

# Nixon's Opening to China: The Misleading Apotheosis of Triangular Diplomacy

Written by Kendrick Kuo

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KENDRICK KUO, JUN 28 2013

When Richard Nixon took office the Chinese Cultural Revolution's self-imposed isolation was still underway and there was little expectation of foreseeable improvements in U.S.-Sino relations. Was rapprochement used to exploit Sino-Soviet hostilities for immediate gain? Or, was the birth of rapprochement the result of visionary leadership seeing the future importance of China for Asian stability? Henry Kissinger described Nixon's motives for an opening to China as a means to "squeeze the Soviet Union into short-term help on Vietnam." [1] Others charge Kissinger for crudely playing the China card in an emerging Sino-Soviet-U.S. diplomatic triangle to pry concessions from the Soviet Union. [2]

It cannot be denied that Nixon and Kissinger used China to pressure the Soviet Union to concede in other trouble areas of foreign policy, especially in the Vietnam War. However, unwarranted emphasis on triangular diplomacy in the study of U.S.-China rapprochement has lent misleading weight to the "China card" perspective at the expense of recognizing Nixon's concern for Asia in a post-Mao era. This paper proposes that Nixon and Kissinger sought rapprochement with China primarily as a means for long-term stability in Asia. Moreover, as Sino-Soviet clashes heightened and revealed deeper division than previously known, China's role in an emerging triangular diplomacy centered on preventing Soviet turbulent expansion into Asia as the U.S. retrenched militarily.

### An Early Policy Decision (1967-1969)

Even before taking office, Nixon had a desire for change in U.S. China policy, but China's isolationism and Mao Zedong's ideological regime dampened any expectation that this change would come soon. During Nixon's 1967 worldwide trips, he expressed to Romanian Communist Party's Secretary General Nicolae Ceaușescu that "the U.S. could do little to establish effective communications with China until the Vietnam war [sic] was ended." [3] In spite of this, he maintained the necessity of bringing China out of isolation and into the international community for the sake of stability in an increasingly multipolar world. Nixon predicted to Ceausescu that within twenty years, if China remained secluded, world peace would be at stake. [4] He took a similar line in his famous *Foreign Affairs* article, titled "Asia After Vietnam," where he painted the dangers of a billion Chinese living in "angry isolation" and the urgency of making China a responsible member of the world. [5]

Nixon carried this logic into his presidency, which pertained not only to China, but also to a whole host of long-term regional stability issues in U.S. foreign policy. After winning the presidential election in 1968, Nixon met with Kissinger on November 25. Nixon spoke of his determination to avoid Lyndon Johnson's pitfall of focusing on short-term problems like the Vietnam quagmire and instead concentrate on future threats to U.S. security, such as reviving the NATO alliance, the Middle East, Japan, and the Soviet Union. In light of these problems, Nixon particularly pinpointed China policy as needing reevaluation and prodded Kissinger to read his *Foreign Affairs* article that laid out his line of thought. [6]

When the Nixon administration began in 1969, Nixon and Kissinger believed the Soviet Union had rough nuclear parity with the U.S. and that the U.S. was in relative decline. The broad transition strategy from American hegemony to a multipolar community required retrenchment of U.S. military forces in Asia, which forced the U.S. to reexamine its

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relationships with allies and enemies.[7] The U.S. feared Soviet hegemony in Asia while at the same time feared the Chinese communist influence on its neighbors.

In spite of this double threat, Nixon resolved to reach out to the Chinese as the lesser of two possible evils. Resigned to the fact that China would inevitably emerge from isolation and that this opening would be a long process, Nixon decided that the U.S. government should try to make contact and eventually normalize relations with China in hopes of a friendlier post-Mao generation of leadership. Nixon's first year in office was marked by uncertainty at how China would respond to U.S. initiatives to begin normalization, and ironically an almost dead certainty that any substantive relationship would elude the U.S. for the near future. It is hard to imagine Nixon or Kissinger sending signals to China of a U.S. interest in warmer relations as part of a bold plan of action to use China as a pressure point for the Soviet Union when rapprochement was far from conceivable.

