The Complexities of Rapprochement

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Henry Kissinger—Zhou Enlai Secret Talks in Beijing, June, 1972

Robert S. McNamara: ...My God, off to Peking again. I can’t keep up with you.

Henry A. Kissinger: I tell you, I love that Chinese food

—Telephone conversation, 14 June, 1972

On 19 June, 1972, assistant to the president for national security affairs Henry A. Kissinger traveled to Beijing for talks with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai and other senior officials of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The month before the visit, President Richard Nixon and Kissinger had launched a major military campaign against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), with air strikes against Hanoi and the mining of Haiphong harbor, as a reprisal against North Vietnam’s spring offensive. The Chinese had protested the bombing and they had also objected, albeit privately, to aerial intrusions and inadvertent bombings by U.S. naval aircraft. Kissinger was not at all sure how friendly a reception he would receive; nevertheless, as he reported soon after his arrival, “the initial reception has been the warmest yet in personal terms.” The hosts were “warm and friendly” showing their resolve to “not let the Vietnam situation stand in the way” of better relations with Washington. Demonstrations of the welcoming Chinese attitude included prolonged applause by cadre at a performance of a “revolutionary” Chinese opera and Zhou’s hosting of the American party for a picnic at the Summer Palace. When Zhou and his guests took a boat ride before the picnic, it was “before the startled eyes of Chinese bystanders who applauded vigorously” and, Kissinger believed, spontaneously.

For Kissinger, the substance of the discussions matched the cordiality of the reception. The talks with Zhou Enlai were “my most extensive talks ever” with him. Zhou engaged in “extraordinarily candid” discussions of Vietnam, the “first really detailed discussion of Vietnam that we have had with the Chinese.” Moreover, the talks showed what Kissinger saw as progress in mutual understanding on a number of international issues, especially the role of the Soviet Union in world affairs. Nevertheless in the face of Zhou’s complaints about the aerial intrusions, Kissinger had much explaining to do. Moreover, Zhou implied that the U.S. was backsliding toward a “two Chinas” policy and moving too slowly on normalizing relations. While these problems troubled Kissinger, he left Beijing convinced that his strategy to isolate Hanoi was working and that Beijing would encourage a negotiated settlement. With the compatibility of U.S. and Chinese views on world politics, especially the Soviet challenge, an optimistic Kissinger believed that Beijing was becoming a “tacit ally” in the Cold War against Moscow.

The substance of the talks in Beijing was completely secret; the media could only speculate over what transpired. Kissinger, however, would sustain the secrecy. In his lengthy memoir, White House Years, he devoted only one paragraph to the June 1972 visit, only noting that he briefed the Chinese leadership on the Nixon-Brezhnev summit held a few weeks earlier to maintain the “momentum” of US-China relationship but also to “discomfit Hanoi.” Kissinger’s account did not even hint at the importance to which he credited the visit at the time.

The declassified records of the Kissinger-Zhou discussion make it easy to understand why he refrained from writing about the visit in any detail. The aerial intrusions were highly sensitive and remained a shared secret between Beijing and Washington for years to come. That these incidents suggested some recklessness in policy—allowing U.S. military aircraft to fly so close to the Chinese border—may have added to Kissinger’s reticence. Another sensitive aspect of the discussions was Kissinger’s detailed exposition of the “decent interval” exit strategy...
from Vietnam, an approach that neither Nixon nor Kissinger ever acknowledged publicly. Zhou’s complaints about Taiwan and normalization may also have been difficult to write about. Finally, a focal point of the talks with Zhou—the detailed discussion of the Moscow summit, of Soviet policy, and Kissinger’s exposition of U.S. nuclear weapons policy—would also have been relevant to Kissinger’s non-discussion of this visit.

Historical writing on U.S.-China relations in the first years of the rapprochement is in its early stages. Nevertheless, older and newer work, some of which uses newly declassified sources, yield important insights about Kissinger’s June, 1972 visit to Beijing. For example, before declassified documents became available but informed by interviews with key officials, Raymond Garthoff challenged Kissinger’s claim that White House policy toward Beijing and Moscow was even-handed by arguing that policy actually tilted strongly towards Beijing as evidenced by his detailed briefing to Zhou of the Moscow summit talks. Kissinger would never make the same favor to the Soviets. In an important book using the new sources, Evelyn Goh shows how Nixon and Kissinger shifted policy toward a highly risky conception of U.S.-PRC tacit alliance against Moscow in order to accommodate and counter emerging doubts in Beijing about détente and thereby “maintain a sense of momentum in the relationship.” Also relevant and highly significant are recent works on Vietnam War diplomacy; Qiang Zhai shows how Beijing began to conduct its Vietnam diplomacy so as not to jeopardize rapprochement with Washington while Jeffrey Kimball has broken ground by demonstrating the importance of the “decent interval” to Nixon-Kissinger strategy. Jussi Hanhimäki’s recent Kissinger biography also emphasizes the importance of the decent interval concept in the June 1972 talks. Finally, Allen Romberg’s recent book on the Taiwan issue suggests that Nixon and Kissinger may not have “fully absorbed the centrality of Taiwan to PRC interests.” This problem suggests the likelihood that the Taiwan issue would strain U.S.-China relations.

A close look at the declassified U.S. record, as well as relevant British documents, shows that the existing scholarship provides an important starting point for putting the June, 1972 Kissinger-Zhou meetings in perspective. Not only do the documents show strong evidence of a tilt toward Beijing, they suggest that Kissinger saw it as necessary to accommodate Beijing’s concerns about Soviet power and Moscow-Washington détente. Declassified sources also reveal how both Zhou and Kissinger worked to prevent tensions over the Vietnam War from impairing the developing rapprochement. Further, transcripts of the meetings reveal Kissinger advancing the “decent interval” Vietnam exit strategy and Zhou’s serious effort to grapple with it.

As valuable as the historical literature is, Kissinger’s June 1972 visit to Beijing deserves extended discussion because the declassified record elucidates the U.S.-China dialogue in important and unexpected ways. The archival record shows that Kissinger tilted U.S. policy much further than has been disclosed by informing Zhou that the U.S. nuclear umbrella extended to China. This top secret offer was highly risky because it could endanger Kissinger’s priority—détente with Moscow; nevertheless, he believed that it demonstrated the White House’s commitment to China’s independence, which he saw as a key to the world balance of power and, tacitly, U.S. preponderance. The declassified record also discloses a hitherto obscure point of U.S.-China tension: U.S. aerial intrusions over the China-North Vietnam border and the secret Chinese complaints about the incidents. Finally, the documents reveal Zhou’s unhappiness over White House statements that deviated from the “one China” policy. The mild tensions over the issue during Kissinger’s visit presaged more basic differences that surfaced during the Ford administration.

Kissinger’s talks with Zhou ranged widely, from Japan and South Asia to the German question. Instead of discussing the conversations as a whole, this essay reviews the few subjects which had the most pressing relevance—the Vietnam War, the Soviet Union, and the Taiwan problem—to the Beijing-Washington relationship. Undoubtedly, Chinese sources in translation would be of value to elucidating the motives and strategies of the PRC leadership but the U.S. record of the June 1972 talks sufficiently illuminates the complexity of the early phases of rapprochement. Points of tension over the Vietnam War and Taiwan issues notwithstanding, the documents show how shared concerns over Soviet power encouraged both leaders to protect the new relationship from the disagreements. While Kissinger, motivated by concept of tacit alliance, tried to strengthen the relationship through security guarantees against Soviet nuclear attack, at the same time he was determined to pursue détente with Beijing’s adversary. This was a risky strategy but Kissinger believed that manipulative diplomacy could make Beijing and Moscow accommodating thereby preserving U.S. freedom of action and a central position for American power.

1. Context
The June, 1972 visit was the consequence of the intricate and protracted secret dialogue between the Nixon White House and the Chinese leadership which led to Kissinger’s secret trip in July, 1971, Nixon’s trip to China in February, 1972, and the Shanghai Communiqué. In spite of apparent conflicts of interest—such as support for opposing sides of the Vietnam War and China’s opposition to U.S. ties with Taiwan and the security treaty with Japan—both powers found a new relationship transcending two decades of tension and hostility to be possible, necessary, and desirable. Determined to keep the United States a “Pacific power,” Nixon wanted to transform U.S. relations with world’s most populous country and the world’s newest nuclear weapons state. In light of the Sino-Soviet split, Nixon and Kissinger saw great strategic benefits from a new relationship with Beijing; triangular diplomacy would shift the balance of power in the U.S.’s favor and strengthen its leverage in dealings with its Soviet rival. Moreover, in light of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s top priority—ending the Vietnam War—they hoped that China would encourage its Vietnamese allies to take a more forthcoming attitude in the Paris talks. Just as important, especially as the 1972 election approached, they saw the very act of rapprochement with a Communist adversary as a great help in neutralizing the adverse domestic political impact of the continued fighting in Vietnam.

