

"ONLY NIXON COULD GO TO CHINA"

Sino-American Détente, 1969-1974

During 1968, American policy in Asia seemed to hit bottom. The bloody Tet Offensive and its aftermath (more U.S. troops died during 1968 than in any year of the war in Southeast Asia) underlined the failure of the U.S. military to subdue Communist forces in Vietnam. The stalemate fueled dissent among American "hawks" and "doves" alike. After three years of predicting victory, President Johnson had to cap force levels, abandon plans to run for reelection, and seek a negotiated settlement. A war fought to demonstrate America's ability to contain Asian communism had, like the Korean conflict, ended up shattering the Democratic party and enhancing the stature of revolutionary leaders in Asia. By supplying critical support to North Vietnam, China could claim some of the credit for humbling "U.S. imperialism." Mao even urged Ho Chi Minh to reject Johnson's call for peace talks (advice Ho ignored) and to push for quick military victory. The Chinese leader brushed aside a belated call from the Johnson administration to resume diplomatic contact in Warsaw, declaring that the U.S. and PRC had "nothing to talk about."

Richard Nixon's election as president in November 1968 seemed to bode even worse. Although he campaigned on a promise to achieve "peace with honor," since the 1950s, he had called for expanding the military commitment to Vietnam and blamed China for most of Asia's problems. While

debating Kennedy in 1960, he had declared: "Now what do the Chinese Communists want? They don't just want Quemoy and Matsu. They don't just want Formosa (Taiwan). They want the world." Nixon later accused both Kennedy and Johnson of not using enough force to prevail in Vietnam or to contain China.

However, Nixon hinted at new thinking in private talks with American diplomats in 1965-66 and in an article he published in October 1967 in the influential policy journal, *Foreign Affairs*. Under the heading "Asia after Vietnam," the future president spoke of the need to give strong support to anti-Communist allies in Asia and reaffirmed his opposition to recognizing or trading with the PRC. Washington must "persuade China that it must change: that it cannot satisfy its imperialistic ambitions." But, he added, in the long run the United States "cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation." Mao Zedong reportedly read a translation of the article and commented to Zhou Enlai that if Nixon became the next U.S. president, he might change policy toward China. Meanwhile, the expanding war in Vietnam dimmed prospects for a new dialogue.

China's major state-controlled newspapers, *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) and *Hong Qi* (Red Flag), ridiculed the new president as the "jittery chieftain" of "U.S. imperialists." In a joint editorial, the two papers described Nixon's inaugural address of January 20, 1969, as a confession that American imperialists were "beset with profound crises both at home and abroad." Despite condemning Nixon and Johnson as "jackals of the same lair," the Communist press did something unprecedented: they published Nixon's speech in its entirety alongside their denunciations. Unknown to the new administration, Mao ordered the papers to print the speech because he liked Nixon's pledge to seek an "open world—open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people—a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation." At the time, however, no one in Washington picked up this signal.

If America's Asian policy lay in tatters as Nixon took office, China's situation, at home and abroad, was scarcely more favorable. The United States, although clearly hoping to exit Vietnam, still had half a million troops on China's southwestern border. To the south, the military standoff between Taiwan and the PRC continued. China's western frontier with India had remained tense since the border war of 1962. To the east, the

specter of an increasingly powerful and assertive Japan rekindled fears among Chinese.

But the greatest external challenge came from the Soviet Union, which shared a 4,500-mile-long ill-defined frontier with China. Sino-Soviet hostility had grown steadily worse since 1958. The trend continued unchanged after 1964, when Leonid Brezhnev replaced Khrushchev. By 1965, Beijing and Moscow called each other "traitors" to true communism and began to deploy large military units along their border. Even before large-scale fighting began in March 1969, Mao considered the Soviet Union as the single greatest threat to his own leadership and to China's security.

Although hostility toward the United States had been an underlying theme in Chinese foreign policy since 1949, gradually the fear of what Mao called Soviet "social imperialism" displaced American "capitalist imperialism" as the chief enemy. When Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia in August 1968 to depose a liberal Communist regime that rejected Moscow's leadership, Mao considered it a portent of what the Soviet Union had in mind for China.

To make matters worse, if the United States really did negotiate its way out of Vietnam and, as Nixon promised, reduced its future military commitments in Asia, how could China alone possibly contain Soviet social imperialism? To preserve his tattered revolution and China's heritage, Mao saw no alternative but to follow a classic Chinese strategy. Think about it this way," he told his physician in August 1969. "We have the Soviet Union to the north and the west, India to the south, and Japan to the east." What could China do if these enemies united against it? "Beyond Japan is the United States. Didn't our ancestors counsel negotiating with faraway countries while fighting with those that are near?" In spite of his criticism of old ways, Mao revived the idea of "using barbarians to fight barbarians."

At the same time as these external challenges multiplied, China faced bitter internal divisions. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched in 1965-66, not only crushed Mao's domestic rivals, it also wrecked the economy and sowed chaos in cities, factories, the countryside, and on university campuses. By 1968, Mao was using the army to suppress the young Red Guard activists he had mobilized to drive his enemies from power.

The border dispute with the Soviets turned deadly in March 1969. When the "near barbarians" attacked, Mao reached out for help from the "faraway barbarians." Fortunately for Mao, the "faraway barbarians" in Washington had resolved to open a dialogue with China.

