

## **NIXON’S TRIANGULAR DIPLOMACY: IS IT APPLICABLE IN THE AGE OF PUTIN, XI AND TRUMP?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

From the beginning of his presidency, Nixon was determined to end the Vietnam War with honor. He hoped that the Chinese would help push the North Vietnamese towards a solution in Vietnam. Nixon’s symbolic visit to China in 1972 changed the balance of power between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. With America now moving closer to China, the Soviet Union was anxious and eager to improve relations with the United States. Thus, Nixon’s “triangular diplomacy” had three components - normalizing relations with China, detente with the Soviet Union, and maintaining a strategic balance of power globally. The main goal of the present article is to analyze Nixon’s policy towards Communist China (PRC) and his triangular diplomacy as a tool of American foreign policy in historical context. An attempt has also been made here to examine whether triangular diplomacy is applicable as a foreign policy tool in the current era of world politics. Nixon’s new China policy and his famous triangular diplomacy were launched shortly after taking office as president, during the height of the Sino-Soviet split and the Vietnam War. Therefore, it may not be inappropriate here to briefly discuss the background information and relevant national and international political situations of Nixon’s presidency in the context of the Cold War era. The research work is mainly conducted through a review of relevant online and offline materials such as published books and journals, including archival documents from the US State Department, which are now available and very essential for any researcher. Moreover, some evidential information has been drawn from Nixon’s memoir “the Memoirs of Richard Nixon” as a primary source.

**Keywords:** Cold War; Vietnam War, Détente; Ping-Pong Diplomacy; Defensive Realism; Nixon Doctrine; triangular diplomacy; Henry Kissinger; Balance of Power; Sino-Soviet Split; SALT Treaty; US-China Joint Communiqués, 1972.

### **INTRODUCTION- HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

From the nineteenth century until World War II, American attitudes toward China were a mixture of reciprocity, cooperation, collaboration, and underlying frustration. But the situation changed dramatically in October 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with the help of the Soviet Union, declared victory in the civil war against the US-backed Nationalists (Goh, 2005). The United States refused to recognize the communist regime as the legitimate government of all of China and continued to support the defeated Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek, who fled from main land China to the island of Taiwan and established the Republic of China (ROC) on this island. Republican members of Congress blamed President Truman and the Democrats for China’s defeat by the Communists. They believed that the United States could have done something to prevent this eventuality (Swanson, 2004). The Sino-Soviet alliance and friendship treaty signed in February 1950 confirmed America’s loss of China to its main enemy, “Soviet Russia which was

the only power capable of challenging American hegemony” (Goh, 2005). The United States now viewed the Peoples Republic of China as a puppet regime of the Soviet Union.

In mid-1949, during the Civil War, President Truman not only refused pleas for help from ROC President Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters in the US Congress, but even after Chiang Kai-shek’s defeat on 5 January 1950, Truman announced the United States’ withdrawal from further support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan. However, the Korean War, which began in June 1950, forced Truman to change his previous China policy and declare the neutralization of the Taiwan Strait in US strategic interests. China’s intervention in the Korean War against US-led UN forces greatly increased the perception of China as a direct aggressor against the United States (Goh, 2005). The conflict with the PRC forced the Truman administration to send the US Navy’s Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait to prevent either side from attacking the other. Upon taking office, President Eisenhower, who was eager to end the Korean War, warned China that United States would use nuclear weapons if the war continued. Due to the stalemate in the Korean War and the death of Stalin, China agreed to sign the Korean Armistice Agreement in July 1953. Although the agreement did not establish a formal peace treaty, it did end the Korean War. Eisenhower lifted the US naval blockade of the Taiwan Strait.

During the First (September 1954–March 1955) and Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1958), the United States not only defended the Republic of China by deploying US air and naval forces, but also threatened to use nuclear weapons on PRC military targets. Such threats were effective at the time because the PRC did not have nuclear power, although in mid-June of 1958 China began operating its first nuclear reactor and cyclotron, which were supplied by the Soviet Union (Lewis and Litai 1988). After the Korean War, the United States expanded its policy of containing communism internationally. On the other hand, China continued its support for the communist war in Vietnam and developed its relations with Southeast Asian communist parties throughout Asia. In response to China’s Vietnam policy in the early 1950s, the United States was sending military advisors to Saigon to assist France in its war for control against the Vietnamese communists. In 1955, US aid began to flow to South Vietnam, the new country created after France’s withdrawal from Indochina (Goh, 2005).

Like his predecessors, President John F. Kennedy pursued a policy of containment to stop the spread of communism in Asia, although several of his advisors suggested that the United States should work toward policies more compatible with the PRC (Pellegrin, 2010). However, Kennedy and some of his close advisors believed that Vietnam presented an opportunity to test the United States’ ability to conduct “counter-insurgency” against communist insurgencies and guerrilla warfare (Spector, 2025). Therefore, in 1961, his administration increased political, economic, and military support to the South Vietnamese government. Kennedy consciously maintained relations with the ROC and tried to convince Chiang Kai-shek not to get too involved in the UN representation (Pellegrin, 2010).

During the Sino-Indian border war in October 1962, which was sparked by the 1959 Tibetan uprising, the Kennedy administration sent arms and equipment to India for two purposes. First, to attract India, which was non-aligned in the Cold War, to the American camp. Secondly, strengthening ties between India and Pakistan so that the subcontinent can become an effective counterweight to communist China (Goh, 2005). China’s nuclear development forced Washington and Moscow in 1963 to consider a preemptive strike on China’s nuclear installations, a means of intervention through both conventional and nuclear weapons. But the idea of joint action was not supported by communist Russia. In October 1964, the PRC successfully tested its first atomic bomb and emerged as a nuclear power in its own right. The nuclear test came amid rising US-China

tensions due to the escalating conflict in Vietnam. During the test, China massed troops on its border with Vietnam.