In Beijing, Mao and Zhou, once concerned about U.S.-Soviet collaboration against China, apparently saw ties with Washington in part as a geopolitical imperative; developing ties with a lesser threat, American imperialism, was necessary to balance off a worse threat, the Soviet empire. An important study by Mao’s military advisers used language paralleling Nixon’s apprehensions about a new Sino-Soviet bloc: the “last thing the U.S. imperialists are willing to see is a Sino-Soviet war, as this would [allow the Soviets] to build up a big empire more powerful than the American empire.” While security concerns were important to Mao and Zhou, prestige considerations were just as significant: if the leading capitalist power developed ties with revolutionary China, it could only raise Beijing’s international standing.

Observing that what brought Beijing and Washington together was “was necessity, not love,” Kissinger believed that it took a “tremendous philosophical upheaval” for Chinese revolutionaries, “men of very great philosophical, almost religious motivation,” to accept rapprochement with a state that been a longstanding adversary. They had concluded, however, that “among all their dangers we were the least.” Yet Mao and Zhou believed that nothing could be settled without an understanding on the Taiwan problem. For them, the status quo of U.S. diplomatic and military relations with Taiwan was unacceptable; thus, rapprochement could not begin until the United States gave up its special relationship with Taiwan and recognized the principle of “one China.”

The Shanghai Communiqué reflected the “necessities” of both governments, with each asserting its views on Taiwan. On the one hand, China declared that Taiwan was a “province of China” and “China’s internal affair.” One the other hand, the United States conceded that Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait agreed that there is “but one China” but reaffirmed “its interest in a peaceful solution of the Taiwan question,” an implicit avowal that the United States had a diplomatic and political interest in how the two parties settled their differences. Privately, Kissinger and Nixon promised that they would not support Taiwanese independence and would withdraw U.S. forces from Taiwan, including nuclear weapons. Forces withdrawal would, as the communiqué asserted, depend on “tensions in the area” diminishing, that is, as a Vietnam settlement unfolded. Diplomatic normalization would occur in Nixon’s second term.

With the Communiqué, both sides agreed to leave the resolution of the Taiwan problem for the future. As Zhou told Nixon, “we have already waited over twenty years and we can wait a few more years.” By agreeing to “wait,” Zhou and Mao showed great flexibility on what was for them an important matter. Kissinger acknowledged the degree of flexibility when he observed that the language on a peaceful solution “runs counter” to Beijing’s view that Taiwan was an internal matter. If the United States had made a statement about the Vietnam negotiations that mentioned a peaceful solution, “he observed, it would be regarded as a trick formula for perpetual [U.S.] involvement.” While Kissinger noted that the Communiqué did not require Washington to take any immediate action he denied that “we have tricked the Chinese” because “they are not trickable.” What the Chinese wanted, he argued, was “a fig leaf for their domestic policy, in order to justify why suddenly Enemy Number One has become somebody with whom they are pursuing a parallel policy.”

The Communiqué also included language opposing “hegemony” in the “Asia—Pacific region” a not so subtle reference to the Cold War considerations that brought the two powers together. Indeed, shared concern about Soviet foreign and military policy underlay much of the Nixon-Zhou dialogue. For example, noting that during the South Asian crisis he had been ready to “warn the Soviet Union against undertaking an attack on China,” Nixon went further by declaring that the “US would oppose any attempt by the Soviet Union to engage in aggressive action
against China.” Nixon and Kissinger made a series of commitments to Zhou concerning U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union, “including equality of treatment, meticulous debriefing, and deflection of pressures.” Thus, not only did Kissinger provide the Chinese with an intelligence briefing on Soviet military forces, he promised to keep Beijing thoroughly “informed of all significant negotiations and agreements with the Soviet Union.” These commitments and the briefing, were early moves, if not the first moves, in the White House’s tilt to Beijing.

On the Vietnam War both sides calmly stated and restated their positions but neither side deeply probed the other’s thinking. Before the summit, Hanoi had urged the Chinese to shun discussions of Vietnam with the Americans, but Zhou refused. Nevertheless, he endorsed Hanoi’s negotiating positions and refused to make any commitments to help Washington. Beijing would not “meddle” in the DRV’s affairs but Zhou urged “bold action” by the Americans to end the war so that Moscow did not develop strong influence over Hanoi. For his part, Nixon emphasized the U.S. withdrawal strategy and elements in the U.S negotiating position involving cease fire and return of POWs. Like Zhou, he played up the Soviet angle; Moscow would grow stronger in Hanoi if the war dragged on. He rejected the DRV’s insistence on the overthrow of Thieu, arguing that such a move would undermine the credibility of American power. Nixon did suggest a possible method for initiating a political settlement involving Thieu’s voluntary resignation and an “impartial commission” to run national elections, but it was in the middle of a long statement in which he also threatened “very strong” action if North Vietnam “chooses to step up the fighting.” Even though both Nixon and Zhou were determined to support their allies, it was evident that both wanted to defuse Vietnam as a source of tension.

One of the commitments that Nixon made to Zhou in Beijing was that after the U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow, “Dr. Kissinger [will] come and report personally to the Prime Minister” on the discussions and the agreements reached there. Nixon may well have expected that a Kissinger trip would sustain any political benefits associated with rapprochement by showing that it remained on a steady course. A few weeks after the Nixon visit, the two sides had agreed that Kissinger would travel to Beijing in June; by mid-May they agreed that the trip would be announced on 13 June (although that would be later changed to the 14th). Kissinger kept Huang Hua, the PRC’s ambassador to the United Nations, informed of the U.S.-Soviet discussions leading up to the summit, including Kissinger’s secret visit to Moscow in April.

The outlook for the Moscow summit and Kissinger’s June trip to Beijing changed dramatically in late March 1972 when the North Vietnamese launched their spring offensive; Hanoi hoped for a decisive victory over South Vietnam partly to strengthen their negotiating position, even “if possible to destroy Nixon’s chances for reelection.” To offset the offensive and demonstrate the credibility of the threat of “very strong action” that he had made to Zhou, Nixon ordered a major bombing campaign across North Vietnam, including shelling of cities on the coast. As the DRV offensive pushed back South Vietnamese forces, Nixon decided to “go for broke” and on 8 May ordered Operation Linebacker to extend the bombing to the Hanoi and Haiphong areas as well as to mine the latter’s harbor. When Nixon made the final decisions, his judgment was that they would not cause the Soviets to cancel the summit. Nixon and Kissinger soon learned that Moscow was no more willing than Beijing to let the war interfere with détente. Thus, the summit proceeded as scheduled in late May.

One of the objectives of the expanded bombing was to destroy Hanoi’s military capabilities by wrecking transportation systems—highways and railways—that carried supplies from China into the DRV. This involved a risky move, relaxation of the twenty-five mile buffer zone that had kept U.S. aircraft away from the DRV-China border. As May turned into June, Beijing began making secret protests to the White House about U.S. aerial intrusions. In addition, Chinese merchant ships in DRV waters experienced close calls from U.S. bombing. Besides a number of intrusions by U.S. naval air in early June, U.S. bombs allegedly damaged several structures, including a bridge, while anti-tank cluster bombs fell on Aikou on 10 June. So that the incidents did not flare into a crisis, Mao and Zhou continued to keep them under wraps although the Chinese Foreign Ministry publicly stated that the bombing of North Vietnam was threatening China’s security. Kissinger became acutely aware of the dangers; as he explained to former Secretary of Defense McNamara, “the way they fly around near the Chinese border—it is not to be believed.” He had already ordered the re-imposition of the buffer zone.

