

The Myth of Nixon's Opening of China

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On February 21, 1972, Air Force One descended through Beijing's early morning haze as the highly-trained pilots navigated the Boeing VC-137C, nicknamed the "Spirit of '76", towards the runway. Inside sat the 37th President of the United States, Richard M. Nixon, nervously awaiting the imminent meetings with the leaders of the Communist Party of China, including Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai.¹ In the context of Cold War-era international relations and geopolitics, perhaps the single most historically significant and decisive event was President Nixon's establishment of official (and public) diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. His trip to Beijing in early 1972 marked the beginning of a certain rapprochement between these two countries and signaled the evolution of the relationships between China, the United States, and the Soviet Union.

¹ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007) 19.

In the aftermath of World War II, as the Japanese threat to China ceased to exist, the two competing factions within the country, the Guomindang led by Chiang Kai-Shek, and the Communists led by Mao Zedong, were able to focus their efforts and resources on defeating each other instead of defending against Japanese occupation. This resulted in a bloody civil war between the Guomindang, the government that led the Republic of China, and the People's Liberation Army that lasted until the Communists claimed victory in 1950. At this point, the Nationalists were forced to retreat to the island of Taiwan, and the CCP was able to take full control and declared the existence of the People's Republic of China.²

During the Civil War, the United States Government threw its support behind Chiang Kai-Shek and the Guomindang in hopes that they would be able to defeat the Communists, remain in control of China, and stem the spread of Communism around the world. Despite American support however, the Guomindang was defeated, stoking fears inside the U.S. Government that communist controlled China would "therefore, significantly affect the world balance of power, since it would make that country a satellite of the Soviet Union."³ The perceived threat of a Soviet controlled China was front of mind for many in the U.S. government, as is apparent in the language of a

² Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 94-109.

³ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 77.

memorandum drafted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff towards the end of the Chinese Civil War. "A Soviet position of dominance over Asia, Western Europe, or both, would constitute a major threat to United States Security. United States security interests require that China be kept free from Soviet domination; otherwise all of Asia will in all probability pass into the sphere of the USSR."⁴ The language of this memo represents an explicit statement of the fundamentals of the United States' Policy of Containment during the Cold War. That is to say that the United States government believed that above all else, Soviet power had to be contained and communism had to be prevented from spreading. An effort at containment resulted in the United States government cutting off contact to mainland China, and only engaging in diplomacy with Chiang Kai Shek's government in Taipei in response to the loss of China to the CCP in 1950. The resulting freeze in relations between the United States and People's Republic of China remained until the two governments began hosting talks under the Nixon administration.⁵

Since the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, the United States had not officially recognized the People's Republic of China on the international stage, and this frigid rivalry manifested itself in political and military clashes during the wars in Korea and Vietnam. Eventually, the

⁴ NSC 22/1, "Possible Courses of Action for U.S. with Respect to the Critical Situation in China," August 6, 1948, FR: 1948, VIII, 133.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 94-109.

allure of their steadily aligning geopolitical and diplomatic interests in Asia presented an attractive middle-ground that allowed for the governments of China and the United States to officially reconcile. That being said, the representations of the historic and diplomatic implications of this rapprochement have been habitually mischaracterized. While the opening of diplomatic relations with China was historically significant, it was not the complete paradigm shift of Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy that it has been made out to be. Rather, it represented a recognition of the evolution of post-War bipolarity, a continuation of the policy of containment concerning the Soviet Union, as well as the United States' willingness to engage with a communist regime in order to project American influence.

Based on these observations, this paper will deal with several different issues. Firstly, it will explore the foreign policy style of President Nixon and his National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger in order to establish a grounding from which it is easier to understand the broader policy decisions that were made. The paper will also deal with the evolution of the international context within which the US-China rapprochement took place, and what this development meant in regard to the traditional containment strategy. Finally, it will detail how the characterization of Nixon's opening of China as an about face on years of foreign policy represents a fundamentally flawed understanding of Cold War policy.