President Baines Johnson continued the Kennedy administration's policy of aiding the South Vietnamese as part of efforts to contain communist expansion. Although he sought ways to improve relations with China, America's large-scale military intervention in the Vietnam War in 1965 further worsened relations between the two countries (Swanson, 2004). To prevent the rise of communist China in East Asia, America pursued some strategies such as trying to isolate the PRC from the international community, like the UN and several states close to American foreign policy were inhibited to recognize the PRC. The United States also ratified a series of bilateral and multilateral agreements designed to encircle the Soviet Union and its allies, including the People's Republic of China. As a result, great hostility developed between Washington and Beijing (Özçelik, 23 March 2017).

### **Sino-Soviet Split**

Despite the USSR's significant economic assistance and cooperation with China and common interests in Vietnam, disagreements and tensions between the two countries were 'growing' (Gerson, November 2010). Relations began to deteriorate in 1956 when an ideological rift emerged between Beijing and Moscow after Nikita Khrushchev assumed leadership of the Soviet Union, although relationship not really over until 1959. Mao, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Chairman, criticized Khrushchev's softer line policy of coexists with the United States, and deeply distrusted him for abandoning the strict traditions of Lenin and Stalin. Relations between Moscow and Beijing reached their lowest point in 1959 when Moscow broke its promise to help China develop an atomic bomb and already started negotiations with the United States on a nuclear test ban treaty (Gerson, November 2010).

There were also differences between China and the Soviet Union over the Vietnam War, although both countries had been providing significant material and diplomatic support to the North Vietnamese. The Chinese interfered with Soviet military supplies to North Vietnam through China (ADST, August 2016). The tensions that had arisen between the PRC and the Soviet Union in the 1950s became increasingly apparent, and on 16 July 1960, the split appeared to be complete, when Khrushchev suddenly withdrew thousands of his scientific and technical advisers from China and canceled all economic aid to China, including military assistance for the development of the atomic bomb. Moscow now started sending aid to India, China's rival in Asia (Bayasgalan, 2022). In 1962, in the context of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Mao accused Khrushchev of being afraid of the United States. When China and India fought a brief war over a disputed border in late 1962, Moscow supported the Indians. In 1962, the Sino-Soviet split became openly apparent (Goh, 2005). By 1967, China's relations with the Soviet Union had become seriously strained. Several expansionist policies, such as the invasion of Czechoslovakia under the Brezhnev Doctrine in August 1968, made Mao fear that he would become "the next victim of the Brezhnev Doctrine." Both Mao and Chou Enlai condemned the attack and accused Brezhnev of behaving like a Russian tsar (Özçelik, 23 March 2017).

On 2 March 1969, Sino-Soviet relations entered a new and dangerous phase when an armed incident occurred on the Sino-Soviet border on an island called Zhenbao in the Ussuri River. More than thirty Soviet border guards and several Chinese soldiers were killed or wounded. Thirteen days later, on March 15, another bloody armed clash took place in the same location, involving far more troops and weapons, and in the following months, Moscow and Beijing engaged in several more battles on the border ( Robinson, August 1970).

Tensions between the two communist countries were so high that there was a widespread Soviet nuclear attack on China even though the Soviet Union had contributed initially to the Chinese nuclear program (Nemeth, April 2021). Although no pre-planned nuclear attack was carried out; the Soviets influenced the Uyghurs in the border areas to destabilize China. The bitter experience of six months of war forced Chinese leaders to reevaluate their foreign policy and turn to the United States for their own strategic reasons (Nemeth, April 2021). It was a strange twist of history that President Nixon, who took office in early 1969, also reached the same conclusion about the need for openness towards China.

### **Richard Nixon assumed power**

When Richard Nixon took office in January 1969, his administration was facing three major challenges—the bloody war in Vietnam, which was taking a considerable toll on the American economy, anti-war protests in the United States and European allies, and the suspension of nuclear weapons negotiations with Soviet Russia (Roos, 9 February 2022). Although Nixon was not ideal leader for the restoration of domestic peace, he was remarkably prepared for the task of redefining the essence of American foreign policy (Kissinger, 2014). Since becoming president, Nixon's main goal was to bring the Vietnam War to an honorable end with the highest authority because growing public opposition to the Vietnam War helped him get elected and he wanted to keep the promises he made during his election campaign. Therefore, after taking power, Nixon was looking for the best alternative way to end the Vietnam War without losing his troops or additional military spending (Ozcelik, 2017). In this case, he understood that only a policy of reconciliation with the PRC could serve American interests. But the problem was that “there was no parallelism between the two states in terms of identity, worldview, and values” (Ozcelik, 2017). The most challenging thing was that the people of both states saw each other as their biggest enemies

However, as “a close reader of history and a shrewd strategist,” Nixon believed that one day normal relations would be established between the United States and the Communist China (Roos, 9 February 2022). His interviews with foreign leaders and American diplomats during his travels in Asia between 1960 and 1968 show that there had indeed been a fundamental and important change in Nixon's thinking about China (Mann, 2000). During a 1965 conversation with Arthur W. Hummel Jr., deputy chief of mission at the American embassy in Taipei, Nixon firmly stated that Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist regime would never fulfill its dream of returning to the mainland. Therefore, he said, America's relationship with the People's Republic of China must be improved (Mann, 2000). During a visit to Singapore that same year, Nixon told Roger Sullivan, then head of the political department of the American embassy in Singapore, how Americans could and should build a normal relationship with the PRC (Ng, September 2010).

In 1967, he spoke with Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu and expressed the need for America to engage with the PRC and even move toward de-socializing relations after the end of the Vietnam War. More importantly, he met with President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966 and urged diplomatic contact with the PRC as soon as possible, arguing that it was time to deal with them on the diplomatic front (Ng, September 2010). A year before the 1968 presidential election, Nixon was not yet ready to take the necessary steps he would take once in the White House (Pei, 22 February 2022). In his well-known article “Asia after Vietnam”, published in the policy journal *Foreign Affairs* in October 1967, he argued, “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” (Nixon, April 2016). During the 1968 election campaign, he promised to establish peace in Vietnam, which was “the main symbol of the decline of American power”

(MacMillan, 2008). To restore American image and power at home and abroad, Nixon envisioned ending the Vietnam War in a way that would not look like America's shameful defeat (MacMillan, 2008).