THE IMPACT OF SINO-SOVIET BORDER FIGHTING

On March 2, 1969, following shouting matches and fist fights between Chinese and Soviet border guards (as well as incidents in which Chinese troops dropped their trousers and "mooned" the Soviets—only to have their bare bottoms greeted by photos of Chairman Mao displayed by the Russians), a Chinese security unit on tiny Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River attacked a Soviet patrol, killing thirty soldiers. The Soviets retaliated two weeks later with an artillery barrage that killed about 800 Chinese.

When Soviet Premier Alexi Kosygin tried to place a call to Mao to discuss the violence, a Chinese operator shouted "you are a revisionist and therefore I will not connect you." On August 13, after many small skirmishes, the Soviets escalated the violence with a large-scale attack in Xinjiang, in northwestern China, which destroyed an entire Chinese brigade in an area not far from China's nuclear weapons test site. The PRC leadership pondered whether the Soviet escalation was a pretext for a major attack or, equally dangerous, might simply spiral out of control.

In this context, Mao asked four senior military commanders who had been sidelined during the Cultural Revolution, to undertake a study of the Soviet threat. Marshals Chen Yi, Ye Jangying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzen deliberated from March through September. In a series of reports to Mao, they concluded that the Soviets probably did not intend to wage a full-scale war against China, but stressed the need to be prepared for a worst-case scenario. Unaware that Mao had modified his own views, the marshals apologized for their "unconventional thoughts," especially the idea that to resist the Soviet threat, the PRC should play the "card of the United States." China should consider initiating "Sino-American talks at the ministerial or even higher levels, so that basic . . . problems in Sino-American relations can be solved." Chen Yi believed that Washington would not want to see Beijing either subdued by or re-allied to Moscow. China could, in Marxist terms, intensify the "contradiction" between the U.S.S.R. and the United States by arranging a "breakthrough" in Sino-American relations.

Even before the shooting began, in February 1969, Zhou Enlai seized on these concerns to convince Mao to resume the Warsaw talks between the United States and Chinese diplomats. However, shortly before the first scheduled meeting, a Chinese diplomat in the Netherlands defected to the United States. When the U.S. government refused to return him, Chinese hardliners, including Defense Minister Lin Biao and Mao's wife, Jiang

Qing, persuaded Mao to cancel the talks. The border fighting, however, created a new urgency for dialogue.

In Washington, both President Richard Nixon and his National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, were thinking in general ways about improving ties with China. Prior to the Sino-Soviet border clashes of March through August, however, they had not set out actual policy goals. In fact, at least until August 1969, the administration remained wary of China and placed a higher priority on improving relations with Moscow. Nixon and Kissinger believed that by improving ties with the Soviet Union, they could get the Russians to pressure North Vietnam to compromise on a settlement and also achieve nuclear arms control agreements with Moscow. In fact, when Nixon announced plans on March 14, 1969, to deploy a limited antimissile defense system, he justified it with the argument that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union desired to "stand naked against a potential Chinese Communist threat." Since Beijing had no missiles capable of reaching the United States (and would have none for another decade), China's press called this plan evidence of an "evil" conspiracy between the Americans and Soviets aimed at "nuclear blackmail" against the PRC.

U.S. diplomats and intelligence personnel were uncertain of what the Soviets or Chinese were up to along their border. Leaders in both countries, they surmised, might be provoking the border clashes to mobilize their publics for other purposes. American experts speculated that China instigated most of the incidents to deter the Soviets from attacking. But if Chinese "tactics were designed to deter wider conflict," these policymakers worried, they might "in fact bring it on."

Anxiety about a wider war increased during the summer of 1969, when Soviet officials dropped hints of an impending attack and asked whether Washington would tacitly support Moscow. For example, the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, told a U.S. official that China was everybody's problem, but there was limited time to act jointly against it. The two superpowers "may not have this power much longer," he warned. Another Soviet diplomat asked his American counterpart if Washington "would be pleased if the Soviet Union and China fought one another." In August, following the attack in Xinjiang, another Soviet official asked how the Nixon administration would respond to a strike against China's nuclear weapons complex. He urged U.S. support, since the attack would "eliminate" the Chinese nuclear threat "for decades" and "weaken and discredit the Mao clique." These probes coincided with rumors that Nixon and Kissinger were mulling over a "deal" in which the United States would "allow" or even cooperate with a Soviet attack

Shifting US goals =
improve w/ SU w/ China

on Chinese nuclear weapons facilities in return for Soviet help in ending the Vietnam War.

It is difficult to know if high-ranking American policymakers gave serious consideration to backing Soviet moves. At the same time as Moscow sought American support, Nixon took his first positive moves in China's direction. On July 21, the president approved a policy change to allow American scholars, scientists, and journalists to receive passports to travel to China. Although this had little practical value, it marked the first relaxation in travel restrictions in twenty years. A few days later, while traveling in the Pacific, the president spelled out what he called the "Nixon Doctrine." Once the Vietnam War ended, he declared, the United States would not use its own troops to fight in local Asian wars. Although he still considered China a "threat to peace," he noted that China's internal problems made it "less effective in exporting revolution."

As Kissinger later explained, U.S. reconciliation with China would reduce Indochina "to its proper scale—a small peninsula on a major continent." The "drama" of opening ties with the PRC would help "erase for the American people the pain that would inevitably accompany our withdrawal from Southeast Asia." As both Kissinger and Nixon realized, popular excitement over "finding China" might mitigate any political backlash from "losing Vietnam."