One of Richard Nixon's most iconic qualities as a historical character was his complicated persona. Historians and political satirists alike have gone to great lengths describing and re-litigating Nixon's personality traits, from the quirky and benign to the sinister and paranoid. Even as a young congressman, Nixon revealed his penchant for paranoia in a House speech that he made on January 26, 1950. The speech was a commentary on the Alger Hiss case, which had to do with State Department official who was accused of being a spy during the campaign led by Senator Joseph McCarthy to root out alleged communists in the United States Government.⁶ In his speech, Nixon describes communist influence in the government as a "sinister conspiracy" that "disarms and dooms our diplomats to defeat in advance before they go to conferences."⁷ This address to the House of Representatives shows a conspiratorial mindset that would come to be one of Nixon's most recognizable traits. Additionally, it displays a tendency to mistrust certain areas of the government that would evolve into a hyper-paranoid and controlling approach to the presidency.

One specific manifestation of this approach was Nixon's disdain-filled relationship with what he called "the bureaucracy", especially within the State Department. He shared this contempt for the State Department bureaucracy

⁶ Richard Nixon, "The Hiss Case—A Lesson for the American People," (January 26, 1950), 19-59.

⁷ Nixon, "The Hiss Case—A Lesson for the American People," 59.

with his National Security Advisor, and partner in his foreign policy tour de force, Henry Kissinger. It was because of this mutual hatred for the State Department that “they developed a conspiratorial approach to foreign policy management”, as Lawrence Eagleburger, a Kissinger aide and Secretary of State under the first President Bush, remarked.⁸ In President Nixon’s opinion, “you need a President for foreign policy; no Secretary of State is really important; the President makes foreign policy.”⁹ For the most part, Nixon and Kissinger excluded or kept the State Department in the dark on a large portion of important decisions of foreign policy. In her book, Margaret MacMillan notes that Nixon believed the Department to be filled with “egghead liberals”, and as Kissinger put it “our basic attitude was the hell with the State Department; let them screw around with the little ones.”¹⁰ In the same vein, the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy style had an “emphasis upon maneuver and manipulation, with its unprecedented centralization and secrecy (raising thorny constitutional questions of accountability).”¹¹ This way, Nixon and Kissinger were able to circumvent the slow and inefficient bureaucracy that plagued the decision-making process of

⁸ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 58.

⁹ Roland Evans and Robert D. Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power* (New York: Random House, 1971), 11.

¹⁰ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 59.

¹¹ Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 50.

foreign policy and consolidate power for themselves within the White House.

This consolidation of power was made official in the "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs-Designate to President Elect Nixon", in which Kissinger outlines an updated structure of the National Security Council ("NSC") system. In this document, approved by President Nixon in December of 1968, Kissinger proposed an expanded role for the NSC in the decision-making process of foreign policy. He argued that "the National Security Council should be the principal forum for issues requiring interagency coordination, especially where Presidential decisions of a middle and long-range nature are involved."¹² Furthermore, Kissinger asserted that the NSC should be involved in the process of decision making when it comes to vital areas of foreign policy in Europe, the Middle East, as well as in East Asia.¹³

All of this is to say that throughout his tenure as President, Nixon continually consolidated the power of foreign policy decision making in the White House, with the help of his National Security Advisor. This power grab came as a result of Nixon and Kissinger's mutual contempt and mistrust for the State Department, and for government bureaucracy in general. As the prime movers of United States foreign policy, Nixon and Kissinger had the

¹² Henry Kissinger "Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs-Designate to President Elect Nixon," *Foreign Relations*, Vol. II (1968-1976), 4.

¹³ Kissinger, "Memorandum from the President's Assistant," 8-9.

prerogative to make changes to the China policy as they saw fit. One such change, was the evolution of the post-War ideology of bipolarity. While this marked disdain for the State Department and subsequent consolidation of power in the realm of foreign policy may seem like another bit of Nixon trivia, it is vital to take these factors into account when assessing whether or not the diplomatic opening of China was a paradigm shift.