Nixon was quite realistic and emphasized that the United States could not rely on its fate entirely or even largely on the goodwill of others. He assessed that peace would be strengthened by continued displays of American strength and a proven willingness to take global action. Therefore, the main principle of his foreign policy was the attempt to build an international system that related power to legitimacy - in the sense that all its important members considered the system to be just. It was the vision of such an international system that first motivated Nixon to open up to China, which he considered an essential component of it. He understood that improved relations with China would either gradually isolate the Soviet Union or induce it to establish better relations with the United States, and thus the specter of a Sino-Soviet cooperative quest for world domination that had haunted American foreign policy for two decades would be quelled (Kissinger, 2014).

He understood that establishing relations with China would help the United States end the war through diplomacy with the more powerful communist country in Southeast Asia. It would also put pressure on the Soviet Union, whose relations with the PRC had deteriorated after clashes on its eastern border, to make progress on the limitation of nuclear weapons and peace-building in the parts of the world where it was involved. Therefore, in his first inaugural address on 20 January, President Nixon indirectly referred to the Foreign Affairs article, saying, "We seek an open world ... a world in which no people great or small, will live in angry isolation" (Nixon Foundation, 18 January 2017).

To properly discharge his foreign relations responsibilities, Nixon appointed his old friend, a skilled administrator and diplomat, William P. Rogers, as his Secretary of State during his first term, and he appointed Henry Kissinger as his National Security Advisor. While Roger kept the State Department in his own hands on minor issues, Kissinger "presented an intellectual framework and negotiating skills". This arrangement worked well for several years because Nixon and Kissinger "were kindred spirits" who shared the same vision when it came to politics and foreign policy (Ozcelik, 2017). On 1 February 1969, Nixon wrote a memorandum to Kissinger, in which he said: "I think we should give every encouragement to the attitude that his Administration is exploring possibilities with the Chinese." He added that this "should be done privately and should under no circumstances get into the public prints from this direction" (Nixon Foundation, 18 January 2017).

In order to conduct his foreign policy more easily and efficiently from the beginning, Nixon tried to keep his intentions regarding China policy secret for four reasons (Ozcelik, 2017). First, the State Department was not interested in engaging with the Chinese; they were focused on the Soviet Union (ADST August 2016). This is why he could not rely on the State Department; he preferred to establish back channel communications with Communist China. This was clearly evident in his telephone conversation with Kissinger on 17 December 1970, in which he told Kissinger that the State Department could not be relied upon and that everything had to be done personally, using personal contacts. Second, Nixon did not want his foreign policy to be stymied by Congress, which he considered to be a "narrow," "short-sighted," and "unsophisticated" concept (Ng, September 2010). Third, although in the late 1950s and early 1960s, some isolated voices began to call for a reassessment of US policy toward China, it was not enough to publicly address the change in US policy towards China (US Mission China, 27 November, 2024). Fourth, Nixon wanted to persuade Moscow to make a deal. He did not want the Soviets to be prepared for a possible US-China rapprochement. In addition to keeping the information secret, Nixon instructed Kissinger to successfully handle the matter himself (ADST August 2016). In his own efforts to widely fulfill

American responsibilities abroad, Nixon established a practice of producing annual reports on the state of the world. These reports were used as guidance for government agencies dealing with foreign policy and, more importantly, as indications to foreign countries about the direction of American strategy (Kissinger, 2014).

Although Nixon kept his intentions secret due to members of the government opposition, he did not forget to express his intentions regarding China policy to three countries, Pakistan, Romania, and France, all of which had good relations with Beijing (Carli, 2023). Most importantly, Nixon felt that President de Gaulle's cooperation would be crucial to ending the Vietnam War and beginning new relations with Communist China, and in this case, Paris would be the best place to open a secret communication channel between Peking and Washington. During a visit to France in February 1969, which had diplomatic relations with Hanoi and Peking, Nixon told de Gaulle that the State Department wanted to control China through a bloc of US-allied forces (Nixon, 1978). Again, at Eisenhower's funeral in late March 1969, Nixon expressed to Charles de Gaulle his determination to begin dialogue with China (Kuo, 28 June 2013). All this happened before he realized how bitter Sino-Soviet relations had become. In April 1969, America's leading China experts like historian John K. Fairbank, the economist Alexander Eckstein, political scientist Bob Scalapino and Doak Barnett, together suggested Nixon to bring a change in US China policy (Millwood, 21 February, 2022). It was Barnett, who not only encouraged both President Lyndon B. Johnson and President Richard M. Nixon to end China's isolation, but also coined the formula "containment without isolation" (Tyler, 19 March 1999). In the coming months, Nixon gradually implemented his diplomatic openness towards China.

### **Nixon's Policy towards China during the Sino-Soviet border conflict**

During the border conflict started on 2 March 1969, Moscow made provocative statements against China and threatened to attack Chinese nuclear facilities, even though the Soviet Union had contributed initially to the Chinese nuclear program. Realizing the seriousness of the overall situation, the Nixon administration announced the deployment of a new anti-ballistic system on 15 March 1969. The purpose of this deployment was to counter a general Soviet attack and a small ICBM attack, for which some US ICBMs were deployed to deflect the fields away from the attack (Burr, 8 November 2021). Nixon's announcement of anti-ballistic missile deployment and the simultaneous brutality of the Soviet invasion shook the Chinese leadership. Chairman Mao concluded: "We are now isolated. No one wants to make friends with us" (Li, 2001). Although there have been no further clashes on the frozen rivers since mid-March 1969, both sides have continued to militarize the entire border (Luthi, 2012). Both countries sought to build political support against each other. A possible major invasion of China by Moscow caused Chinese leaders to begin preparing for a possible all-out war with the Soviet Union.