By August, Nixon had given up hope that the Soviets would or could pressure North Vietnam into making peace. This led the administration to pursue the "China card" more actively. In an August 1 conversation with Pakistani President Yahya Khan, Kissinger asked Khan (who had an ambassador in Beijing) to inform Zhou Enlai that the United States sought an accommodation with China. In late September, when Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko visited the UN, Nixon told Kissinger, "I think while Gromyko is in the country would be a very good time to have another move to China made."

In August, a Chinese Communist official in Hong Kong had mentioned to an American journalist that if Washington really wanted to show its interest in improving relations, it should "withdraw its forces from the Taiwan Strait." In October, Nixon and Kissinger decided to signal Beijing of their serious purpose by ordering an end to U.S. naval patrols in the Taiwan Strait. They sent word to China through Pakistan that the cessation of the patrols was designed to facilitate bilateral talks. Early in December, Ambassador Walter Stoessel in Warsaw literally chased down Chinese diplomat Lei Yang at, of all things, a Yugoslav fashion show, and informed him that Nixon wanted "serious, concrete talks" with Beijing. China re-

sponded on December 7 by releasing from captivity two Americans who had accidentally sailed their yacht into Chinese waters in February 1969. Three days later, Lei Yang invited Ambassador Stoessel to visit him for the first of several informal conversations.

Stoessel did most of the talking during the December and January meetings. He explained that Nixon was willing to send a "special representative" to Beijing or to receive a Chinese envoy in Washington. The United States hoped for a peaceful resolution to Taiwan's status and would "oppose any offensive military action from Taiwan against the mainland." The more rapidly the Vietnam War ended and tensions in the region subsided, Stoessel added, the sooner the United States would "reduce those facilities on Taiwan that we now have." These "informal exchanges" led to two formal rounds of ambassadorial talks in January and February 1970. The Chinese announced at the latter meeting that "if the U.S. government wishes to send a representative of ministerial rank or a special envoy of the U.S. president to Beijing for further exploration of questions of fundamental principle between China and the United States, the Chinese government will be willing to receive him."

The Soviets picked up enough information about these exchanges for Ambassador Dobrynin to warn Kissinger that Washington should "not use China as a military threat" against Moscow. Kissinger, of course, took this as proof that the approach toward China was, as hoped, providing the United States with added leverage over the Soviet Union. Although it took more than a year to arrange a visit to Beijing, it seemed that for the first time in twenty years, the United States and China were reading from the same script.

Between March 1970 and the spring of 1971, Sino-American relations seemed to take one step back for every step forward. Through Pakistani and Romanian intermediaries, Nixon proposed that the White House and China's leaders "open a direct channel of communication," which the president would keep secret. Zhou Enlai quickly realized that Nixon intended to "adopt the method of the [American-Vietnamese] negotiations in Paris, and let Kissinger make the contact." In fact, during 1970-71, the White House cut the State Department out of the China policy loop, giving Kissinger full responsibility and sidelining specialists who might outshine the president and his aide.

But just as a breakthrough seemed imminent, external events derailed progress. In April 1970, pro-American elements in Cambodia overthrew Prince Sihanouk, a Chinese ally. In May, American troops invaded Cambodia in a campaign to destroy Communist base areas. Mao responded by

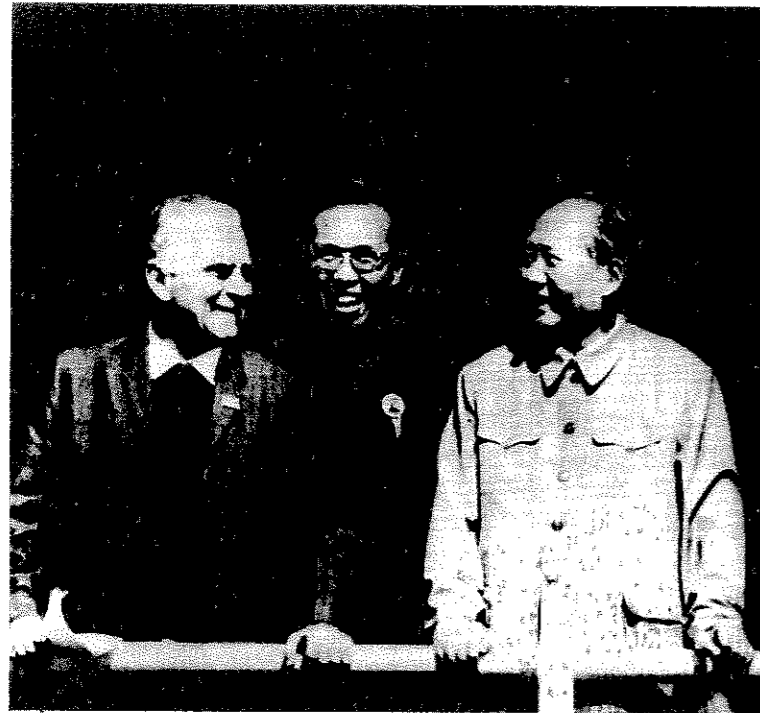
postponing further talks in Warsaw and calling for "the people of the world to unite and defeat the U.S. aggressors and all their running dogs." This language so offended Nixon that the president considered sending a U.S. naval flotilla to the China coast—until Kissinger talked him out of it. Despite the ruffled feathers, Mao kept communication lines open through gestures such as the July 10, 1970, release of Bishop James Walsh, an American cleric imprisoned in China as a spy since 1958.