In the aftermath of World War II, two nations emerged as the unequivocal world powers: The United States and the Soviet Union. The rivalry that developed between these two nations typified the landscape of geopolitics and international relations during the early years of the Cold War. As such, a certain bipolarity defined the post-War relations, not only between the United States and the Soviet Union, but also between their allies and the countries that were used as staging zones for the perpetuation of their respective ideologies and influence, such as the nations of Southeast Asia and Central America. Undoubtedly, the philosophy of bipolarity shaped the early Cold War, but as the relations between international powers evolved, so too did the landscape of international relations. The process of international evolution deserves a paper unto itself to fully explicate, but suffice it to say that a combination of domestic and foreign crises led to Nixon and his administration reevaluation of how they looked at the Cold War and the United States' role in the world order. In Kissinger's words;

“For twenty years, Wilsonian idealism had enabled American leaders to conduct their global role with missionary vigor. But the America of the late 1960s-- stalemated in Indochina and torn by domestic conflict--required a more complex and nuanced definition of its international enterprise...Nixon inherited a society rent by frustration, whose future would depend on its ability to frame attainable long-term goals and to persevere in those goals even in the face of adversity without yielding to self-doubt.”¹⁴

This passage perfectly exemplifies the situation in which Nixon and Kissinger found themselves during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Not only was the crisis in Vietnam coming to a head, but the United States' very credibility was beginning to take damage on the international stage. In this way, Nixon was forced into a situation that called for a large degree of adaptation and evolution. Additionally, the shifting international atmosphere was further complicated by one of the watershed moments of the Cold War, the Sino-Soviet split.

This rift between the two supposed leaders of the communist world, caused by military clashes along the Soviet-Chinese border in 1969, not only shook the foundations of the international order, but also deconstructed the myth of monolithic communism. The deconstruction of this myth called into question the foundational theories of American anti-communism set forth in documents like Kennan's *Sources of Soviet Conduct*, and

¹⁴ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 704.

the Truman Doctrine. Ultimately, the combination of these changing factors in the realm of international relations forced Nixon and Kissinger to face an international system that was becoming more heavily based on a plurality of powers as opposed to the strictly bipolar relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union of decades past. In his study of Nixon-Kissinger foreign strategy, Robert S. Litwak describes the situation in the post-1969 period as “the ongoing dilemma of reconciling continued (indeed revitalized) military bipolarity with the new conditions of global pluralism.”¹⁵ Thusly, the growth of international pluralism, and the Sino-Soviet split that aided in its exacerbation, also acted as a catalyst for the Nixon-Kissinger China policy that would eventually become rapprochement.

One popular historical argument concerning Nixon’s foreign policy and his trip to Beijing in 1972 is that it represented a complete 180 degree turn away from the previous decades of Cold War containment policy that had been adopted by every President since the end of World War II, beginning with President Truman and spanning through President Johnson. This policy of containment was largely founded upon and inspired by the ideas put forth by George F. Kennan in his article, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”, published in 1947. Kennan articulates what would eventually become the central doctrine of the containment policy when he wrote that “Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that can be

¹⁵ Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, 56.

contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, put which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence.”¹⁶ This sentiment expressed in Kennan’s writing was a foundational aspect of the United States’ foreign policy going forward.

While China’s opening did represent a new era in Cold War international relations, it was not as dichotomous as the traditional view suggests. In reality, the opening was rather in line with the previous decades of the containment of Soviet power, as well as the President’s adherence to a realist/realpolitik view of international relations. Nixon believed that in order to promote a successful and stable foreign policy, the United States must act deliberately with its interests as well as the interests of other nation states in mind. The conception of political realism that Nixon subscribed to was very much in line with the pioneering works of prominent international relations realists of the 20th century like Hans Morgenthau. In his work, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, he wrote, “The statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers. The popular mind, unaware of the fine distinctions of the statesman’s thinking, reasons more often than not in the simple moralistic and legalistic terms of absolute good and