On 21 March, the Hong Kong newspaper The Star quoted Mao Zedong as saying that China was prepared to use nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack (Nixon's China Game); but Radio Moscow suddenly denied Western reports about the Soviet nuclear threat (Luthi, 2012). On the same day, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin attempted to call Mao Zedong on a direct telephone line to discuss the matter. China now dismissed Moscow's initial nuclear threats and promptly rejected Kosygin's offer of talks. In this situation, Moscow tried to organize China's neighbors and some European countries into an anti-China security system. But those countries were not willing to engage in any anti-China cooperation. They strongly were advocating Sino-Soviet negotiations. In the wake of its failure to gain significant political support against China, on 29 March, Moscow issued its official note to Beijing to resume the border negotiations that began in Peking in September 1964 (Luthi, 2012). Accordingly, on 11 May, the PRC agreed to convene a Sino-Soviet

commission on the navigation of Border Rivers in mid-June. But on 10 June, due to the Soviet attack on Chinese forces, the commission met from June 18 to August and was only able to resolve minor issues (Luthi, 2012).

When cracks began to appear in USSR-China relations in early March 1969, Nixon and his security advisor Henry Kissinger believed that the Sino-Soviet conflict presented a golden opportunity for the Nixon administration to create a triangular balance of power between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. But the chances of systematically exploiting the Sino-Soviet rivalry were very slim for two reasons. First, China was still separatist, deeply radical in its communism, and not open to communication with the United States. Even after the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in April 1969, China was still following the traditional Maoist line of supporting revolution abroad (Kuo, January 06 2017). Second, Chinese officials did not express their views in favor of Sino-American reconciliation until mid-July 1969. Their suggestion was that China should oppose both the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite such gloomy circumstances, Nixon insisted on reconciliation, although he did not know how far it would go. He was determined to take any steps towards US-China reconciliation only so as not to damage US-Soviet relations because it would poison US-Soviet relations (Kuo, 28 June 2013). To make his China policy success Nixon tried to play cautious trilateral game involving China and the Soviet Union. His administration tried to establish better relations with each of them than with each other (ADST, August 2016).

On 17 June, US Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, who had praised the Nixon administration, particularly the ‘Nixon Doctrine’, sent a letter to Chinese Premier Chou Enlai through Cambodian leader Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The letter called for Mansfield to be allowed to visit China and meet with Mao to discuss important issues between the two countries, including the resolution of the Vietnam War. By July 26, Mansfield’s letter had reached Beijing. But in August 1969, the Prime Minister rejected Mansfield’s request because of the US “aggression policy” in Vietnam and the occupation of Taiwan which Chou claimed was rightfully a part of China (Luthi, 2012).

Although Chou’s response to Mansfield was rude, he and Mao placed it in the context of increased Soviet pressure and US efforts to use China to put pressure on Soviet revisionism (Luthi, 2012). Rather than rely on Mansfield’s efforts to visit China, Nixon had already attempted to send peace envoys to the Chinese through personal back channels in Pakistan and Romania, who proved receptive (Roos, 9 February 2022). So before his open attitude towards China policy, he decided to reduce the active participation of US military forces abroad to reduce tensions with China and the Soviet Union. On 25 July, at the beginning of his state visit, Nixon announced his intention to reduce US military commitments in Asia, including Vietnam, in what is now known as the ‘Nixon Doctrine’. Under the Nixon Doctrine, the United States would provide economic and military aid to Vietnam, but would not commit the physical presence of US troops for direct combat (MacMillan, 2008). However, this doctrine was not intended to take real account of South Vietnam, where US ground forces were already deployed. However, the Nixon administration did not strictly adhere to this doctrine from 1969 onwards. For example, US ground troops were deployed during the US invasions of Cambodia in 1970 and Laos in 1971 (Samuels, 1969). Meanwhile, on 21 July, as part of his broader foreign policy, Nixon eased US trade sanctions against China (Kuo, 28 June 2013).

### **Nixon’s visit to Pakistan and Romania**

On 1 August, during a visit to US military ally Pakistan, President Nixon expressed his personal views to President Yahiya Khan, saying that Asia could not move forward if a nation as large as

China remained isolated. He also said that America should not be a party to any mechanism designed to isolate China. He asked President Yahiya to convey his feelings to the Chinese at the highest level (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume I). From Pakistan, Nixon flew directly to Romania to meet with Nicolae Ceausescu. During their meeting, Nixon asked Ceausescu to convey his Chinese feelings to Mao and to act as a mediator between the United States and China. Ceausescu agreed to do so. On 8 August 1969, US Secretary of State Rogers expressed his desire to resume diplomatic talks with China in Warsaw (Nixon's China Game). But the PRC leaders still did not contact the United States. Perhaps they did not want to give the United States the opportunity to exploit the Sino-Soviet conflict at that time. Chau enlai instructed Lei Yang, who left to join Warsaw as Charge d'Affaires in June 1969, to pay close attention to the development of US policy (Luthi, 2012).

However, after violent clashes on the border, Chinese leaders dramatically changed their minds towards the United States. On 13 August, Soviet troops using APCs and tanks supported by two helicopters attacked Tielieketi in Xinjiang, killing 38 Chinese soldiers. These clashes, which occurred just five days after the conclusion of Sino-Soviet border navigation talks, raised a new round of Soviet nuclear threats (Gerson, November 2010). In reality, the Soviet leadership was hesitant about such drastic measures against populous China (Luthi, 2012). Like the Soviets, the Chinese wanted to avoid "full-scale war" (Burr, 12 June 2001, Document 11). But the real Soviet motive for the nuclear attack was not clear to the PRC until 27 August, when CIA Director Richard Helms publicly announced that the Soviet government was in contact with the communist governments of Eastern Europe about attacking China's nuclear weapons facility at Lop Nor. Beijing viewed this announcement as a real threat of imminent Soviet invasion and immediately issued orders for war preparations (Gerson, November 2010). On three separate occasions starting in September 1969, Chinese decision-makers, particularly Lao and Lin, convinced themselves that a covert Soviet attack was imminent (Gerson, November 2010).

By then, the USSR had realized that the Sino-Soviet conflict had opened the door to the possibility of Sino-American reconciliation. So, Moscow pursued preventive diplomacy to prevent potential relations between the United States and China (Luthi, 2012). Following its aggressive diplomatic strategy, the USSR once again attempted diplomatic contact. The Chinese leadership, suspicious of Moscow's intentions and a possible nuclear attack, finally agreed to a meeting between Kosygin and Zhou at Beijing Airport on 11 September, but the meeting ultimately failed (Gerson, November 2010). The date for the formal talks was set based on discussions at the Beijing airport. But China was not at all comfortable.