Kissinger’s remained a closely held secret until it was announced on 14 June. That was a “surprise” to White House watchers and, no doubt, to Hanoi and Moscow. The Chinese protest of the U.S bombing had led to press speculation that the trip had been quickly arranged to address Beijing’s protests. The White House quickly and correctly denied that supposition.
When Kissinger flew to Beijing, he was well prepared and had at his disposal a thick briefing book on the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and other issues. Given Nixon’s leading role on China policy, most likely he reviewed the briefing material and gave instructions and advice as he had before Kissinger’s previous China trips in 1971. Such instructions need elucidating but, as Kissinger wrote in his trip report, he was conveying to the PRC the President’s “authoritative views.” Research in the White House tapes may disclose whatever guidance Nixon provided before Kissinger left for Beijing.\(^{xvi}\)

As Kissinger landed in China, the Foreign Ministry’s recent protest condemning “new war crimes” against the DRV and “grave provocations” against China could well have made him wonder about what kind of a reception he would receive. As he deplaned, however, it was evident that he had little to worry about. That same day he cabled Nixon (the aircraft had communications links) that the “initial reception had been the warmest of any visit yet in personal terms.” Near the aircraft, a group of top Foreign Ministry Officials “briefly formed a semi-circle and started applauding,” all “wearing broad smiles of welcome.”\(^{xvii}\)

When Kissinger arrived in Beijing, he encountered several familiar faces. Marshall Ye Jianying, Vice Foreign Minister Qiao Quanhua and two Foreign Ministry interpreters—the Brooklyn, NY-born Nancy Tang and Ji Chaozhu-had participated in previous Kissinger visits (as well as Nixon’s). A new face at the meetings was newly-promoted Assistant Foreign Minister Zhang Wenchin. Creating more comment among the U.S. party was the participation of another recently promoted Assistant Foreign Minister, Wang Hairong. Kissinger’s military assistant, Jon Howe, later wrote that “The deference shown to [her] seems to confirm that, protestations to the contrary, she is probably Mao’s niece and/or confident.” Howe’s speculation was close to the mark; Wang was Mao’s grand-niece and served as his liaison to the Politburo. Even Zhou Enlai had to go through her to communicate with Mao.\(^{xviii}\)

2. Détente, the Moscow Summit, and the “New Czars”

In his trip report, Kissinger observed that the Soviet Union was Beijing’s “main preoccupation and principle motive for moving ahead with us.” With this own concerns about Soviet military power and political influence, Kissinger emphasized the Soviet threat: “My basic approach was to play the ominous Soviet themes and emphasize that a strong U.S. and developing U.S.-PRC ties were the best antidotes.” He could plausibly take this theme only so far, however, because the Nixon White House was assiduously pursuing détente with Moscow. When Zhou emphasized the antagonistic relationship with the Soviets and expressed some doubts about U.S.-Soviet détente, Kissinger frankly justified the administration’s strategy as a way to limit Soviet freedom of action and encourage good behavior. In keeping with his emphasis upon a Soviet threat, however, he acknowledged the possibility of worst cases, such as the collapse of détente, and the possibility of U.S. nuclear support in the event a Beijing-Moscow clash turned into full-scale war.\(^{xix}\)

Kissinger played the card of a Soviet threat early in his meetings with Zhou. Discussing the Moscow summit, he stated that one of its “objective consequences” was to “free Soviet policy for a greater role in Asia by producing relaxation in Europe.” That is, with the Moscow Treaty and the Four Power Agreement on Berlin confirmed and agreements to hold conferences on European security and mutual balanced force reductions in place, Kissinger saw substantially reduced tensions in Europe. Having one less Cold War front to worry about, the Soviets might begin “adventures in Asia.” If that were to happen, he assured Zhou (who did not comment) that “we will strongly and, if necessary, violently oppose” Moscow.\(^{xx}\)

Later in the talks, Kissinger elaborated his thinking on the Soviet danger. As an example of a Soviet effort to expand influence in Asia to China’s detriment, Kissinger pointed to the acceleration of Soviet arms into Vietnam in early 1972, which showed the danger of another “Soviet dependent state around your borders.” To elucidate Moscow’s effort to demonstrate Beijing’s “impotence,” Kissinger initiated a lengthy discussion of the 1971 South Asian crisis, during which he took it for granted that India was working on the Soviet Union’s behalf against Pakistan and, its partner, China. It was to put “pressure” on the Soviets, not India, Kissinger explained, that the United States deployed naval forces in the Indian Ocean during the crisis.\(^{xxi}\)

Kissinger did not mention any specific Soviet military threat to China, much less detail what Soviet “adventures” he had in mind. He may have believed that was unnecessary; the presence of nearly a million Soviet troops near the border with China and Moscow’s continuing efforts to improve the readiness of those forces gave the Chinese “good reason” to be concerned. Kissinger may have also believed it was unnecessary to tell Zhou that in previous years he
had wondered and worried whether the Soviets might launch a surprise attack on the PRC’s nuclear weapons facilities. Concerns about a Soviet military strike against China would continue to disquiet Kissinger. A month after meeting with Zhou he told British Cabinet Secretary Burke Trend that it was difficult gauge Soviet intentions, but “perhaps the least improbable hypothesis was that Moscow might be tempted to make a short sharp strike” to take out China’s nuclear weapons installations. “If that is what they have in mind they will be ready to do it within the next two years.”xxii

For one whose leading concern was the balance of power, the threat that worried Kissinger—the subordination of the PRC to the Soviet Union—would have shattering consequences. But however much he worried about prospective Soviet misdeeds, he could not leave it at that especially after having participated in the celebrated Nixon-Brezhnev summit in Moscow only a few weeks earlier. During several long statements on Soviet objectives, Kissinger argued that Moscow was pursuing several “contradictory” policies. As much as he saw potential for Soviet adventurism in Asia, Kissinger did not see it as the whole of Soviet diplomacy; he would explain to Zhou that there were other possibilities. One was related to the theme of threat: “to isolate each of their opponents and to defeat them separately.” Another option, in conflict with the others, was to improve relations with Washington, with détente agreements supporting “peaceful evolution.” This, Kissinger told Zhou, was the direction that the Nixon administration wanted Soviet policy to head, with Moscow “changing its policy in a more peaceful direction” and with the United States “giv[ing] it every incentive to do this.” In the meantime, as he had emphasized before, Washington would keep its distance from the Sino-Soviet “quarrel” while neither Beijing nor Washington should ask each other to “do anything against the Soviet Union.” All bets would be off, however, if the Soviets “should move aggressively.”xxiii

During the discussion of Soviet policy, Kissinger argued that U.S. moves toward China during 1971 had elicited a more cooperative Soviet attitude. As he put it, “our relations with the Soviet Union speeded up considerably,” after the announcement of the secret trip and Nixon’s trip to China the previous July. For example, the negotiations on West Berlin “accelerated,” so Kissinger claimed, because of the White House’s China initiative. Kissinger was trying to say that triangular diplomacy had worked—that Sino-American rapprochement had made Moscow more willing to treat with Washington. This may have been an attempt to convince Zhou that détente was to China’s ultimate advantage because it could give “incentives” for the evolution of Soviet policy in ways that were more compatible with global security.xxiv

Like Kissinger, Zhou played the Soviet card; later in the discussion, he observed that if the Soviets continued their policies, they will “exceed the former policies of the Czar in old Russia.” Noting that the Chinese were now using the epithet the “new Czars,” he pointed out that it gave the Soviets “the greatest headache.” That Beijing was using the old Leninist term “social imperialism” with respect to Soviet policy was also designed to create pains. “They probably hate us to death,” with Mao as the “number one target of hatred” and Zhou close behind. As Kissinger noted in his trip report, Zhou’s “preoccupation” with the Soviets was a recurring theme which suggested that the Sino-Soviet “certainly won’t be mended by the present leadership.”xxv

Using language that would have shocked self-styled Western Maoist revolutionaries, Zhou supported high U.S. military budgets. He approvingly pointed to recent testimony by Secretary of Defense Laird favoring increased defense spending. Kissinger, who was in constant bureaucratic conflict with Laird, disparaged the Secretary’s testimony by stating that he was “given to dramatic statements” and was “wrong in speaking” publicly about his intentions (probably because of a likely adverse reaction in Moscow). Zhou, however, disagreed: “I appreciate that man very much because he says some true words.” By contrast, he was bemused by Democratic presidential aspirant George McGovern’s campaign promise that, if elected, he would cut the military budget by one-third; Zhou believed that such a cut was “impossible.” Showing some misunderstanding of the U.S. political system, Zhou argued that the Pentagon would not allow huge cuts, but Kissinger did not see that as the “major problem.” The problem was the “damage” to the international system: if the United States tried to “weaken itself,” it would produce a “chaotic situation which would have a high probability of producing a war.” The Soviets, China’s “northern neighbor,” were unlikely to “resist [the] temptation” to take advantage of chaos.xxvi

Zhou would restate his approval of Laird’s “putting all the things on the table” in favor of military budget enlargement but he showed some concern about the implications of SALT I limitations on strategic forces and Soviet competition in nuclear weapons technology. Kissinger assured Zhou that although SALT I put a numerical cap on the strategic forces of both sides, “the technical competition will not stop.” That is, both sides would have broad scope for improving delivery systems, and increasing numbers of warheads, among other possibilities, all
within the scope of the SALT I limits. The United States, Kissinger suggested, was not going to abandon qualitative improvements in strategic forces; it would “be extremely dangerous for everybody if we stop while the others continue.”