## Rapprochement Begins (January-March 1969)

Discussion of resuming U.S.-China ambassadorial talks in Warsaw had been on the table intermittently, but in January 1969 there were signs that the Cultural Revolution was tapering off and the Chinese were considering concrete proposals that opened the possibility of increased contacts.[8] The most feasible area of progress was recognized as trade, but even in this sector changes were foreseen as slow.[9] There were no immediate gains to be made at these beginning stages of contact, nor were there any expectations of foreseeable future gains. The fruit of such labors were envisioned as for the next generation. In meetings held January 20-21, Nixon's handwritten notes reflected ambivalence about any immediate progress, writing "Chinese communists: short range—no change. Long range—we do not want 800,000,000 living in angry isolation. We want contact—we will be interested in Warsaw meetings." [10]

When a Polish source began speculating at the end of January about U.S.-China rapprochement, Nixon directed Kissinger on February 1 to privately plant ideas of such a policy to cause Soviet consternation.[11] This is oftentimes perceived as part of a grand strategy developed by Nixon and Kissinger through a perceptive insight into a surfacing triangular relationship. On the contrary, this isolated event was used to score easy points, after which there are no signs of a broad coordinated policy to continue leaking this misleading information. Why not use initial moves toward China to disquiet Soviet confidence if it does not in fact hinder chances of rapprochement? This idea had to be planted because there was little hope of true rapprochement.

The mood in the first months of 1969 was one of pessimism—no one believed that substantial progress in rapprochement was going to be seen anytime soon. The glimmer of hope was the Warsaw talks scheduled for February 20. Although Kissinger acknowledged indications of a switch to a "softer [Chinese] foreign policy," he saw no evidence of détente.[12] For Kissinger, the February 20 talks were also constrained by U.S. obligations to not abandon Taiwan or damage Asian alliances and interests, but offered "an opportunity to shift the focus of our policy: to seeking a modus Vivendi with the Communist Chinese which provides greater stability for East Asia." [13] All ideas of rapprochement were anchored to a future stability for Asia as the U.S. retrenched its military commitments, not a way to pressure the Soviet Union.

However, even this hope of initial talks was crushed when the Chinese cancelled the 135<sup>th</sup> Sino-U.S. ambassadorial meeting because of alleged U.S. involvement in the defection of Chinese officials in the Netherlands. In light of this, U.S. Ambassador to Poland Walter Stoessel, Jr. suspected that "we may be in for prolonged suspension of Warsaw meetings." [14] On March 2, 1969, Chinese and Soviet military clashes began on the Ussuri River; Nixon and Kissinger considered the PRC to be more aggressive than the Soviets and so assumed the Chinese instigated the conflict.[15] Possibility of capitalizing on the Sino-Soviet split was not considered because China was still viewed as isolationist, deeply radical in her communism, and not open to contact with the U.S. No matter how far rapprochement seemed from the horizon, Nixon revealed to Charles de Gaulle at the end of March, at Eisenhower's funeral, his determination to open dialogue with China. This was before he was aware of the extent that Sino-Soviet relations had become embittered.[16] Consideration of systematically exploiting Sino-Soviet hostilities had yet to fill memorandums and bureaucratic discussion.

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## **Rapprochement Policy Debates (April-August 1969)**

After the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist party in April 1969, Kissinger's analysis underlined the leadership's continued focus on domestic issues and predicted Chinese foreign policy to continue following the traditional Maoist line of supporting revolutions abroad.[17] Rapprochement was seen as dependent on the variable of time because of Mao's dominance in the Chinese Community Party. Washington assumed that China would remain hostile to the Soviet Union and the U.S. while Mao was in charge and only his departure could bring change to Chinese foreign policy.[18] Moreover, because of Maoist ideology, China would try to export revolution in Southeast Asia for many years to come. The CIA's played the same tune and predicted little hope for change. The goal was a gradual reduction of points of conflict in anticipation of a favorable post-Mao regime.[19] Despite such bleak circumstances, Nixon pushed for rapprochement, not knowing how far it would go. He knew immediate results were not likely, but saw the future problem China could be to regional politics.