More than the temporary escalation of the Vietnam War, however, slowed the improvement of China's ties with the United States. From the summer of 1970 through September 1971, Mao engaged in a power struggle with Defense Minister Lin Biao, his designated heir. Lin and his followers opposed any reconciliation with the United States, advocating, instead, either a continued hard line toward both superpowers or a compromise with Moscow. Before Mao could push through an alternative policy, he needed time to build a consensus and isolate his erstwhile disciple and rival.

In the fall of 1970, Mao felt confident enough about his position to signal Nixon. In the 1930s, Mao had spoken to the outside world through a young American journalist, Edgar Snow, who passed through the KMT blockade to enter Communist territory. Snow's book, *Red Star Over China*, remains a classic account of the Chinese revolution. Snow had visited China several times after 1949, writing favorable accounts of the PRC. Since 1965, however, Chinese officials had rebuffed his efforts to return. In August, Mao invited Snow, who then lived in Switzerland, to visit China. On October 1, 1970, the journalist stood next to Mao at Tiananmen Square to review the National Day parade in Beijing. A picture of the two standing together appeared on the front page of Chinese newspapers. This was intended as a signal to Nixon, as well as to the Chinese public, of an imminent policy change toward the United States.

According to Mao's physician, the chairman labored under the illusion that Snow sometimes worked for the CIA, guaranteeing that he could serve as a conduit to Nixon. In fact, in 1970, Snow had little influence and few professional connections in the United States. Nevertheless, when they met, Mao told his old biographer that he would welcome a visit by Nixon "as president or as a tourist." He wondered aloud why the president had delayed coming to China. Mao even suggested how Nixon could defuse conservative criticism of such a trip, by "trumpeting his purpose as winning over China so as to fix the Soviet Union."

Although Snow did not publish this interview for several months, Nixon quickly learned of Mao's invitation. Still, the president delayed respond-



Mao Zedong invites his "old friend," American journalist Edgar Snow, to join him on Tiananmen on China's national holiday, October 1, 1970. (Chinese government photograph)

ing. Republicans did poorly in the November 1970 congressional election, and Nixon hesitated to alienate his conservative base. He became especially concerned in December when Zhou Enlai sent word through an intermediary that China would insist that an envoy "discuss the subject" of the vacating "Chinese territory called Taiwan" by U.S. forces. Clearly, differences over Taiwan remained a major impediment to any presidential visit.

During the first months of 1971, Washington and Beijing continued to probe each others' intentions through public statements and messages delivered by intermediaries. Nixon raised the China issue in a speech in March. For the first time since 1949, an American president called China by its formal name, the People's Republic of China, and admitted he hoped

to "establish a dialogue" with the PRC. Nixon explained that Washington no longer sought to "impose on China an international position that denies its legitimate national interests." He followed this by lifting some trade and travel restrictions on China dating from the Korean War.

In April, Chinese and American leaders found a serendipitous but effective way to build public support for their dialogue. At a table tennis tournament in Nagoya, Japan, members of the Chinese and American teams spontaneously began speaking and exchanging gifts. When U.S. players mentioned their interest in visiting China, top officials in Beijing decided that the timing was "not yet mature." On April 6, however, Mao suddenly ordered the Foreign Ministry to "invite the American team to visit China." The White House quickly approved the travel plans.

Although the outclassed American players lost their exhibition matches, the Chinese press and public showered the visiting athletes with affection. This genuine enthusiasm convinced Mao and his allies that the Chinese masses would back an opening to the United States. On April 14, at a reception for both teams, Zhou Enlai announced that "your visit has opened a new chapter in the history of the relations between Chinese and American peoples." Just hours later, Nixon ordered termination of additional restrictions on trade with China. So-called Ping-Pong Diplomacy had broken two decades of isolation.

The cascade of favorable publicity provided by American television networks traveling with the ping-pong team convinced Nixon that the American people, too, would support a new China policy. He jokingly asked Kissinger and his aides whether they had "learned to play ping-pong yet." Only Vice-president Spiro Agnew rained on the parade. In a critique that mirrored Lin Biao's opposition to Mao, Agnew complained bitterly to a group of reporters about their favorable coverage of the ping-pong team's visit to China. If Americans had to live in the kind of houses common in China, he snapped, liberals would call it "oppression of the poor." Nixon, who already considered scratching Agnew from the 1972 ticket, complained that the vice-president was too dense to understand "the big picture in this whole Chinese operation, which is, of course, the Russian game. We're using the Chinese thaw to get the Russians shook."

On April 27, the White House received a message from Zhou transmitted via Pakistan. It repeated the invitation to receive Nixon or Kissinger, but dropped the demand that withdrawal of U.S. forces from Taiwan was a precondition and focal point of discussion. Although China insisted that establishing formal diplomatic relations would require the United States to cut ties to Taiwan, the island's status could merely be one of several is-

sues raised. On June 2, Beijing clarified its position further. Zhou sent word through Pakistan that Mao had approved a secret visit, in which Kissinger and Zhou could freely raise "principle issues of concern" to either party. For the Chinese, this would include the "withdrawal of all U.S. armed forces from Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait area." The American side could bring its own issues to the table. Elated, Nixon and Kissinger described this message as "the most important communication that has come to an American president since the end of World War II."