Central to the discussion on Soviet policy was Kissinger’s review of the agreements and understandings other than SALT reached at the Moscow summit. He noted that the Soviets had a strategy to reach the “maximum number of agreements” in persuade the Americans of the advantages of doing business with them: “one would go to Peking for banquets and to Moscow for agreements.” Kissinger would briefly mention the variety of agreements on “technical areas” such as space, the environment, and health, but he focused on the negotiating proposals and agreements that either had implications for China or had more general strategic import.

He began by noting that the Soviets had made a number of proposals on nuclear proliferation and nuclear weapons use that Washington rebuffed because they had negative implications for China; as he told Zhou, the “objective import was directed at you.” For example, Brezhnev had proposed special consultations on other countries with nuclear weapons capabilities as well as a U.S.-Soviet agreement “not to use nuclear weapons against each other.” Although the consultations proposal was also a non-starter, the Soviets would be persistent about the non-use agreement and engaged Kissinger in a continuing dialogue over it. As he later told Burke Trend, it was useful to give a “‘bone’ to the Soviet dog.” Nevertheless, Kissinger informed Zhou that he had told the Soviets that the proposal could not be considered unless it included assurances that the Soviets were “not free to attack either our allies or other countries with nuclear weapons.” The Soviets would push this initiative in the months ahead and Kissinger would keep Mao and Zhou informed of the discussions that led to the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War (PNW) as “as a sign of our special confidence in you.” Only the British and the Chinese knew about these secret talks.

Zhou’s principal question about the Soviet non-use proposal—did it mean a comprehensive “guarantee” of no-first use of nuclear weapons?—produced revealing statements by Kissinger. Beijing had long supported a no-first use agreement, but Kissinger implied that no-first use was inconsistent with American policy which “reserve[d] the right” to use nuclear weapons if there was a “massive attack” on Western Europe or on a “country whose independence we consider vital.” The United States would not sign a non-use agreement if it meant that the other signatory could attack countries of interest to Washington. If conventional weapons could not repel attacks the United States required a nuclear option. “We cannot accept a Czechoslovakia in every part of the world.”

To strengthen the bilateral relationship, Kissinger was about to make an extraordinary move—a tacit extension of the U.S. nuclear umbrella to China. Nevertheless, recognizing that any unsolicited offer of protection, such as that made by his deputy General Alexander Haig earlier in the year, could lead to a prickly reaction, he was careful to make the formulation ambiguous. After observing that in “most foreseeable circumstances” nuclear weapons would not be used, Kissinger said again that there were “two places where it would have to be considered.” When Zhou asked “which two,” Kissinger said that one was an attack on Europe; the other was “an attack that would put all of Asia under one European center of control.” The two agreed that the Soviet might have such ambitions and, as Zhou put it, “we must closely watch the development of events.”

Kissinger’s statements about safeguarding countries whose “independence” was a fundamental interest and preventing Asia from being placed under one “European center of control” were entirely consistent with White House policy as well as with the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy. During tense phases of the 1969 Sino-Soviet border fighting Nixon had said that the United States could not afford to let the Soviet Union “smash” China and referred to concerns among Asian leaders that the Soviets might “take over China in the sense of controlling its policies and actions.” The emphasis on China’s independence and territorial integrity dovetailed with Kissinger’s balance of power approach but also evoked a basic element of John Hay’s Open Door policy. Moreover, Kissinger’s language opposing a “European center of control” brings to mind U.S. national security doctrine as it emerged during the 1940s if not before. That was the concept that the U.S.’s preponderant position in world politics depended on preventing a hostile power (or coalition) from controlling the Eurasian land mass.

While the likelihood of a Soviet move against China was low, Kissinger may have believed that a generalized security guarantee was necessary to reconcile Beijing to U.S.-Soviet negotiations on the prevention of nuclear war. As he later explained to Burke Trend, using language that epitomized the manipulative character of triangular diplomacy, the United States needed to compensate for the “bone” given to the “Soviet dog” by “finding some compensating ‘bone’ to give to the Chinese dog.” “This may also bring the Chinese dog closer to heel.” Suggesting that the “bone” might be an alliance relationship or perhaps the “guarantee of a new neutral bloc” in Southeast Asia
to contain Moscow, Kissinger did not tell the British that he had already presented the PRC with a tacit nuclear guarantee.xxxiv

Whatever Zhou thought of Kissinger’s offer his reaction was minimal; to reject it would have been awkward because it might have ruffled Kissinger’s feathers. To express positive interest would have been no less tricky because it could have suggested possible dependency on Washington that could have made him vulnerable to criticism from Mao. No doubt Zhou, like Kissinger himself, would have understood that Kissinger’s guarantee was a hollow commitment. Early in 1969, Nixon had said that with respect to U.S. nuclear guarantees to Western Europe, the “nuclear umbrella is no longer there.”xxxv In other words, in a world whether the Soviet Union had reached strategic nuclear parity, the Europeans could not automatically expect the U.S. president to launch a nuclear strike against Moscow in the event of war in Western Europe. If there had been a Sino-Soviet military confrontation threatening to lead to a major war, Kissinger and Nixon may have played nuclear brinkmanship but whether they would have risked nuclear war and global devastation, over a conflict in Manchuria remains doubtful. Although Kissinger later reported that “My elliptic [sic] comment was not lost upon [Zhou],” he could not know whether Zhou saw it as credible.xxxvi

After more talk about the Soviet non-nuclear use proposal, the conversation turned briefly to the broader implications of economic matters discussed at the summit and more frank talk by Kissinger of his strategy to limit Soviet freedom of action. Mentioning a Soviet proposal for “the massive development of Siberia,” with the possibility of Japanese participation, Kissinger stated that Washington would review such proposals carefully because of the possibility that they could be used “either to blackmail us or to create the basis for blackmailing others.” Kissinger did not explain this statement but perhaps he was referring to the possibility that the Soviets would use of investment proposals and prospects to play the major capitalist powers off each other. During a later conversation, Zhou showed some concern about the role of Western credits in indirectly supporting the Soviet military budget. Kissinger acknowledged that this posed a difficult problem; “on the one hand we would like to strengthen the peaceful elements in the Soviet Union. On the other hand there is the danger that we are making possible for them the competition they could not otherwise sustain.” Showing the White House’s commitment to a linkage strategy, Kissinger believed it was possible to regulate the supply of credit so “we can turn it off if their political behavior becomes threatening either against us or against countries whose survival we consider essential.”xxxvii

After Kissinger gave a rather disdainful evaluation of the plans for a Conference on European Security and Cooperation and Mutual Balanced Force Reductions negotiations, Zhou raised questions about one of the summit agreements, the “Basic Principles of Relations.” While Kissinger, unlike the Soviets, treated lightly this affirmation of peaceful co-existence and equality as the basis for U.S.-Soviet relations, Zhou showed interest and concern. He noted that the “Third World” was “quite displeased” with the third principle—“special responsibility” by the superpowers to prevent situations that would “increase international tensions”—because it implied that “world affairs will be monopolized by you two big powers.” “It has that feeling,” Zhou added, suggesting that he saw something in the criticism. Kissinger denied any “intentions of forming a condominium” arguing that the purpose of the statement was to discourage “expansionism” and “big power” exploitation of “local conflicts.” Zhou did not explore the issue further but his comments reflected what NSC staffer saw as a “basic contradiction” in PRC diplomacy between rapprochement with Washington and its penchant for presenting “itself as a champion of the Third World.” Language about superpower collusion against the Third World had been a theme in Chinese foreign policy during the 1960s and it would surface again when the Chinese began to express doubts about the implications of the PNW negotiations with the Soviets.xxxviii