Although China's nuclear power lagged far behind that of the Soviet Union, China was able to deter the Soviet Union because of its non-nuclear power, yet Mao feared a full-scale conflict because of the Soviets' nuclear advantage (Nemeth, April 2021). On 23 September, China conducted its first underground nuclear test (Nixon's China Game). By mid-October 1969, Beijing became so concerned about a Soviet nuclear attack that the central leadership, including Mao Zedong, fled Beijing. On 18 October, China placed its primary nuclear forces on full alert in anticipation of a possible Soviet attack based on the precedent set in Czechoslovakia - the first and only time such an order had been issued. According to the Indian Foreign Ministry, China had even stepped up efforts to move some of its nuclear facilities to Tibet (Gerson, November 2010). On 20 October 1969, Soviet leaders ended the conflict after reaching an agreement on the negotiation of the vote. Although no formal settlement was reached for more than a decade, the start of negotiations marked the end of "nuclear conflict and possibly World War III." After years of conflicting policies and ideologies, open military conflict finally severed relations between the two neighboring states (Nemeth, April 2021).

As China prepared for all-out war with the Soviet Union, America began to see China as an important player on the “global chessboard.” At the same time, the United States - which by then wanted to withdraw its military forces from Indochina and East Asia - saw the Sino-Soviet rivalry as an opportunity to improve relations with China (Moscoe, 4 April 2014). Meanwhile, after the Tielieketi incident on August 14, at a meeting of the National Security Council, Nixon made the stunning announcement that the Soviet Union was the aggressor and that China should be helped (Kuo, 28 June 2013). Amid ongoing tensions between Peking and Moscow and growing speculation of a Soviet invasion, Nixon began to focus on triangular diplomacy to maintain long-term stability in Asia (Kuo, 28 June 2013).

Nixon’s motive for improving relations with the PRC was not merely a strategic consideration involving Vietnam or an attempt to gain more room for strategic action in relations with the Soviets. But his plan was influenced by the fact that China was a large country and was going to be a major actor one day, but the United States was on the opposite side of the Pacific, Washington needed to communicate with them. Besides, he personally understood that without some kind of relationship with China, America could not really do well in world politics, especially in advancing its policies and interests in the Pacific region. However, Nixon was not seeking a unique or special relationship with China, and he was not giving up on establishing a tolerable relationship with the Soviets where there would be some mutual interests and mutual benefits. After all, the Soviets were the more powerful of the two, and the nuclear-armed country was opposing America (ADT, August 2016).

After considering these issues in the fall of 1969 and early winter of 1970, the Nixon administration made its first serious attempt to establish direct negotiations with China (Mann, 2000). American public opinion had also shifted during this period. Politicians and academics were ready to move towards establishing relations with Beijing. But the main problem was how to convey to the Chinese that American attitudes had changed (MacMillan, 2008). There were no diplomatic relations between the United States and Communist China. The State Department and others were hesitant to improve relations with China because they believed it was more important to focus on the Soviet Union, as it was a nuclear superpower (ADT August 2016). The last diplomatic contact between the two countries took place 15 years ago in 1954, when top officials from both countries joined the Geneva Conventions to negotiate new political boundaries between North and South Korea and North and South Vietnam (Roos, 9 February 2022). Moreover, Mao and his followers knew Nixon, who portrayed the Chinese Communist Party as merely a tool of the Soviet Union, as a well-known anti-communist. Therefore, they had no particular reason to believe that Nixon would be different from his predecessors, the Democratic presidents (Mann, 2000). As a result, it took two years of delicate negotiations between the two powers to open the way to communication with China (MacMillan, 2008).

Although Nixon and Kissinger were trying to communicate with the PRC through Pakistani and Romanian back channels, they also turned to the Warsaw Channel to try to establish contact with Beijing (Ng, September 2010). In September 1969, Nixon and Kissinger instructed Walter Stossel, the American ambassador to Poland, to contact his Chinese counterpart and ask him to resume the long-running Warsaw talks (Mann, 2000). Nixon instructed Stossel to convey the message that the president wanted to have serious talks with the Chinese (Mann, 2000). Stossel took three months to contact his Chinese counterpart. Meanwhile, the Sino-Russian conflict ended on 20 October 1969, after the Soviets and Chinese finally agreed to negotiate over the border dispute. On 7 November 1969, the United States publicly announced that it would cease naval patrols in the Taiwan Strait, which had begun in the mid-1950s as a symbol of the US commitment to Chiang Kai-shek. The PRC Foreign Ministry considered US move as an American test of Chinese responsiveness and as a gesture of goodwill. It advised Mao to order the release of two American

sailors who were arrested while entering Chinese waters in February 1969. On 16 November, Chou sent a proposal to Mao stating that ‘We should pay attention to the tendencies of Nixon and Kissinger’. The next day, Mao agreed to Chou’s proposal to open talks in Warsaw and release the two American sailors (Luthi, 2012).

In December 1969, Kissinger gave a press briefing in which he said, “We have always made it clear that we have no permanent enemies and that we will judge other countries, and specifically countries like Communist China, on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology” (MacMillan, 2008). On 3 December, Ambassador Stossel was able to successfully contact Chinese Charge d’Affaires Lei Yang and delivered the message to him. The PRC responded favorably and invited Stossel to the PRC embassy on 11 December. Lei and Stossel met again on 8 January 1970. During their secret talks on 20 January 1970, Stossel assured China that Nixon wanted to reduce the American military presence in Southeast Asia and was willing to reverse the US policy toward Taiwan and Chiang Kai-shek of the previous two decades. Stossel also suggested that America could send a representative to Beijing, or receive a Chinese envoy in Washington. To continue Washington’s reconciliation plan after lifting sanctions on US companies abroad, non-strategic trade with China has been allowed (Nixon’s China Game).