The president characterized the invitation as the result of "fundamental shifts in the world balance of power [that] made it in both [nations'] interest to have relations." In a paraphrase of Mao's remarks to his physician, Nixon asserted that China, "faced by the Soviets on one side, a Soviet-backed India on another," and a resurgent Japan that could "develop [military power] fast because of its industrial base," sought protection from the United States. Mao and Zhou still demanded that "the U.S. should get out of the Pacific" but, Nixon surmised, they really "don't want that."

Nixon predicted that as American military strength in Asia inevitably diminished, Japan would "either go with the Soviets or re-arm," two bad alternatives from China's perspective. Soon after receiving Zhou's invitation (but before Kissinger went to Beijing), Nixon predicted that, with American prodding, Mao and Zhou would agree that a continued U.S. military presence in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia was "China's [best] hope for Jap restraint."

On July 9, while visiting Pakistan, Kissinger feigned stomach trouble, dropped out of sight, and flew in a Pakistani airliner to Beijing. As he and his small staff (including John Holdridge and Winston Lord) were driven to a state guest house, veteran diplomat Huang Hua asked Holdridge for assurance that the American envoy would not snub Zhou as John Foster Dulles had at Geneva in 1954. Zhou had nothing to worry about. Kissinger found what he considered a "soulmate" in the urbane prime minister and called him "one of the two or three most impressive men I have ever met." Zhou was more restrained, praising Kissinger as "very intelligent—indeed a Doctor."

The two men conferred for seventeen hours over two and one-half days. In his published account of the talks, Kissinger attributed his success to that fact that he offered Zhou the single thing motivating China—"strategic reassurance, some easing of their nightmare of hostile encirclement." As a gesture of good will, he provided intelligence data on Soviet military deployment along China's border. Zhou, Kissinger reported, made a pro forma demand that the Americans abandon Taiwan, pull out of South Viet-



Nixon's National Security Adviser, Henry Kissinger, meets secretly in Beijing with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai, July 1971. (National Archives)

nam, and cease assisting a "militaristic Japan." But over lunch, Zhou reportedly assured Kissinger that these were minor irritants.

In fact, the American envoy opened the talks by making several concessions on issues of concern to China. Kissinger declared the United States would reduce its military presence in and around Taiwan as relations with the PRC improved and the Vietnam War ended. Meanwhile, Washington would not support a policy of two Chinas, a one China-one Taiwan policy, or an independent Taiwan. It would also oppose any attack by Taiwan against China. Finally, Kissinger revealed that Nixon intended to formally recognize the PRC, and cut links to Taiwan, following his reelection.

When Zhou briefed Mao on the discussion, the chairman commented that it naturally took time for a monkey to evolve into a human being. The Americans were now at the ape stage, "with a tail, though a much shorter one, in his back." In light of this forward movement, Mao decided, "we are not in a hurry on the Taiwan issue." After some nimble redrafting, the two sides issued a statement for release by the president after Kissinger's return. It declared that: "Knowing of President Nixon's expressed desire to visit" China, Zhou had issued an invitation for him to visit before May

→ 1972, to seek the "normalization of relations" and to "exchange views on questions of concern to the two sides."

When Nixon learned of the agreement, he mused to his chief of staff, H. R. Haldeman, that in politics "everything turns around." The Chinese "made a deal with us" due to "concern regarding the Soviets," their former ally. He (Nixon) had "fought the battle for Chiang" on Taiwan since the 1950s and had always "taken the line that we stand by the South Koreans . . . by the South Vietnamese, etc." How "ironic" that a conservative like himself was the "one to move in the other direction."

→ Nixon predicted that cooperation between the United States and China would "shatter old alignments." The "pressure on Japan," formerly America's closest Asian ally, might even push it toward an "alliance with the Soviets." Certainly, Moscow would try to redress the balance of power by "moving to Japan and India." Washington would have to "reassure its Pacific allies that we are not changing our policy" nor selling out friends "behind their backs." They, like the American public, must understand that although there was "validity ten years ago to play the free nations of Asia against China," the United States could now "play a more effective role with China rather than without."

→ Zhou Enlai's geopolitical outlook closely paralleled that voiced by Nixon and Kissinger. Although he rebuffed Kissinger's suggestion that China press North Vietnam to agree to a compromise, immediately after Kissinger left Beijing, the Chinese premier conferred with North Vietnamese leaders. He argued that improved Sino-American relations would stabilize Asia and, ultimately, enhance Hanoi's security. The Vietnamese rejected this notion, complaining that China had "thrown a life buoy to Nixon, who almost had been drowned." Even though a year passed before a tentative peace was agreed to in Vietnam, all sides recognized that China now placed a higher priority on cooperation with Washington than on assisting Hanoi.

→ Nixon announced the China opening in a televised speech on July 15. The American public, weary of Asian confrontations, responded with great enthusiasm. In private, Democrats brooded about Nixon, the old Cold Warrior who had accused Truman of "losing China," scoring points by rebuilding ties to the PRC. Publicly, however, they could do little more than praise his actions. Conservatives seemed stunned by the turnaround, but focused their attention on protecting Taiwan. Nixon convinced California Governor Ronald Reagan, the rising star of the Republican right, that it made sense to work with the Chinese Communists, since it provided ammunition to use against the more threatening Soviet Communists.

He even persuaded Reagan to travel to Taiwan as his representative to explain matters.

Most politically informed Americans realized that an improvement in relations with Beijing would put pressure on Hanoi to agree to a settlement of the war in Vietnam, would give the United States continued influence in Asia after a withdrawal from Vietnam, and might compel Japan to modify what many Americans saw as its aggressive trade policy.