On May 15, Kissinger chaired a Senior Review Group meeting discussing U.S. China policy (NSSM 14).[20] U.S. policy was being reevaluated because an isolationist China was a security threat no matter what policy it pursued due to its size and its weaker neighbors. The group agreed that it was imperative to bring China into the world community because this would make her more predictable; moreover, it was recognized that all changes were mere posturing for possible, future rapprochement. U.S. foreign policy issues entangled with China were listed as SALT, India, Pakistan arms policy, recognition of Mongolia, and post-Vietnam security—no discussion of using Sino-Soviet hostilities, let alone for U.S. gain. On the contrary, a powerful fear of rapprochement was that it would poison U.S.-Soviet relations.[21] The paper assumed China would not remain isolated because of its size and so the U.S. had to position itself for future Chinese leaders to influence China's behavior as it came out of isolation.

Nixon departed on his world tour on July 24, during which he kept implying openness to Chinese contact, having already relaxed the U.S. trade embargo against China in June.[22] When Nixon met with de Gaulle, he informed the French President that the U.S. Department of State wanted to contain China through a U.S.-Soviet bloc of allies. While he saw this as a good short-term policy, he reiterated his desire to eventually recognize China while acceding this as largely conjectural because relations with China were difficult. Visiting Ceaușescu in Romania, Nixon pointed out the priority he placed on good relations with the Soviets and hoped that relations with China could improve when China altered its approach to other nations. Again, the desire for an open China clashed with the reality of Chinese isolationism.

Green Marshall, Assistant Secretary for East Asian Affairs, recalled the misgivings of State's Soviet experts about Nixon's interest in rapprochement because of its potential to negatively impact U.S.-Soviet relations.[23] In June, Marshall had brought such concerns up to Nixon on a flight from Midway to Hawaii and Nixon "seemed determined to handle any US-Chinese rapprochement in a way that would not impair US-Soviet relations." [24] Consistent with this position, Nixon would tell ambassadors in Bangkok on July 30 that "we must not line up with either Moscow or Beijing. China's billion people and nuclear potential offer an unpleasant prospect, but so does Soviet adventurism in Asia." Nixon saw the dilemma and wanted it both ways—to defend against Soviet expansion while at the same time not wanting to create a stabilizing, friendly China. The solution was to continue reaching out to China, which may have immediate affects of giving the Soviets a second thought, while also posturing the U.S. a hand in the future role of China in Asia.

On August 3, when NSSM 14 was discussed again, the question posed was whether it was truly in the American interest to pull China out of isolation and remove containment barriers.[25] In the short-term, there would be challenges to U.S. Asian policy and losses for U.S. and its allies. However, the reward would be a long-term increased stability in East Asia. Moreover, because U.S. was not able to keep China isolated, it would be best to take advantage of inevitable change. Time and again, discussions of interests and objectives focused on regional issues and China's neighbors.