The first serious public action on the China initiative was taken on 1 February 1970, when Nixon sent his first Foreign Policy Report to Congress stating that “the Chinese are great and important people who should not remain isolated from the international community . . . The principles underlying our relations with Communist China are similar to those governing our policies toward the USSR. Unites States policy is not likely soon to have much impact on China’s behavior, let alone its ideological outlook. But it is certainly in our interest, and in the interest of peace and stability in Asia and the world, that we take what steps we can toward improved practical relations with Peking” (Nixon, 1978).

On 18 February, in a speech to Congress, President Nixon said that ‘the United States had unilaterally entered into an agreement with China which demonstrated our desire to establish more normal and constructive relations, adding that we avoid dramatic gestures that could invite dramatic rejection’. At another Warsaw conference held on 20 February, China accepted the Nixon administration’s proposal, stating that ‘if the United States government wants to send a ministerial-level representative or special envoy to Beijing . . . the Chinese government would be willing to receive him’ (Nixon’s China Game). On 1 March 1970, the State Department announced the easing of most of the official restrictions on travel to Communist China. By April, the Nixon administration announced further easing of US trade restrictions on exports to China (Nixon, 1978). But the chances of success in achieving real improvement in Sino-US relations were low. The Chinese were much more likely to be interested in negotiations because of their influence on the Soviets. Moreover, the destabilizing and damaging impact on some of America’s friends and allies and America’s relationship with China was substantial (Mann, 2000).

Although the Warsaw talks between the PRC and the United States were temporarily suspended due to the American invasion of Cambodia in late April, this did not end communication between the two countries. Nixon did not give up on the normalization process because the main rationale for this initiative was based on a clear assessment of mutually beneficial interests. A few months later, the Chinese indicated that they were willing to resume diplomatic talks. In July, they released American Roman Catholic Bishop James Edward Walsh, who had been imprisoned for twelve years since his arrest in 1958. In an interview with Time magazine on 5 October 1970, Nixon said: “If there is anything I want to do before I die, it is to go to China. If I don’t, I want my children to” (Nixon, 1978).

To keep the State Department out of the negotiations, Nixon opened indirect communication with China through Pakistani President Yahiya Khan and Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (Swanson, 2004). It is fortunate that when Nixon and Kissinger decided to open the way to communication with China, the Chinese leadership reached a similar conclusion (MacMillan, 2008). Both Mao and his close foreign policy ally Chou Enlai felt that China's isolation as a result of the Cultural Revolution had profoundly affected China's foreign policy as well as its socio-economic life. China was now on the brink of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The Chinese leadership also understood that their well-armed neighbor, the Soviet Union, was the one who could attack China in the future. Therefore, the Chinese had their own strategic interests in resuming dialogue with the United States ( Roos, 9 February 2022). They were just hoping for a positive signal from Washington. The cancellation of the Warsaw talks provided the White House with an opportunity to end the State Department's involvement in this complex negotiation process and focus on a 'back door channel' that could be closely controlled and monitored (Özçelik, 23 March 2017).

On 25 October 1970, President Nixon asked Pakistani President Yahiya Khan at the White House to send a secret proposal to China, stating that the United States wants high-level talks in Beijing and promised that it would not enter into any anti-Chinese alliance with the USSR. At about the same time, in a meeting with Ceausescu at the White House, Nixon asked Ceausescu to convey his intentions to China, and thus Nixon also created the 'Romanian Channel' (Nixon, 1978). On 26 October, Nixon made a positive gesture towards China, referring to it as the "People's Republic of China" instead of "Communist China" (Swanson, 2004). About two weeks later, Yahiya Khan conveyed Nixon's proposal to Chou Enlai. After discussions with Mao Zedong, Chou told Yahiya Khan- 'We welcome Washington's offer of face-to-face talks. We would be happy to have a high-level person for this purpose to discuss the withdrawal of American troops from Taiwan' (Nixon's China Game).

After weeks of silence, on 9 December, Nixon and Kissinger received Chou Enlai's reply through President Khan: 'A special envoy from President Nixon will be welcomed to Beijing to discuss the vacation of the Chinese territory called Taiwan'. The message ended with a play on words: "We have had messages from the United States from different sources in the past, but this is the first time that the proposal has come from a Head, through a Head, to a Head." Through Pakistani Ambassador Agha Hilaly Nixon and Kissinger replied that they could send an envoy, but the discussions "would not be limited to Taiwan", and they "proposed that Chinese and American representatives meet in Pakistan to discuss the possibility of a high level meeting in Peking in the Future (Nixon, 1978). At a press conference on 10 December Nixon said that there had been no change in US policy opposing China's entry into the United Nations, but he said that the United States would continue to seek to ease trade and travel restrictions and open up communication with Beijing (Nixon's China Game). In an interview with American writer and journalist Edgar Snow on 18 December 1970, Chairman Mao Zedong said that President Nixon would be welcomed to visit the PRC. To improve relations between the United States and China, Romanian Deputy Prime Minister Gogu Radulescu also acted as a mediator during his 1970 and 1971 visits to Beijing with Chou Enlai, who gave President Nixon a message to read, explaining that the status of Taiwan was the only unresolved issue between the United States and the PRC (Nixon, 1978).

Although in early 1971, in response to South Vietnam's invasion of Laos with US air support, China stopped exchanging secret letters with the White House through Pakistan, on 17 February Nixon insisted that the US campaign in Laos should not be interpreted by Communist China as a threat to them. Nixon did not want to make the normalization process worse by explaining what they had (Özçelik, 23 March 2017). In his second annual 'State of the World' address to Congress on 25

February 1971, which highlighted the potential for expanded relations between nations, Nixon stated that “the United States is ready to see the People’s Republic of China play a constructive role in the family of nations”. During his speech, Nixon discussed the possibility of China’s entry into the United Nations “without sacrificing the status of the Republic of China,” and referred to China as the People’s Republic of China for the first time. In mid-March 1971, the US State Department lifted “all restrictions on the use of US passports for travel to mainland China” (Nixon, 1978).