As the U.S. trade deficit with Japan ballooned in the early 1970s, a member of the Nixon cabinet told journalists that "the Japanese are still fighting the war, only now instead of a shooting war it is an economic war. Their immediate intention is to try to dominate the Pacific and then perhaps the world." The president himself complained at one point that the Japanese were "all over Asia, like a bunch of lice." Nixon and his staff often mentioned that a key benefit of improved ties with China would be less dependence on Japan as a strategic Asian ally and a freer hand to press Japan to limit exports, raise the value of the yen, and reduce trade barriers. Furious at Japan's repeated delays in enacting promised trade reform, Nixon made a point of keeping his China policy secret from Tokyo. He purposely gave Prime Minister Sato Eisaku only a few minutes advance notice of his announcement of his impending trip in order, he claimed, to "stick it to Japan."

← China, with its own bitter memories of Japan's wartime aggression and growing anxiety about its neighbor's economic strength and possible designs on Southeast Asia, shared Nixon's sentiments. Beijing saw cooperation with Washington as a way to contain both the current Soviet threat and a potential Japanese challenge. Stunned by the sudden change in American China policy, as well as by the president's action a month later to devalue the dollar and impose special taxes on imports, the Japanese described themselves as victims of "Nixon shocks." In the opinion of Japanese leaders, the "Nixon administration was thinking about the possibility of using Communist China as a counterweight to Japan in post-Vietnam Asia." Just as Nixon and Kissinger relied on triangular diplomacy to influence Soviet behavior, the Americans seemed to be "playing a kind of China card to Japan."

← During the seven months between Kissinger's initial trip to China in July 1971 and Nixon's arrival there in February 1972, Sino-American détente evolved quickly. In September 1971, after Mao identified Lin Biao as the leader of a "plot," the defense minister's son, Lin Ligu, attempted to assassinate Mao. When the attack failed, both Lins boarded a plane, on September 13, and tried to flee to the Soviet Union. The aircraft crashed

in Mongolia, killing all on board. Lin's demise discredited opponents of détente and allowed Zhou Enlai, the foremost advocate of this approach to the United States, to reemerge as Mao's chief deputy.

In October, Kissinger visited China a second time. To build mutual confidence, he provided the Chinese with additional intelligence information on Soviet forces gathered by U.S. satellites. While Kissinger shared secret military data in Beijing, the United Nations disregarded a half-hearted American plea to keep a place for Taiwan in the organization. It voted, instead, to seat the PRC as the sole representative of China.

In other signs of changing Asian alignments, in November 1971, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong pleaded with Mao Zedong to defer his meeting with Nixon. The Chinese leader, who only three years before had urged Hanoi to spurn peace talks with Washington and push for a military victory, rebuffed the plea. Instead, he told Pham to negotiate the best deal he could with the Americans, even if it meant leaving the South Vietnamese regime in place. At the end of the year, when war erupted on the Indian subcontinent, Washington and Beijing agreed on a "tilt," as Kissinger put it, in support of Pakistan, while Moscow backed India.

THE NIXON VISIT TO CHINA

Both to minimize jet lag and maximize press coverage, Nixon's flight to China was scheduled over a three-day period, with arrival on February 21, 1972. During the lengthy trip, Kissinger suggested several ways the president might "bond" with Mao. Nixon should "treat him as an emperor," but stress that he, like Mao, were both "men of the people" who had "problems with intellectuals." In reality, comparing Nixon's visceral dislike for liberal politicians and journalists to Mao's massive persecution of his critics was preposterous.

In notes to himself, Nixon speculated that the Chinese leadership favored meeting him to "build up their world credentials," speed unification with Taiwan, and "get the U.S. out of Asia." He hoped the summit would speed a settlement in Vietnam and restrain future "Chicom expansion." Both he and Mao wanted a stable Asia and "restraint on U.S.S.R."

On February 21, 1972, Nixon walked down the stairway of his plane at Beijing's airport to shake the hand of Zhou Enlai. Ushered into Mao's presence a few hours later, he spoke eloquently of his own journey from anti-communism to China. What brought him to this meeting was "recognition of a new situation in the world and a recognition on our part that what is important is not a nation's internal political philosophy. What is important



President Richard Nixon meets his old enemy, Chairman Mao Zedong, in Beijing, 1972. (National Archives)

is its policy towards the rest of the world and towards us." Both China and America worried about Soviet behavior and the future of Japan. Why, he asked rhetorically, did the Soviets have "more forces on the border facing you" than facing Western Europe? Sino-American differences over Taiwan, Korea, and Indochina paled in comparison.

In their talks with Zhou Enlai, Nixon and Kissinger stressed a common interest in maintaining a balance of power by "restraining" Russian expansion. The president promised not to make any deals with Moscow aimed at China, to treat China as an equal, and to inform the PRC about any military agreements reached with the Soviets. The Americans would avoid any deals with the Soviet Union in Europe or the Middle East that might "free [Moscow's] hand" for expansion in Asia.

Nixon and Kissinger responded to Chinese criticism of the U.S.-Japan security treaty by asking their hosts to ponder the alternative—a Japan completely uncoupled from its American anchor. "Do we tell the second most prosperous nation to go it alone—or do we provide a shield?" Nixon asked Zhou. Was not a "U.S. Japan policy with a U.S. veto" less dangerous than a "Japan only policy?" If America had no security treaty with Japan (or no

military bases in the Philippines and South Korea), Nixon argued, our "remonstrations would be like empty cannon, and the wild horse of Japan would not be controlled." All but calling the U.S.-Japan security treaty a scheme to keep the threatening Japanese genie bottled up, the president told Zhou that the American pact with Japan "is in your interest, not against it."