## **Whispers of Triangular Diplomacy**

Triangular diplomacy began to emerge when ongoing negotiations between Peking and Moscow failed to bring

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immediate results and growing speculation of a Soviet invasion. This did not lead directly to a furor of discussion in the White House on how to exploit both sides to further U.S. interests in Vietnam, as some historians have portrayed it.[26] Rather, triangular diplomacy was used to maintain stability in Asia. Just as rapprochement with China would help guide a critical player in Asian politics out of isolation for the sake of regional stability, it would also help prevent Russia from filling an Asian power vacuum as the U.S. retrenched militarily.[27]

On August 14, at a National Security Council meeting, Nixon made the stunning declaration that the Soviet Union was the aggressor and that China was to be helped.[28] The problem of strict U.S. impartiality in the Sino-Soviet split was that it favored the Soviets since they were the stronger party. Kissinger wanted to redefine impartiality as establishing a position wherein all Chinese resentment was aimed at the Soviets instead of the U.S.[29] However, because such a stance would still put U.S. in a hard place by being at odds with the Soviets, ideas began to form of how the U.S. might as well try to obtain concession on either Vietnam or Korea in the process.[30]

On September 9, in a conversation between Nixon, Kissinger, and Stoessel, Nixon commented on the bad reception Brezhnev's collective security pact idea had among Asian nations since it sought to contain China. Far East countries feared a U.S.-Soviet cabal against China because it might strengthen the Soviets to take over China through controlling its policies and actions.[31] In September, contingency plans were drawn to address various scenarios of a Soviet military offensive against China and U.S. strategy to capitalize on the split gradually entered into analyzing the Sino-Soviet split. Possibilities included blockading North Vietnam if the Soviets decided to blockade China, military pressure by landing troops north of the DMZ or offering a carrot to lessen Hanoi's stubbornness.[32]

It is upon these types of strategies in dealing with the triangular relationship with China and the Soviet Union that Nixon and Kissinger are caricatured into squeezing the advantageous circumstances for all concessions possible is created. Although it cannot be denied that Nixon and Kissinger tried to use the split in the communist bloc to further U.S. interests in North Vietnam and SALT, the long-term implications on Asia were always part of the decision framework. From August to September Soviets were asking U.S. contacts about how the administration would react to a surgical strike on Chinese nuclear facilities. Because U.S. responses could influence the way China perceived U.S. policy, Kissinger recommended Nixon to direct officials to make clear to Soviets that the U.S. would not follow Soviet tactics because it was not siding with the Soviets. Kissinger realized that such a stance would not benefit U.S.-Soviet relations, but long-term advantages in regards to China and Asia as a whole would outweigh short-term gains with the Soviets, especially with growing indication of a body of opinion in the Chinese Communist Party that wanted to make U.S.-China relations less ideological.[33]

As triangular diplomacy emerged, the primary thrust of the U.S. stance was to prevent an extension of Soviet influence in Asia just as Nixon and Kissinger saw U.S. power declining. The concessions they could get from the Soviets were natural ways to capitalize on the situation, but Sino-Soviet tensions were not seen as something to be encouraged. On the contrary, it was seen as potentially detrimental to the U.S. In a sentence, Nixon and Kissinger tried to make the best out of an undesirable Sino-Soviet tension.

## **A Risky, but Worthwhile Venture**

The disadvantages and advantages to the conflict were myriad, but a net balance could not be calculated. If Mao's regime survived after a Sino-Soviet war, China's prestige would be bolstered and would be a more dangerous opponent to U.S. interests in Asia. If the Soviet succeeded in making Chinese puppet regimes, Soviet influence in Asia would be significant and detrimental to U.S. allies in the region. If Mao's regime was toppled, China might devolve into a state of civil war and the U.S. would have to counter Soviet efforts to take advantage of the situation.[34]

With all these issues at hand, any decision the U.S. took would be fraught with dangerous repercussions. The risks were too great and the U.S. would be wise to do all it could to minimize clashes of major Sino-Soviet conflict.[35] The most prudent course of action to prevent making the situation more volatile was to avoid making the impression of taking sides. Nixon and Kissinger were not so rash as to toy with a high-risk, possibly nuclear border conflict for the mere sake of concessions in other areas of interest.