### **Ping-Pong Diplomacy**

In parallel with the political and diplomatic efforts mentioned above, another channel of informal communication was opened in April 1971, when the US Ping-Pong team, which was in Japan for the 31st World Table Tennis Championships, received a surprise invitation from CCP Chairman Mao Zedong and the Chinese leadership for an all-expenses-paid trip to the PRC. The event became known as Ping-Pong Diplomacy. The historic tour began on 10 April 1971, when fifteen American table tennis players, team officials, and spouses crossed a bridge from Hong Kong to China (Andrews, 19 October 2018). The US team, accompanied by journalists, was welcomed to the Chinese mainland by PRC Premier Chou Enlai. Several friendly matches were held and the visitors spent ten days visiting some of China’s historical and cultural sites (Moravčík, 2022).

The American tour ended at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. During their tour on 14 April 1971, the American team had a historic meeting with Chinese Premier Chou Enlai, who personally congratulated the American players and told them “You have opened a new chapter in the relations of the American and Chinese people” (Andrews, 19 October 2018). On the same day, President Nixon announced the lifting of a twenty-year-old trade embargo between the United States and China. The President also ordered a series of new steps to relax currency and shipping controls in place in China (Nixon, 1978). Chou Enlai’s call for a ping-pong team was a symbol of the Communist Chinese government’s readiness to improve relations with the United States (Swanson, 2004). On 16 April, President Nixon told the American Society of Newspaper Editors that ‘he hoped he would one day be able to visit China’ (Nixon’s China Game). After the tour, the Chinese team was invited to tour the United States. A year later, in April 1972, the PRC ping-pong team, accompanied by Chinese officials, toured the United States (Moravčík, 2022). The famous ping-pong diplomacy incident laid the foundation for numerous exchanges between American and Chinese artists, scientists, educators, and many others (Moscoe, 4 April 2014).

On 21 April, the Chinese government sent a verbal message to the US government regarding the US proposal to hold high-level dialogue between the two sides: ‘To fundamentally restore relations between China and the United States, the United States must withdraw all its armed forces from China’s Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait area. A solution to this important question can only be found through direct discussions between high-level officials from the two countries. Therefore, the Chinese government is reiterating its willingness to publicly receive the US President’s special envoy (e.g., Mr. Kissinger) or the US Secretary of State, or even the US President himself, in Beijing for direct meetings and talks ( Burr, 27 February 2002, Document 17). On 27 April, Nixon and Kissinger received a message from Chou Enlai through Pakistani channels stating that the Chinese government reiterates its willingness to publicly receive the US President’s special envoy or the US Secretary of State, or even the US President himself, in Beijing for direct meetings and talks lifting the condition that talks within Taiwan should be limited (Swanson, 2004).

Nixon was always wary of conservative opponents who might band together in Congress to disrupt the entire China effort. That is why he urged Chinese leaders through Pakistanis not to invite other US politicians - especially conservatives - to visit China. On 29 April, President Nixon told reporters, ‘I hope and, in fact, I hope to visit mainland China in some way’. On 30 April, Life

magazine published an interview with Mao Zedong dated 18 December 1970, in which the CPC chairman welcomed Nixon to China for talks, “either as a tourist or as president” (Nixon, 1978). After receiving Chou Enlai’s message through President Yahiya on 27 April, the important question now was who to send to Beijing for preliminary negotiations. After days of mulling over potential candidates, Nixon finally chose his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, “a highly intelligent man whom Nixon relied on as an extension of himself when dealing with both domestic and international affairs” (Tofte, 2011). Kissinger was the perfect man for the secret trip to hold secret talks with China in anticipation of the president’s visit. He was not only secretive by nature, but also had a reputation as a playboy, having romanced many women, including actresses Jill St. John, Shirley MacLaine, Marlo Thomas, Candice Bergen, and Liv Ullman. So, if he “disappears” for a few days to go to China, no one will be surprised, imagining that he is somewhere with a woman (Swanson, 2004).

On 10 May 1971, President Nixon sent a message through the “Yahiya Channel” that he was prepared to travel to Beijing for direct talks with the leaders of the People’s Republic of China, and proposed an initial secret meeting between Kissinger and high-level Chinese officials in China (Burr, 27 February 2002, Document 23). On 2 June, Kissinger received Chou Enlai’s message from Pakistani Ambassador Hilaly and handed it over to Nixon. The message was very historic, stating that “Premier Chou Enlai welcomes Dr. Kissinger to China as the US representative who will come in advance for a preliminary secret meeting with high level Chinese officials to prepare and make necessary arrangements for President Nixon’s visit to Peking.” When Nixon finished reading the message, Kissinger burst into cheers and said that it was the most important message to come to an American president since World War II (Nixon, 1978). On 31 May, Kissinger also received a message from the Romanians that Chinese leader Mao Zedong was prepared to meet with Nixon for direct talks and would welcome Kissinger to China to make such arrangements with Chinese Premier Chou Enlai (Nixon Foundation, 18 January 2017).

### **Kissinger’s secret visit to China**

On 1 June 1971, Nixon announced that a significant change has occurred among the members of the United Nations regarding access to mainland China, adding that his administration was “analyzing the situation” and would announce their position at the UN’s fall session. On 4 June 1971, Nixon responded to Chou Enlai’s message, saying that he looked forward to the opportunity to begin personal exchanges with the leaders of the People’s Republic of China (Burr, 27 February 2002, Document 28). In order to keep his visit to China secret on 9 July 1971, Kissinger suddenly fell ill with stomach pains while traveling to Pakistan, where he spent several days in bed. From Pakistan, Kissinger traveled secretly to China to lay the groundwork for Nixon’s own visit. This time the White House announced the end of a twenty one year trade embargo with China (Nixon, 1978). During Kissinger’s so-called secret visit, Nixon raised a related issue about Chinese domestic policy. Addressing an audience in Kansas City, Nixon argued that there was no reason to think that the Chinese Cultural Revolution would always remain a “Chinese domestic travail” for the Chinese because, according to him, the Chinese people “are creative, they are productive, they are one of the most capable people in the world. And 800 million Chinese are going to be, inevitably, an enormous economic power, with all that that means in terms of what they could be in other areas if they move in that direction” (Kissinger, 2014).