With all of Zhou’s emphasis on a Soviet threat, Kissinger assumed that the U.S. emphasis on détente was not exactly to the liking of the PRC leadership. Despite Zhou’s nonchalant attitude toward the Moscow summit—“We were quite relaxed”—Kissinger reported to Nixon that he suspected that this was “for the record and for his pride.” What made him sure were Zhou’s doubts about “concrete manifestation” of détente, such as his questioning of credits to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, “I left no doubt that we would continue to make agreements with Moscow that served our national interests.”xxxix

Kissinger’s long meetings with Zhou were not his only occasion for discussing the Soviet Union during this visit. On 21 June he also had a several hour long talk with Marshall Ye Jianying, which gave the Chinese another opportunity to emphasize the need for a strong U.S. military position. Unfortunately, the record of this discussion remains unavailable. Touching on the most sensitive military issues—U.S. nuclear weapons, the impact of SALT on
the strategic balance “in various category of weapons,” MBFR, and future U.S. deployments in Europe—they showed, according to Kissinger that Ye wanted to be “sure that our nuclear weapons technology remained ahead of the Soviets” and that Washington’s “overall defense position would counter the Russians.” As he had been during earlier Kissinger visits, Ye was highly affable, showing “pro-American sentiments,” strong support for “American strength,” and deep concern over the aim of “Soviet expansionists to surround China.” Commenting that Nixon’s re-election was of “major importance” to the Sino-American rapprochement and the world in general, Ye “congratulated [Nixon] in advance on his re-election”\footnote{xl}

While the talks with Ye showed conviction on the Chinese side that unlike the Soviet Union, “American power [was] not directed at China” neither side may have taken the effusive language too seriously. U.S. intelligence took it for granted that the PRC was developing its own ICBMs to deter the Soviets but also the United States. Moreover, Kissinger believed that if Beijing concluded that Washington could not play the role that it wanted—a “resolute counter to Moscow in strength and will”—the Chinese could “turn brutally against us.” They would “make a formidable opponent.” In keeping with his recognition that foreign policy interests could shift abruptly, Kissinger had been presiding over an effort to review U.S. plans for nuclear war with China.\footnote{xli}

The dialogue with Zhou over South Asia, Western Europe, and Japan made it easy for Kissinger to conclude that Beijing and Washington’s views on world politics were altogether harmonious. Japan’s new ties with Japan and West Germany, and growing ties with the United Kingdom and Pakistan, Kissinger believed, were a form of anti-Soviet containment; China was “trying to build walls around the Soviet Union.” It was this convergence of interests that led Kissinger to conclude that “We now have a better mutual appreciation of each other’s global strategy as well as tactical moves.”\footnote{xlii}

Kissinger was always aware that friends could become enemies, but he left Beijing persuaded that China’s search for a “balance” against the Soviet Union would sustain the developing rapprochement. That, of course, suited Kissinger quite well; a successful trip put more “pressure” on the Soviets without “shocking” them, although the talks with Zhou would have shocked the Soviets if there had been any leaks. Kissinger also believed that the fact of his visit “deepened Hanoi’s paranoia and isolation.” For Kissinger, the Vietnam problem was most critical because it was the “only issue that significantly hinders our bilateral relations” with China.\footnote{xliii}

3. Vietnam: “a pitfall which was created by you which is difficult for you to get out”— Zhou Enlai\footnote{xliv}

When Kissinger arrived in Beijing, Hanoi’s spring offensive was coming to an end, although the Linebacker bombing campaign would continue into the fall. Never criticizing the Chinese for supporting Hanoi, Kissinger vented his rage on the latter: Hanoi had launched a “combination of a military and psychological campaign designed to undermine the American government, and that we can never accept.” Zhou, however, criticized the U.S. bombing, but not too harshly, warning that “if you continued your bombing like you have, that will become very dangerous.” What the Chinese saw as especially troubling, however, were U.S. aerial incursions into Chinese territory and accidental bomb dropping. Kissinger, then, had a lot of explaining to do, not only on the incidents but why the PRC should find merit in U.S. negotiating strategy. In spite of these problems, Kissinger would find that Zhou wanted to avoid a contretemps that could imperil the rapprochement.\footnote{xlv}

For Kissinger, the key problem that divided DRV and U.S. negotiators was the problem of a political settlement. While he would profess to find the North Vietnamese “very heroic,” he was appalled by their diplomacy, which, he thought, was “not very wise.”Memcon, 19 June, 1972, 10: 25 p.m. The “problem is the inability of a government that has fought 30 years to think in political terms, and its impatience to settle everything in one negotiation.” He could not think of a “practical compromise” between the DRV and the U.S. government position. On the one hand the DRV called for a tripartite coalition government preceded by Thieu’s resignation. For Hanoi, getting Thieu, the ultimate American “puppet,” out of power was the sine qua non for a legitimate coalition. On the other hand Nixon and Kissinger firmly opposed political action against Thieu. Restating arguments that Nixon and he had already made to the Chinese, Kissinger argued that overthrowing Thieu could only damage the credibility of American power: “a country cannot be asked to engage in major acts of betrayal as a basis to its foreign policy.”\footnote{xlvi}

Although the White House would not act against Thieu, Kissinger wanted Zhou to understand that the Saigon regime would likely fall victim to “historical evolution.” For the long term, Washington could not and would not be Saigon’s guarantor. As he explained, the United States “cannot bring a communist regime to power,” but “if, as a result of historical evolution, it should happen over a period of time, if we can live with a communist government in
China, we ought to be able to accept it in Indochina.” Whatever the end result was, Kissinger sought, as he variously put it, “a sufficient interval” or a “reasonable interval” between the withdrawal of American forces and the political process that “happens afterward.” It was also important that there was “no outside intervention.” When Zhou asked whether Saigon would participate in political negotiations during the ceasefire, Kissinger declared that Thieu et al. would be reluctant “because they believe they are winning,” but Washington would “see to [it]” that Saigon went along, e.g., with a scheme for tripartite supervision of elections. Here Kissinger was showing overconfidence; he was minimizing the most difficult problem of all: convincing Thieu to accept a peace plan that, among other elements, left North Vietnamese forces in the South.\textsuperscript{xlvii}

In his discussions with Zhou, Kissinger did not use the term “decent interval,” but whether he called it “reasonable interval” or something else, that is exactly what he was discussing with Zhou. The concept reflected Kissinger’s understanding that the war would remain deadlocked, that a U.S. military victory was impossible and that once U.S. forces had left Vietnam, Thieu’s prospects were doubtful. Making Thieu’s future all the more problematic was that Kissinger had already conceded a cease-fire-in-place for DRV troops in the South, although this was not explicitly acknowledged to Zhou. While Kissinger had briefed Zhou on the concept of “political evolution” in South Vietnam the previous July, that briefing was relatively abstract compared to this one.\textsuperscript{xlviii}

Kissinger’s exposition plainly intrigued Zhou, although he showed some doubts. With U.S. military aid keeping Thieu strong, he argued, Saigon had “blind confidence” that U.S. aid would continue and that it would not have to participate in a “reasonable” intra-Vietnamese settlement. He saw credibility arguments as a kind of trap because the search for credibility, or “face,” could prolong an already long war: “if such kind of face worries are to be maintained then the war will not be able to be stopped.” Indeed, he was worried about escalation. Using the Korean War and U.S. drive to the Yalu for analogy, Zhou argued that “once a war breaks out, then the development of that war is often independent of its will.” Not only was Zhou concerned that U.S. strategy might “force the [DRV] into a corner” and make them desperate, he observed that intensified U.S. bombing was a problem for the Chinese: “it can only anger our people more.”\textsuperscript{xlix}

Zhou had already told Kissinger that Beijing saw the U.S. mining campaign as a “provocation against us” because it left the land route as the only way to supply North Vietnam. Nonetheless, the Chinese would “grit [their] teeth and use all our strength to assist them.” This choice of language raised some questions in Kissinger’s mind and he tacitly asked for a reaffirmation of previous statements that Beijing would not use military force in Indochina unless it was “directly attacked.” Zhou answering by declaring that “we must continue the transportation and our people will die in that course.” Although that amounted to a reassurance that China would keep out of the fighting, Zhou’s description of the vulnerabilities of Chinese shipping to air attack brought Kissinger to the “most important problem.” It was “absurd,” he argued that Beijing and Washington should have “tension over an area from which we are attempting to withdraw and which you are not attempting to enter.”\textsuperscript{xlix}