¹⁶ George F. Kennan, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* 25, no. 4 (July, 1947), 576.

absolute evil.”¹⁷ In the context of the Nixon Administration, this foreign policy stance placed less importance on what Kissinger called “American idealism”, or ideological motivations, in other words. In his first annual report on foreign policy, President Nixon wrote:

“Our objective, in the first instance, is to support our interests over the long run with a sound foreign policy. The more that policy is based on a realistic assessment of our and others’ interests, the more effective our role in the world can be. We are not involved in the world because we have commitments; we have commitments because we are involved. Our interests must shape our commitments, rather than the other way around.”¹⁸

For a Cold Warrior like Nixon, this heavier focus on national interests as opposed to ideological concerns came as a shock to many people, and he would suffer attacks from the Right as a result.¹⁹ That said, understanding Nixon’s foreign policy framework does aid in understanding the necessary conditions that allowed for the opening of diplomatic relations with China. Namely, the Sino-Soviet split of 1969 presented an opportunity for Nixon to not only continue a policy of Soviet containment, but also to de-emphasize ideological motivations for the sake of the promotion of national interests. This Split also brought about

¹⁷ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 165.

¹⁸ First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970s, February 18, 1970, in *Nixon Papers*, 1970 vol., 119.

¹⁹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 712.

a phenomenon that has come to be known as Triangular Diplomacy between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. While Triangular Diplomacy as a conceptual framework has had its fair share of detractors over the years, it is useful in that it helps us to explicate how Nixon's realist foreign agenda took shape, as well as showing how the opening of China was a continuation of the Containment Policy. Specifically, the opening of China allowed for the United States to promote the PRC as a counterbalance to Soviet power in East Asia as well as creating a so called "China card" that could be played in negotiations with Moscow. In other words, "this was also the opportunity for Washington to exploit concretely the Sino-Soviet schism to its geopolitical advantage. By playing the 'China card'...the United States could exert pressure on the Soviets for greater responsiveness in the superpower détente process and in trying to find a negotiated settlement in Vietnam."²⁰ For Nixon and Kissinger, the opening was the perfect opportunity to promote détente as well as serve the national interests of the United States abroad. In Kissinger's own words, "I would begin a dialogue with communist China. In a subtle triangle of relations between Washington, Peking, and Moscow, we improve the possibilities of accommodations with each as we increase our options toward both."²¹ Diplomatic relations with China acted as a

²⁰ Evelyn Goh, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the 'Soviet Card' in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971-1974," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 (June 2005): 475.

²¹ Speech Written for Nelson Rockefeller, July 1968, quoted in Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston 1979), 165.

bargaining chip and was leveraged against Moscow during negotiations and was also used as a counterbalance to Soviet power and expansionism, especially in East Asia.

Taken collectively, the evidence provided suggests that Nixon's opening of China was not the paradigm shift that it has been touted as and was rather in line with the decades-old policy of Soviet containment. Despite the previous analysis, however, the question remains; why were Nixon and Kissinger so willing to engage with a revolutionary communist regime that imprisoned political dissident and oppressed its own people? Nixon's realist philosophy goes a certain distance in explaining this willingness, but this is likely a grand oversimplification. With the growing fissures between Beijing and Moscow and the subsequent demise of the myth of monolithic communism resulting from them came the potential for a projection of American power. China represented an attractive opportunity to Nixon and Kissinger to engage with a communist regime, and potentially use the power of diplomatic and economic relations to project American influence. Beyond just promoting a peaceful relationship with the PRC and stability in East Asia, establishing direct relations with China opened the door for the introduction of American free-market and democratic ideals into a communist nation. As early as 1967, Nixon supported the idea of a relationship with China for purposes other than merely having a diplomatic connection. In a piece that he wrote for Foreign Affairs, he said; "Taking the long view, we

simply 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."²² Not only does Nixon mention the country of China itself, but also expresses hope that the Chinese people may one day be brought out of "angry isolation" and into the international (presumably Western-dominated/neoliberal) fold. This goes a step further than merely having a diplomatic relationship with the government of the People's Republic of China, but also with the people of the People's Republic of China.