Nixon referred to Taiwan and Vietnam as minor "irritants" between the United States and China that could be solved gradually, perhaps through some sort of trade-off. He repeated his support for "one China," with Taiwan a part, which he hoped would be peacefully reunited with the mainland. He could not make a "secret deal" that violated the U.S. commitment to Taiwan, but said "I know our interests required normalization" of relations. He promised to establish diplomatic ties, presumably by cutting links to Taiwan, after his expected reelection in 1972.

In banquet toasts on February 27, Nixon and Zhou pledged to oppose efforts by any country (meaning the Soviet Union) to establish hegemony (dominance) in the Asia-Pacific region. Finessing Taiwan's status presented more of a problem. In the original wording of a joint communiqué, Kissinger noted that Washington intended to honor existing commitments to Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—but made no reference to Taiwan. State Department officials traveling with Nixon demanded the inclusion of Taiwan. Kissinger reluctantly reopened discussion with the Chinese, who refused to accept such wording. Nixon finally agreed to drop references to all U.S. defense commitments in the Pacific, thereby not singling out Taiwan. The Shanghai Communiqué of February 28, 1972, affirmed America's support for a "peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question by the Chinese themselves" and its promise to "progressively reduce" U.S. forces on the island "as tension in the area diminishes." There was "but one China," Nixon acknowledged and "Taiwan is part of China." The communiqué contained a brief reference to America's chief Asian ally: "The United States places the highest value on its friendly relations with Japan" and would continue to "develop the existing close bonds." The Chinese repeated their opposition to the U.S.-Japan security treaty, condemned "the revival and outward expansion of Japanese militarism" and endorsed "the Japanese people's desire to build an independent, democratic, peaceful and neutral Japan."

In the year that followed Nixon's visit, his China initiative helped the president achieve three major goals: arms control with the Soviets, a cease-fire in Vietnam, and reelection. In May 1972, Nixon traveled to the Soviet Union and signed several accords, including a long sought Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT). Brezhnev's willingness to host Nixon even

while the U.S. Air Force stepped up bombing of North Vietnam revealed Soviet determination to restore their own détente with America.

After the failure of their spring military offensive and signs of diminished Soviet and Chinese support, North Vietnamese and U.S. negotiators concluded a draft cease-fire agreement in October 1972. The terms, not publicly announced, provided for the continued existence of two rival Vietnamese governments. U.S. forces were to depart within 90 days of the agreement, but North Vietnamese and Vietcong troops could remain in South Vietnam. Both Hanoi and Washington could resupply their allies. The rival regimes pledged to discuss a political settlement. As most observers understood, the terms were little more than a cease-fire in place, not the "peace with honor" Nixon had called for. Even though a final accord was not signed until January 1973, this preliminary agreement buried the already troubled candidacy of Democratic presidential nominee George McGovern, whose campaign centered on a pledge to end the war. Nixon won reelection in November with 61 percent of the vote.

In February 1973, following the Vietnam peace settlement, Kissinger returned to Beijing. "The flood gates were opened," he reported to Nixon in describing the warmth with which he was received by Zhou and Mao. Instead of parking Kissinger's aircraft in a dark corner of the airfield, authorities permitted his "plane to taxi right up to the terminal." His photograph graced the "top half of the People's Daily," and "guards saluted" the American delegation "for the first time as we entered the Great Hall and our Guest House."

On earlier trips to Beijing, the Americans thumped the Soviet threat to spur cooperation. This time the situation appeared reversed, as Kissinger found the Chinese "obsessed" by fears of encirclement. "The Soviet Union dominated our conversation," he reported. It was the "centerpiece and completely permeated our talks." Mao and Zhou sounded like their former nemesis, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, demanding greater American efforts to "counter the Russians everywhere" by forming alliances to "prevent the Soviets filling vacuums." The United States and PRC could "work together to commonly deal with a bastard," Mao declared.

Kissinger raised the issue of Taiwan, repeating Nixon's pledge "to move toward normalization of relations." The American envoy assured Zhou "we would be prepared to move" after the 1974 midterm congressional elections "toward something like the Japanese solution with regard to diplomatic relations." (In 1972, Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei opened formal ties with the PRC. Japan closed its Taiwan embassy, but retained an informal liaison office there, staffed by "retired" diplomats. Trade con-

tinued unabated. Unlike the United States, however, Japan had no security treaty with Taiwan.) By "mid-1976," Kissinger stressed, "we were prepared to establish full diplomatic relations." In the interim, he and Zhou agreed to establish official liaison offices in Washington and Beijing.

In addition to the strident anti-Soviet tone of the February 1973 talks, Kissinger was struck by the "major turnabout" in the attitude of Mao and Zhou "toward Japan and the U.S." In July 1971, Kissinger recalled, Zhou had described Japan as "fattened economically by the U.S." and about to "expand its militarism throughout" Asia. Throughout the next year, China condemned the U.S.-Japan security treaty. Now "the Chinese . . . clearly consider Japan as an incipient ally" that could help "to counter Soviet and Indian designs." Zhou acknowledged the security treaty as a "brake on Japanese expansionism and militarism" and cautioned the United States against any trade sanctions or other actions that might drive Japan into a "situation where the Soviet Union became its ally instead of the U.S." Mao actually urged Kissinger to spend more time in Japan and to "make sure that trade and other frictions with Tokyo . . . would not mar our fundamental cooperation." Kissinger, suddenly suspicious of China's new warmth toward Japan, cautioned the Chinese to avoid a bidding war with America to "compete for Tokyo's allegiance" as this might encourage "resurgent Japanese nationalism."