Zhou also saw the absurdity and would later closely question Kissinger about the notion of a “reasonable interval.” Apparently he found it credible enough to declare that if Beijing did not have to take into account alliance consideration, “our thinking would be like yours.” The United States would “go [its] way” after a military agreement and the political factions in Vietnam would begin “fighting with their doors closed.” Yet, China could not and would not try to “impose” a negotiating approach on Hanoi. A little piously, he explained that “we cannot impose our thinking on a small country.” Zhou found Hanoi’s search for a comprehensive politico-military settlement completely understandable; “they would like to see a final solution to the question before they can find themselves at ease.” Thus, Zhou urged Kissinger to support the coalition government-solution arguing that it “couldn’t be immediately turned into a communist government.” On the contrary, it would be “a government of complex composition.” Moreover, Beijing would respect Vietnamese neutrality treating it as “kind of a buffer.”\textsuperscript{xl}

As Kissinger later noted, the only real heat in the discussion came when Zhou protested U.S. air intrusions and bombings over Chinese territory near the DRV border. Right to the point, Zhou stated “you are bombing us.”\textsuperscript{xl} To help the U.S. side better understand what had happened, Zhou provided charts and evidence— bomb canisters with stock numbers on them, which Kissinger’s military aid, Jonathan Howe, carefully transcribed. Kissinger assured Zhou that the incidents were not authorized and that “it cannot be the intention of our government to challenged the sovereignty of the People’s Republic or to engage in provocative acts against” it. The U.S. military had claimed that there were no incidents and that China’s radar had to be at fault, but Kissinger doubted that. Emphasizing that Beijing had decided to “tell it to you through these secret channels,” Zhou wanted Kissinger to understand that that precaution “may also be considered one of the ways of making efforts to normalize relations between our two
countries.” Kissinger agreed; he also assured Zhou that Washington had issued instructions widening the buffer zone near China; it was “extremely unlikely that another intrusion will occur.” Indeed, Beijing had made no complaints since 12 June. Nevertheless the bombing would continue and the potential for incidents remained.

Although the bombing incidents had the potential to ignite a crisis, Beijing was explicitly treating rapprochement as a higher priority. Thus, as Howe noted, the PRC position on Vietnam had been “unusually mild.” Kissinger was pleased that Zhou had taken a positive interest in his “decent interval” approach, but the Premier’s deference to Hanoi’s negotiating position made it evident that the Vietnam problem could not be solved in Beijing. Nonetheless, Kissinger believed that trips to Beijing as well as Moscow reinforced the American negotiating position. So far both communist powers were meeting an important U.S. policy goal; they were acquiescing in “what we are doing” and putting their relationship with Washington “above the local concerns of their ally.” As long as Beijing was dealing with Washington, the public dimensions of the relationship—Kissinger’s visits and the related press coverage—“must deepen the North Vietnamese sense of isolation.” While Kissinger did not think that Beijing would exert strong pressure on Hanoi to be “reasonable,” he supposed that if Zhou spoke with the DRV leaders “along lines even remotely akin to his presentation to us, this cannot help but add to the cumulative pressures on Hanoi.”

Kissinger recognized that U.S.-China tensions over Vietnam “could still get out of hand” and that an early settlement with Hanoi had important implications for U.S.-China relations. Several times during their talks, Zhou reminded Kissinger that the Vietnam problem had important implications for normalizing U.S.-China relations. Failure to reach a settlement, he warned, will “affect the settlement of the Taiwan issue.” The implication was that if Washington did not expeditiously liquidate its fighting role in Vietnam, the U.S. “hope” for a “peaceful” resolution of the mainland-Taiwan split would have less force and Beijing might feel free to unite with Taiwan in its own way. Other references to the Taiwan problem and diplomatic normalization would suggest that Beijing was far from satisfied with U.S. policy.

4. An Incident Near the Summer Palace and the Problem of Normalization

During the seventeen hours of talks with Chinese leaders, there might have been 20 minutes that focused on the Taiwan problem and the question of establishing normal U.S-China diplomatic relations. For Kissinger these problems were secondary compared to the challenges posed by superpower diplomacy; the promise made during Nixon’s visit about normalization “early” in his second term could be addressed in due course. In the meantime, he told the NSC staff, “we have the diplomatic contacts we need.” Sharp comments by Zhou would show that normalizing relations was important and that deviations from “one China” had to be avoided, but Kissinger would continue to find it difficult to appreciate how important the Taiwan problem was for Beijing.

During the weeks before the meetings with Zhou, Kissinger had felt no great pressure for quick action on normalization and probably was not paying close attention to Taiwan affairs. The larger commitments to withdraw U.S. forces from the island would not be triggered until the Vietnam War ended; moreover, from Nixon and Kissinger’s perspective important alliance and political considerations made rapid action impolitic. To counter the effect of the Beijing summit, the administration had worked to increase Export-Import Bank lending and schedule new military aid financing for Taiwan. As for the establishment of even low-level diplomatic relations with Beijing, such as an interests section, Kissinger, unlike his “friends and admirers in Foggy Bottom,” was not interested in early action. He had “no overwhelming interest in that, partly for Taiwan reasons” and partly because he thought little of interests sections. It was evident that the White House was inevitably reluctant to make moves that could produce negative reactions in Taiwan when any sense of diminished commitment might create foreign policy problems and perhaps even tensions with the Republican Party base.

While Kissinger was not in much of a hurry, Zhou and Mao were looking for something that showed tangible interest in normalization. What concerned them, however, were signs of slackening commitment to the ideas of the Shanghai Communiqué. On the last day of the talks, Zhou showed dissatisfaction in a number of ways. During the afternoon, he complained that the White House was giving “too much encouragement to Taiwan to be so arrogant.” Zhou also noted that Nixon had sent a letter to Chiang Kai-shek congratulating him on his re-election; although he asserted that “We have no objection to that,” he probably did. As another example of “encouragement,” Zhou criticized a recent article by Nixon in U.S. News & World Report for mentioning the “Republic of China in one breath and the People’s Republic of China in the other.” Zhou’s implication was that Washington was wobbly on the
concept of “one China.” Kissinger read it that way because he tried to assure him that “we will not encourage in any way the two-China solution.”

Zhou had more to say on the subject of normalization. During the boat ride on the lake near the Summer Place, occurred what Kissinger aide Jonathan Howe saw as the “low point of the discussion.” After Kissinger said that it would be useful to have more talks after the election, Zhou noted that “will depend on your efforts,” one of which was to re-elect Nixon, the other of which was to “normalize relations.” He went on to say that if Washington “consistently refuse[d] to normalize relations,” the public reaction to his future appearances with Kissinger at places like the Summer Palace would be hostile—the “the masses will be cursing me — they won’t applaud me.” Because this was a social event, Kissinger only said that “we are making major efforts to normalize relations.”

It would be interesting to know what lay behind Zhou’s statement, whether he was under instructions from Mao and the Politburo to make this criticism, and whether he agreed with it or not. Was Beijing looking for signs that Washington was making plans to gear up for diplomatic normalization after the 1972 elections? Did it expect Washington to move quickly in breaking diplomatic relations with Taiwan, which Nixon would have found to be very difficult? Zhou’s comment had been very general and Kissinger must have wondered what he expected. All he could do at the final meeting was to assure Zhou that that normalizing relations was “one of the key aspects of our foreign policy which we will pursue with great energy.” Zhou, however, did not go into the issue at any length; he simply restated the earlier understanding that “normalization itself will have to wait until after the elections.”

Before changing the subject, Zhou asserted that “the time has come for serious dialogue on the requirements of normalization. After all, he was only complaining about these problems; he made no threats. The complaints, however, may have suggested some Chinese dissatisfaction with the negotiation of the Shanghai Communiqué. At the banquet thrown by Zhou, Kissinger picked up some signs of this when Zhang Wenchin observed that the Chinese people “felt the Communiqué was largely drafted by Americans” because language and formulations were “not typically Chinese.” Kissinger also gathered that there was “some feeling among the leaders that we got the better of the deal, especially in the Taiwan section,” Kissinger knew exactly what Zhang had meant; as he told the NSC staff, it “is not easy to point to one practical consequence” of the Communiqué’s language on Taiwan “that we have to carry out immediately.”