Additionally, there were definite signs that a "moderate line" was beginning to emerge within the CCP, promoted by Zhou Enlai. This new direction was characterized by a more moderate foreign policy, and a de-emphasizing of political radicalism in favor of economic pragmatism for the sake of modernization.²³ China had suffered from economic stagnation and famine for years as a result of its isolationist policies when it came to international trade. Zhou Enlai identified this and saw the need to engage economically with non-socialist nations.²⁴ To mitigate these

²² Richard M. Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 1 (October 1967), 121.

²³ Lorenz Lüthi, "Chinese Foreign Policy, 1960-1979" *The Cold War in East Asia: 1945-1991* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011) 156-163.

²⁴ Zhou Enlai yu Zhongdong: Jinian Zhou Enlai zongli shishi 30 zhounian" [Zhou Enlai and the Middle East: The 30th anniversary of Zhou Enlai's passing]. *Dangshi Zongheng*, no. 1 (2006), 8.

crises, China opened up trade with countries like the United Kingdom, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Austria, Japan, and Italy by the mid-1960s.²⁵ From Washington's perspective, the willingness of Beijing to open itself to Western markets presented an opportunity to project American influence through free-trade and economic relations. Along these lines, there is definite evidence of a socio-economic and cultural exchange that took place between these two countries after the opening. "Wester Union established direct telegraph services, AT&T linked the two countries with direct telephone service, and RCA built three satellite receiving stations so that China would have instant contact with all continents. More than 50 delegations were exchanged by 1976. The Chinese have studied American industry, medicine, science, and agriculture."²⁶ Another example of the introduction of American ideals in China is through open trade and economic exchange. For example;

"U.S.--Chinese trade increased from zero in 1970 to 1.06 billion in 1976...Since 1972, the U.S. has sent more than \$1.6 billion worth of agricultural products and \$200 million worth of machinery. Boeing sold ten 707 commercial jets with spare parts, and United Aircraft shipped eight 707 engines. Most of the equipment has been used to develop China's infant oil industry. Since China has an estimated 70 billion

²⁵ Lorenz Lüthi, "Chinese Foreign Policy," 157.

²⁶ Harry M. Joiner, *American Foreign Policy: The Kissinger Era*, (Huntsville: Strode Publishers, 1977), 89.

barrels of oil, it will probably purchase considerable oil technology from the United States."²⁷

Ten, or even five years prior to Nixon's election, the idea of trading billions of dollars' worth of goods with the most populous communist nation on Earth would have been unheard of. However, as a direct result of Nixon and Kissinger's opening, the United States was able to introduce the spoils of American free-market capitalism into the heart of "red China."

While Nixon's opening of China was certainly one of the most historically momentous events of the Cold War, it has been repeatedly mischaracterized over the years as a total foreign policy paradigm shift, away from post-War containment and stringent anti-communism. In reality, the opening was a manifestation of Nixon and Kissinger's recognition of the evolution of the international order, from post-War bipolarity to an international system heavily based on pluralism. Rather than operating as a shift away from post-War containment of the Soviets, Nixon's China policy actually served as a counter to Soviet power and expansionism in East Asia with China operating as an extension of the United States' policy of Soviet containment. The willingness of Nixon and Kissinger to engage with a communist regime signified the breakdown of the myth of monolithic communism. It also allowed for the United States to project the influence of its free-market economy and

²⁷ Harry M. Joiner, *American Foreign Policy*, 90.

democratic principles into a nation that was previously completely isolated. Ultimately, as with most historical events, it is vital to nuance the conceptions of Nixon and Kissinger's foreign policy in order to craft a fuller understanding of the President's visit to China and its consequences.