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Looking ahead two years to the China Summit in 1972 and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, considered one of Nixon's crowning achievements, we see the first fruits of his vision for a stable Asia through rapprochement with China. White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig, Jr. stressed the importance of the Shanghai Communiqué as ending the idea of a monolithic communist bloc dominated by the Soviet Union and forged a Sino-U.S. partnership to safeguard against Soviet Union adventurism in Asia.[36] During Nixon's post-Communiqué tour of Asia, he assured allies that their interests had been advanced through relaxed tensions.[37] Little did Nixon know, as he embarked on seeking détente with China in 1969, that substantive diplomatic contacts would be made while he was still in office. His visionary pursuit of a China that was a responsible member of the world community bore undeniable fruit in 1972 and would continue to benefit the United States until this very day.

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[1] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, Ltd., 1979), 164.

[2] Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon, Kissinger, and the Opening to China*, in *Nixon in the World*, ed. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 112.

[3] Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 281.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Richard Nixon, "Asia After Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967), 113-125.

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[6] Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 341.

[7] Michael Shaller, *Détente and the Strategic Triangle*, in *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 363.

[8] "US-Communist China Warsaw Talks," Digital National Security Archive, Confidential, Memorandum of Conversation (Item Number CH00037), January 14, 1969, <http://nsarchive.chadwyck.com/cat/displayItemId.do?queryType=cat&ItemID=CCH00037>. Digital National Security Archive will be referred to as DNSA.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] "Memorandum from President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger)," February 1, 1969, Document #3, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006). *Foreign Relations of the United States* collection below will be referred to as *FRUS*.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] "U.S. Policy Toward Peking and Instructions for the February 20 Warsaw Meeting" or "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger to President Nixon)," February 12, 1969, Document #6, *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), 12.

[13] *Ibid.*, 13.

[14] "U.S.-Chicom Talks," DNSA, Secret, Cable 452 (Item Number CH00063), Feb. 20, 1969, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url\\_ver=Z39.88-2004&res\\_dat=xri:dnsa&rft\\_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CCH00063](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?url_ver=Z39.88-2004&res_dat=xri:dnsa&rft_dat=xri:dnsa:article:CCH00063).

[15] Kissinger, 172.

[16] Li Danhui, *Vietnam and Chinese Policy Toward the United States*, in *Normalization of Sino-American Relations*, ed. William C. Kirby, Robert S. Ross, and Gong Li (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 180.

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[20] "Minutes of the Senior Review Group Meeting," May 15, 1969, Document #13, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Kissinger, 180.

[23] Marshall Green, John H. Holdridge, and William N. Stokes, *War and Peace with China* (Bethesda, MD: DACOR Press, 1994), 86.

[24] *Ibid.*, 87.

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[25] "Response to National Security Study Memorandum 14," August 8, 1969, Document #23, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).

[26] Danhui, 208.

[27] Vitaly Kozyrev, *Soviet Policy Toward the United States and China*, in *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations: An International History*, ed. William C. Kirby, Robert S. Ross, and Gong Li (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 258.

[28] Kissinger, 182.

[29] "Memorandum for the Record of the Washington Special Actions Group Meeting," September 4, 1969, Document #29, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] "Memorandum of Conversation" or "Conversation with the President Concerning China and U.S.-Chinese Contacts," September 9, 1969, Document #31, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), 81.

[32] "Minutes of the Washington Special Actions Group Meeting," September 17, 1969, Document #32, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).

[33] "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon" or "The US Role in Soviet Maneuvering Against China," September 29, 1969, Document #37, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).

[34] "Draft Response to National Security Study Memorandum 63," or "NSSM-63: U.S. Policy on Current Sino-Soviet Differences," October 17, 1969, Document #40, *FRUS 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), 112. This is a summary of the difficulties that lied in discerning how the U.S. should react in the possibility of Sino-Soviet war; the rest of the draft response to NSSM 63 contains more detailed information.

[35] *Ibid.*

[36] Alexander Haig, Jr., *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1994), 265.

[37] John Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide: An insider's Account of Normalization of U.S.-China Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997), 98.

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