Perhaps Zhou’s statement had been simply an instance of firing “empty cannons,” to register disappointment over the U.S. errors on Taiwan and the continued problem of the Vietnam War, whose settlement, after all, was a condition for more normal relations. After all, he was only complaining about these problems; he made no threats. The complaints, however, may have suggested some Chinese dissatisfaction with the negotiation of the Shanghai Communiqué. At the banquet thrown by Zhou, Kissinger picked up some signs of this when Zhang Wenchin observed that the Chinese people “felt the Communiqué was largely drafted by Americans” because language and formulations were “not typically Chinese.” Kissinger also gathered that there was “some feeling among the leaders that we got the better of the deal, especially in the Taiwan section,” Kissinger knew exactly what Zhang had meant; as he told the NSC staff, it “is not easy to point to one practical consequence” of the Communiqué’s language on Taiwan “that we have to carry out immediately.”

Zhou’s expression of dissatisfaction with Washington’s Taiwan policy, Kissinger later reported, “jarred with the mood of the overall visit.” In spite of his observation that “we cannot take for granted their patience on fundamental issues,” Kissinger made no recommendations for pro-active steps to address Beijing’s concerns. Nevertheless, Kissinger continued to puzzle over Zhou’s remarks. A few days after returning from China Kissinger met with Huang Hua and mentioned the boat ride incident. “When I thought about it, frankly I don’t know what [Zhou] was talking about.” Huang could not elucidate the incident and Beijing authorities did not provide additional information. Instead, a series of reports from U.S. journalists in China appeared suggesting that Beijing was dissatisfied with the U.S. “attitude” on Taiwan and expected that normalization required a “complete American break with Taiwan.” This led to some displeasure at the White House but also a request for any “suggestions” that Beijing might have on the Taiwan question. Chinese authorities provided no answers; they may not have been ready for serious dialogue on the requirements of normalization.

Aftermath

Only a few days after his departure from Beijing, Kissinger met with a Foreign Service group telling his audience that he would never do anything so “petty” as to try to manipulate Beijing or Moscow by discussing one with the other or telling one what he said to the other. That, however, is exactly what he and Nixon were doing; the tilt toward Beijing that typified White House strategy depended on the manipulative approach that characterized Nixon-Kissinger diplomacy. By briefing the Chinese on Nixon’s secret talks with the Soviets and by making nuclear guarantees, Kissinger was trying to strengthen Beijing’s confidence in a relationship with Washington.

Confidence especially depended on a settlement of military tensions. After Kissinger returned to Washington the Pentagon reinvestigated the incident on 10 June involving the cluster bombs. Denying that U.S. aircraft had intruded into Chinese airspace because they were “flown by experienced pilots flying fully-systems capable aircraft,” the Defense Department nevertheless developed a scenario to explain how cluster bombs could have landed on Aikou. The aircraft “could have had a high altitude inadvertent release.” If that had happened when an aircraft was flying at...
10,000 feet, the bombs “would be scattered over an extremely large unpredictable area,” as much as three nautical miles away depending on various conditions (speed, climbing, banking, etc.). The Pentagon further argued that it was evident that there had been no “intent to strike a target” because the “bomblets” that the Chinese had found were “duds.”\textsuperscript{lxiv}

With the tightening of controls over flights near the Chinese border, the Pentagon might have thought this was the end of it, but Beijing brought more incidents to the White House’s attention on 10 July. The next day, the Pentagon imposed tighter controls over air strikes near the buffer zone and did its best to keep a tight lid on the whole affair. By the end of August, reporters with the \textit{New York Times} and the \textit{Washington Post} had learned how close to the border U.S. fighter-bombers had been operating. Nevertheless, the Pentagon denied that there had been any “real incidents.” More occurred over the summer and Beijing finally went public, to Kissinger’s displeasure, when U.S. fighter-bombers attacked what was a lifeboat (Chinese version) or a logistics vessel (Pentagon version) killing five members of the crew. Nevertheless, both Beijing and Washington preserved the secrecy of the earlier incidents and the PRC protests and Pentagon investigations remained classified for years.\textsuperscript{lxv}

In the wake of Kissinger’s visit, Hanoi would soon feel some pressure from Beijing. If Kissinger had been a fly on the wall (with Chinese language skills!) during Zhou’s meeting with Le Duc Tho only a few weeks later, he would have been pleased and perhaps surprised to hear Zhou, possibly influenced by Kissinger’s decent interval strategy, urging his DRV comrades to take a flexible approach. Zhou suggested that, as a “surprise” tactic, the Vietnamese “hint” that they would be willing to recognize Thieu “as a representative of one of the three forces in a coalition government.” When Tho rejected any change in tactics, Zhou stressed the importance of “play [\textit{ing}] for time with a view to letting North Vietnam recover.” By not insisting on Thieu’s overthrow, Zhou argued, the DRV might find Washington more likely to agree to proposals for a coalition government. While the DRV Politburo was rethinking its position on Thieu, it was not ready to make concessions until the fall of 1972 when it tried to accelerate the negotiations to reach a settlement before the U.S. election.\textsuperscript{lxvi}

Kissinger told Nixon that the “unique bond” that the U.S. side had developed with the Chinese leadership had been critically important for better understanding across the Pacific. This had been accomplished by avoiding “diplomatic niceties” and speaking “our minds to the Chinese as equals.” No other country “had either the strength or the will to treat the Chinese as equals” and that the United States was doing so, he argued, “has wiped out much of the Chinese ill feeling toward us.” In his report to Nixon, Kissinger carefully avoided giving himself any personal credit for developing this “unique bond,” although one NSC staffer Richard Solomon was less hesitant. Observing that he had sensed a “notable degree of personal rapport” between Kissinger and Zhou, Solomon suggested that it was “a valuable factor in our evolving relationship.”\textsuperscript{lxvii}

The personal element would be fleeting—Zhou was already showing signs of what became a fatal illness\textsuperscript{lxviii} — but the records of the June 1972 talks provide a good example of the rapport with Kissinger. The two seemed to enjoy their dialogue, even when the subject matter was fraught with tension. Both showed the political skills that explained how they kept in good grace with their political masters, Mao and Nixon respectively. Thus, Kissinger worked hard to persuade Zhou that on fundamental issues such as the Soviet Union and Vietnam, Beijing and Washington had no basic conflict. Indeed, he wanted Zhou to recognize that Nixon and he were pursuing policies that were compatible with Beijing’s needs, for example, by trying to restrain aerial activity near China’s border and to arrange a “decent interval” in South Vietnam so that history could “evolve” there. Even if the Chinese were not altogether sold on \textit{détente}, Kissinger was determined to pursue it hoping that he could manipulate Beijing into acquiescence through persuasion, regular briefings, and nuclear guarantees. By pursuing a “tacit alliance” with Beijing and \textit{détente} with the Soviets, Kissinger wanted to establish a network of political, economic, and security relationships with the two Communist rivals that would ensure that the conduct of both was compatible with U.S. interests but that would nevertheless align Washington and Beijing in the event that the Soviet Union acted against China.

The discussions also show Zhou trying to steer a course through difficult currents. For reasons of prestige and security, the leaders of China’s revolution also saw no alternative to developing ties with Washington. This did not mean abandoning traditional anti-imperialism; Zhou gave principled support for DRV negotiating position and emphasized Beijing’s determination to aid Vietnamese revolutionaries. At the same time, while pushing Kissinger to get America out of Vietnam and questioning his obsession with “face,” Zhou listened with interest to Kissinger’s apparent flexibility about the future of Vietnam. Yet, Beijing’s strong anti-Soviet stance informed Zhou’s tacit criticisms of U.S. \textit{détente} policy. More difficult, because they touched on basic national security and the conception...
of “one China,” were the U.S. aerial intrusions, accidental bombings, and mistakes on Taiwan policy. Here there was some heat on Zhou’s part; he made it plain that Nixon and Kissinger had to be careful. Indeed, Kissinger’s inability to negotiate a break of diplomatic ties with Taiwan as a lead up to normalizing relations with Beijing would eventually complicate China-U.S. relations. Nonetheless with all its concerns over Vietnam, aerial intrusions, and Taiwan, the Chinese leadership was going to continue the approach that it had developed when it invited Kissinger and Nixon to China; as long as Washington was careful on “one China” and made progress in ending the Vietnam War, the rapprochement would continue.