By the time he left Beijing, Kissinger's assessment of Chinese foreign policy led him to what even he recognized as a remarkable conclusion. "We are now in the extraordinary position," Kissinger reported to Nixon, that among all nations "with the exception of the United Kingdom, the PRC might well be closest to us in its global perceptions. No other world leaders have the sweep and imagination of Mao and Zhou nor the capacity and will to achieve a long-range policy." The United States and China had become "in plain words . . . tacit allies."

However, the Americans had not given up entirely on détente with the Soviet Union. At the same time that he spoke so glowingly of China, Kissinger told Nixon that with "conscientious attention to both capitals, we should be able to have our mao tai [sic] and drink our vodka, too." In other words, improved ties with China were still considered a spur to cooperation with Moscow, not merely a strategy to contain the Soviets. Despite this hope, during the remainder of Nixon's presidency—just under eighteen months—and that of his four immediate successors, the U.S.-China relationship assumed an increasingly anti-Soviet tinge.

This evolution was influenced by both domestic and foreign developments. In March 1973, Kissinger informed Zhou and Mao that Nixon still

planned to normalize diplomatic relations and cut links to Taiwan as soon as possible. Within a month, however, the unraveling Watergate cover-up began to envelop the White House. Although Kissinger had few direct links to the Watergate crimes, his patron, Richard Nixon, possessed diminishing political capital and was hesitant to alienate conservative Republicans who retained affection for Taiwan.

During Nixon's final year in office, relations with the Soviet Union soured. In October 1973, during another round of Arab-Israeli warfare, Brezhnev threatened to send troops to bolster Egypt. Nixon warned of a U.S. military response if he did so. Although a cease-fire averted a super-power confrontation, the resulting Arab oil boycott spiked energy prices and contributed to economic recessions in the United States and Japan.

With the process of normalization and the status of Taiwan put on hold, and with the Watergate crisis hobbling Nixon, dislike of the Soviet Union seemed the main force binding together the United States and China. Trade did not become a significant factor until the late 1980s. Beginning in mid-1973, Washington supplied a growing amount of intelligence on Soviet military matters to the Chinese. When Kissinger met with Mao and Zhou in November 1973, and during conclaves in 1974, both sides swapped tales of Soviet perfidy and discussed ways to contain the Soviet threat against China, South Asia, and the Middle East.

Despite frustrations on both sides, the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic that began in the early 1970s had dramatic, if sometimes unintended, consequences for world politics. Even though both Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong were considered leading ideologues of the cold war, their actions largely stripped that contest of its ideological trappings. After 1972, the cold war in Asia, at least, essentially disappeared. When the North Vietnamese finally swept over South Vietnam in the spring of 1975, few Americans or anyone else considered it a victory for "communism" or a threat to the larger stability of Asia. What passed for the cold war globally during the two decades after Nixon's trip to China was clearly more a rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States than an ideological struggle or contest for the hearts and minds of the world's people.

Although the Chinese-American relationship from 1973-1989 underwent many small changes, the foundation laid by Nixon and Kissinger and Mao and Zhou proved quite durable. At its core lay a shared belief in the value of strategic cooperation against the Soviet Union. Other issues, such as trade, economic reform, and human rights, took a back seat. While many Americans of varied political viewpoints remained uneasy with China's

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continued antidemocratic and authoritarian character, they believed that strategic cooperation and economic growth would gradually transform the PRC into a something like a Western nation. The consensus within the Ford, Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations held that Mao's chief successor, Deng Xiaoping, was committed to economic reform and gradual political liberalization. The cooperative spirit between China and the United States, these presidents believed, had taken deep root and could withstand the vagaries of world politics, including the decline of Soviet power. During the fifteen years following Nixon's resignation in August 1974, this axiom provided a reliable guide.

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T E N

"TACIT ALLIES" TO TIANANMEN

China and Presidents Ford, Carter,
Reagan, and Bush, 1974-1992

In August 1974, with the Senate poised to convict him of various "high crimes and misdemeanors," Richard Nixon resigned the presidency. The collapse of his popular and political support resulted almost entirely from criminal involvement in the Watergate break-in and cover-up. The triumph of constitutional process over politics and dirty tricks confounded Chinese Communist leaders unfamiliar with checks and balances. Mao and Zhou suspected that a dark conspiracy explained Nixon's fall from power and wondered if opponents of his opening to China had provoked it.

In fact, Nixon's China initiative was one of the most popular and enduring of the controversial president's achievements and bolstered, rather than undermined, his stature. Soon after Vice-president Gerald Ford assumed the presidency, he dispatched now Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to Beijing, where he affirmed that U.S. policy remained steadfast and unchanging. Ford promised to honor Nixon's pledge to soon shift diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to the PRC.

THE FORD PRESIDENCY AND CHINA

Despite the new president's intention to normalize relations with China, as had proved true so often in Sino-American relations, domestic politics intervened. From almost the moment he entered the White House, Ford found