China, Vietnam, and the United States*, p. 196.

189. Rusk to John Gronouski, 5 February 1966, in *FRUS*, 1964–1968, Vol. XXX, p. 254.

through the steady application of U.S. military power, they sought to relieve Beijing's evident anxieties over U.S. intentions. Memories of China's entry into the Korean War were still fresh amid ominous reports of China's preparations for military action in Vietnam. At a minimum, the effort to allay Beijing's concerns required constant assurances that Washington did not intend to destroy the North Vietnamese regime or to attack the PRC. These considerations had largely determined Johnson's cautious prosecution of the war at the outset. In 1966, the need for *political* signaling to China rose in proportion to the gradual escalation of *military* pressure against North Vietnam, first with the end of the bombing pause in January and then with the targeting of POL facilities in June. The political signals came with the relaxation of the travel ban, the promotion of expanded contacts, and a striking change in rhetoric.

The process of tentative bridge-building outlined in this article occurred at a time when Beijing could not be expected to reciprocate. Chinese leaders remained profoundly suspicious of America's role in Southeast Asia. Moreover, any relaxation of attitudes toward the United States would have challenged Mao's political authority and distracted attention from, and undermined the rationale for, a purge of his "revisionist" rivals in the Party. Yet Mao undoubtedly understood that the prosecution of the Cultural Revolution would benefit from a tense atmosphere such as that provided by the simmering war in Vietnam. The domestic transformation also required a sufficiently benign international climate that would enable him to focus his energies on the cherished objective at home. In these circumstances, he sought or at least welcomed assurances of American restraint in Vietnam.¹⁹⁰ Thus, although Washington's peace feelers failed to elicit a constructive response from the Chinese, they did play some role in keeping the war limited.

In addition to shedding new light on Sino-American relations, an examination of this period offers a fresh perspective on Lyndon Johnson's foreign policy leadership. It was no coincidence that the high-water mark of policy innovation in 1966 dovetailed with Johnson's personal engagement with policy toward China, a level of interest that previously had been lacking. Some U.S. officials, such as the authors of the Long Range Study, wanted to adopt a more flexible American stance so that they could eventually push Chinese foreign policy in a more moderate direction. The president's immediate interests were keeping the war limited and selling it to an impatient and confused pub-

190. Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, Vol. 3: *The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961–1966* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 376; and Robinson, "China Confronts the Soviet Union," in MacFarquhar and Fairbanks, eds., *Cambridge History of China*, Vol. 15, pp. 222–227.

lic. Thus, Johnson's domestic and strategic objectives in Vietnam increasingly depended on his ability to evince restraint and openness toward the PRC. He was more eager than some of his advisers were to advance this aim. Johnson's unease with existing policy and his responsiveness to changing domestic and international pressures, as well as his prudence in Vietnam and his ability to empathize with Chinese security concerns, are not captured in most of the historical literature, which has generally portrayed him as an unimaginative Cold Warrior at the mercy of his inner circle and with a strong preference for military force.¹⁹¹ To be sure, when bridge-building efforts clashed with Asian alliances or the military campaign against the DRV, the latter concerns took precedence. The Johnson administration's response to the pressures of war, however, set in motion a thaw that would reach its culmination during the Nixon presidency. Evidently the significance of the shift in U.S. policy was not lost on some Chinese officials. Wang Guoquan, the PRC's ambassador in Warsaw, later recalled with regret that his superiors in Beijing were preoccupied with domestic political maneuvering and did not share his sense of optimism over his encounters with U.S. diplomats in 1966: "We lost a favorable opportunity to give Sino-American relations a timely push. It must be a regrettable thing in the history of diplomacy."¹⁹²

Acknowledgment

Research for this article was funded in part by a grant from the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation. The author wishes to thank Robert Accinelli, Nigel Ashton, Steve Casey, Arne Kislenko, Odd Arne Westad, and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Cold War Studies* for their insightful commentary.

191. For standard criticisms of Johnson, see Bird, *The Color of Truth*, p. 269; Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson's War: America's Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945–1968* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), p. 78; Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 396–398; H. W. Brands, *The Wages of Globalism: Lyndon Johnson and the Limits of American Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 28–29; David Kaiser, "Men and Policies: 1961–69," in Kunz, ed., *The Diplomacy of the Crucial Decade*, p. 12; and Waldo Heinrichs, "Lyndon B. Johnson: Change and Continuity," in Cohen and Tucker, eds., *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World*, p. 26.

192. Quoted in Zhang Baijia and Jia Qingguo, "Steering Wheel, Shock Absorber, and Diplomatic Probe in Confrontation: Sino-American Ambassadorial Talks Seen from the Chinese Perspective," in Ross and Changbin, eds., *Re-examining the Cold War*, p. 193.

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