The Vietnam problem was the most immediate importance to Zhou and Kissinger because an early settlement could only improve the bilateral relationship. Yet, one of the most striking parts of the discussion is the evidence of Kissinger’s efforts to develop a tacit alliance with Beijing by offering nuclear guarantees. While Kissinger tilted policy largely to ease Beijing’s concerns about the Soviet Union and U.S. détente policy, Zhou barely reacted to Kissinger’s offer, but undoubtedly discussed it with Mao. How Zhou and Mao interpreted Kissinger’s offer as well as their more general understanding of the state of the rapprochement can only be elucidated through the Chinese archival record. Moreover, the fuller impact of the U.S.-China dialogue on Vietnamese developments will remain elusive until the corresponding Chinese records are available. Finally, what made Zhou suddenly and critically bring up the problem of U.S. policy on normalization? One document on the Chinese side become available, the full picture will become clearer.

References

3 Kissinger, White House Years, p. 1304. For Kissinger's first three trips, see ibid., 741-755, 774-784, and 1053-1087. Kissinger’s recent book on the Vietnam War also gives short shrift to the June1972 meeting, emphasizing what Zhou had to say rather than such matters as Kissinger’s elaboration of the “decent interval” concept. See Kissinger, Ending the Vietnam War: A History of America’s Involvement In and Extrication from the Vietnam War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), p. 295. Kissinger consistently avoided disclosing in his memoirs how much U.S. policy tilted toward China. For example, he eschewed discussion of his intelligence briefings to the Chinese during the February 1972 summit or his secret proposal to Zhou Enlai in November 1973 for a U.S.-China "hot line" for communicating strategic and tactical warning of Soviet military moves against China. Kissinger wrote his first two volumes of memoirs during the Cold War and may have thought that discussion of some topics would cause too much controversy with Moscow, which already suspected that he had been less than evenhanded. See William Burr, ed., The Kissinger Transcripts: The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow (New York, The New Press, 1999), pp. 50-51 and 203-204.
7 Shanghai Communiqué, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States Richard Nixon Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President 1972 Washington, D.C.; Government Printing Office, 1974, pp.376-379; memcon, Kissinger and Qiao Guanhua, 22 February 1972, 10:05 a.m., HAKO, box 92, Dr. Kissinger’s Meetings in the PRC During the Presidential Visit February 1972; Romberg, Reins in At the Brink of the Precipice, pp.45-48. For the negotiation of the Communiqué, see Jian, Mao’s China, pp.272-276.
8 Memcon, 22 June 1972, 2:10 p.m.; “Briefing Given by Dr. Kissinger in the Family Theater of the White House-7 March 1972.”
\textsuperscript{xxv} Kissinger to the President, “My Trip to Peking, June 19-23, 1972,” 27 June 1972.


\textsuperscript{xxvii} Memoranda, 24 February 1972, 5:15 p.m.; Zhai, China and the Vietnam Wars, p.200.


\textsuperscript{xxix} Memoranda, 22 February 1972, 2:10 p.m.; Lord to Kissinger, “Undertakings with the PRC,” 17 March 1972; memcon, Kissinger and Huang Hua, 14 March 1972 6:00 p.m., RG 59, Policy Planning Staff (Director’s Files), 1969-1977 (hereinafter cited as Director’s Files), box 329, China Exchanges March 1, 1972-June 24, 1972.

\textsuperscript{xxx} Kissinger, June 1972 Visit; “Podgorny En Route to Hanoi,” from this file unless otherwise indicated; Haig to Kissinger, “Arrangements for China Trip,” 8 June 1972, NSC, HAKO, box 97, China Dr. Kissinger June 1972 Visit. For Wang’s role, see Ma Jisen, The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004, 355-357.


\textsuperscript{xxxiv} Burke Trend to Prime Minister, “Discussions with Dr. Kissinger in Moscow,” 31 July, 1972, National Archives (UK), PREM 15/1362. In a diary entry for entry for 15 August 1970, White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman wrote that Kissinger told a “surprised” Nixon that “something big was stirring” and that he expected the Soviets to “use nuclear force to knock out China’s missiles.” H. R. Haldeman Diary, NPMP.


\textsuperscript{xxxvi} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m. While Kissinger may have believed that his China moves accelerated the Berlin negotiations, he had tried to slow the negotiations down during June 1971, perhaps to have a card in the event that the Soviets reacted badly to the announcement of his secret trip. For Kissinger’s Berlin tactics, see David Geyer, “The Missing Link: Henry Kissinger and the Backchannel Negotiations on Berlin,” David C. Geyer and Berndt Schaefer, eds., American Détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969-1972, Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Supplement I, Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2004, pp.80-97.


\textsuperscript{xxxviii} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m.; Burke Trend to Prime Minister, “Discussions with Dr. Kissinger in Moscow,” 31 July 1972, National Archives (UK), PREM 15/1362. In a diary entry for entry for 15 August 1970, White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman wrote that Kissinger told a “surprised” Nixon that “something big was stirring” and that he expected the Soviets to “use nuclear force to knock out China’s missiles.” H. R. Haldeman Diary, NPMP.

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\textsuperscript{xxxx} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m.; Burke Trend to Prime Minister, “Discussions with Dr. Kissinger in Moscow,” 31 July, 1972, National Archives (UK), PREM 15/1362. For a detailed account of the first phases of the negotiation of the Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement, see Garthoff, Détente and Confrontation, pp.376-379.

\textsuperscript{xxxxi} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m.

\textsuperscript{xxxxii} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m. While Kissinger may have believed that his China moves accelerated the Berlin negotiations, he had tried to slow the negotiations down during June 1971, perhaps to have a card in the event that the Soviets reacted badly to the announcement of his secret trip. For Kissinger’s Berlin tactics, see David Geyer, “The Missing Link: Henry Kissinger and the Backchannel Negotiations on Berlin,” David C. Geyer and Berndt Schaefer, eds., American Détente and German Ostpolitik, 1969-1972, Bulletin of the German Historical Institute, Supplement I, Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 2004, pp.80-97.


\textsuperscript{xxxxiv} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m.; Burke Trend to Prime Minister, “Discussions with Dr. Kissinger in Moscow,” 31 July, 1972, National Archives (UK), PREM 15/1362. For a detailed account of the first phases of the negotiation of the Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement, see Garthoff, Détente and Confrontation, pp.376-379.

\textsuperscript{xxxxv} Zhou also asked later whether the Soviet proposal included language about an international agreement “leading to prohibition and destruction of nuclear weapons,” which was also a standard Chinese proposal.

\textsuperscript{xxxxvi} When Kissinger’s deputy, Alexander Haig had met with Zhou earlier in the year, he had said that “the future viability of the PRC was of the greatest interest to us and a matter of our own national interest,” and, accordingly, offered tactical and strategic intelligence information to assist China. Zhou responded with what Kissinger later called a “withering blast”: China would never depend on “external forces” to maintain independence and viability because that would make it a “protectorate or colony.” See Memcon, 7 January 1972, 11:45 p.m., NPMP, NSC, box 1037, China-A.M. Haig January Visit Jan. 1972.

\textsuperscript{xxxxvii} Memoranda, 20 June 1972, 2:05 p.m.

Kissinger to the President, “My Trip to Peking, June 1923, 1972,” 27 June, 1972. When Kissinger met with Burke Trend later in July, he acknowledged that the United States could do little if Moscow launched a “short sharp strike” but that if a Sino-Soviet conflict became protracted, Washington “could not, and would not, stand aside.” See Burke Trend to Prime Minister, “Discussions with Dr. Kissinger in Moscow,” 31 July, 1972, National Archives (UK), PREM 15/1362.

Washington “could not, and would not, stand aside.” See Burke Trend to Prime Minister, “Discussions with Dr. Kissinger in Moscow,” 31 July, 1972, National Archives (UK), PREM 15/1362.

Note for information on the talks with Ye, see Kissinger to the President, “My Trip to Peking, June 1923, 1972,” and Howe to Kissinger, “China Trip,” 24 June, 1972. See also Kissinger to the President, “Atmospherics of My Visit to Peking,” 27 June, 1972, NSC, HAKO, box 97, China Dr. Kissinger June 1972 Visit.

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