On 11 July, after two days of secret talks with Chou Enlai, during which, both sides discussed a number of important issues, especially the Taiwan issue, and both sides agreed on President Nixon’s visit. On the same day, Kissinger returned to Pakistan and informed Nixon that Chou Enlai, on behalf of the government of the People’s Republic of China, had invited President Nixon to visit

China at a suitable time before May 1972. It goes without saying that the date of the meeting was set before May 1972 because it was determined by the desire not to involve the American visit before the presidential election in November (Özçelik, 23 March 2017).

President Nixon gladly accepted Chou Enlai's invitation. At 7:30 pm on 15 Jul 1971, in a surprise announcement broadcast on national television, Nixon revealed that he would visit the People's Republic of China in early 1972. In his three-and-a-half-minute announcement, he noted that the goal of the meeting between the leaders of China and the United States was to normalize relations between the two countries and exchange views on issues of concern to both sides (Nixon, 1978). Shortly before announcing his visit to the People's Republic of China, Nixon spoke to the editors of Time magazine and, referring to 19th-century European concerts, said: 'We must remember the only time in the history of the world that we have had any extended period of peace is when there has been balance of power. It is when one nation becomes infinitely more powerful in relation to its potential competitor that the danger of war arises. So, I believe in a world in which the United States is powerful. I think it will be a safer world and a better world if we have a strong healthy United States, Europe, Soviet Union, China, Japan each balancing the other, not playing one against the other, an even balance' (Kissinger, 2014). This statement was a clear reflection of Nixon's belief that a world in which these five powers balanced each other would be safer and better off than one dominated by just two superpowers. During his historic announcement, Nixon also added that the beginning of relations with the PRC was not directed against any other nation (Swanson, 2004).

Nixon's rapprochement announcement of his upcoming visit to China not only "stunned the world", but it also shocked conservative anti-communists, who thought it was a betrayal of America's Taiwanese ally, where the anti-communist Chinese government had fled after losing the civil war (Roos, 9 February 2022). However, some Democratic leaders expressed their optimism about the visit. Following Nixon's announcement of the trip, Democratic leader Mike Mansfield was quoted as being 'surprised, delighted and happy' about the proposed trip (Tofte, 2011). Nixon's announcement of plans to visit Beijing caused serious concern in Moscow. An article in the Soviet newspaper Pravda on 25 July 1971 warned that "any schemes to use the contacts between Beijing and Washington for some 'pressure' on the Soviet Union . . . are nothing but the result of a loss of touch with reality". On 2 August, Secretary of State Rogers announced that the United States would end its 20-year policy of opposing Communist China's admission to the United Nations, but would not vote to expel the Nationalists. An article in the Chinese communist journal Hongqi (Red Flag) explained China's recent efforts towards the United States-China needs to ally itself with its "second enemy," the United States, in order to isolate and hurt its main enemy, the Soviet Union. In an interview with the New York Times, Chou Enlai insisted that "the question of Vietnam and Indochina must be resolved, not the question of Taiwan or other questions," but he said that as long as Nationalist China remained seated, China would refuse to enter the United Nations. An editorial in the People's Daily condemned Roger's proposed "two-China" policy, and reiterated that Taiwan was China's internal affair. On 17 August, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a stronger condemnation (Nixon's China Game).

In response to US openness towards China, India quickly concluded the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation on 9 August 1971. The Indo-Soviet alliance expanded and, perhaps, was an unintended consequence of the shift in US geopolitical views towards China. Also, there was a great Indian real-political counterweight to the Pakistani channels that Nixon and Kissinger used to open up China. Kissinger handled the matter very skillfully. He directly linked the policy of improving relations with the Soviet Union through a possible summit to the United

States' open communication with China, the heated Arab-Israeli conflict, and the situation in the subcontinent (ADST, August 2016). On the Chinese side, some important developments also accelerated the talks. For example, Lin Biao, known as one of the biggest opponents of any relationship between China and the United States, died after a plane crash. In an unscheduled press conference, President Nixon said that the United States would support the PRC's seat on the UN Security Council because it reflects the reality of the situation, but he added that "we will vote against the expulsion of the Republic of China" (Nixon's China Game ).

Another of Nixon's foreign policy priorities was to establish an understanding with the USSR. His administration continued to negotiate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT-I) with the USSR to reduce tensions between the United States and Russia. But the USSR was reluctant to move forward with the negotiations for two reasons: first, the United States was in a weak position due to its exhausting participation in the Vietnam War; secondly, the USSR had the capacity to achieve nuclear parity with the United States (Moravčík, 2022).

After the failure of the Sino-Soviet talks held at Beijing Airport in September 1969, Moscow adopted a policy of cooperation with Chinese society, in order to maintain a standstill in US-China relations and prevent possible military cooperation against the Soviet Union. But this strategy failed when Moscow learned of Kissinger's secret trip to China in 1971 (Moscoe, 4 April 2014). Soviet Russia, which had previously rejected calls to limit its nuclear arsenal, has now begun diplomacy in earnest for the US president's Moscow summit, despite their ongoing proxy war in Vietnam (Roos, 9 February 2022). The establishment of relations between China and the United States was a threat to Soviet power, and they believed that it would tip the balance of power in the Pacific in favor of the Chinese (Tofte, 2011). Soviet Russia now invited Nixon to meet with Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev in Russia. This was a sign that Nixon's "triangulation" efforts were working; fear of improved relations between China and America was leading the Soviets to improve their own relations with America, just as Nixon had hoped (Hughes, 2025). On 12 October 1971, a joint declaration was issued in Washington and Moscow confirming that President Nixon would visit the Soviet Union three months after his return from China. On 20 October, Kissinger returned to China on a six-day official visit in preparation for the president's meeting with Chinese leaders (Nixon, 1978).

On 25 October, while Kissinger was in China, after a week of heated debate, the United Nations General Assembly voted to expel the Republic of China from the General Assembly and to appoint the People's Republic of China as the sole government representing China to the Security Council. US Ambassador to the United Nations George H. W. Bush later complained that Kissinger's visit to China during the vote had thwarted US efforts to preserve Taiwan's seat (Swanson, 2004). Chiang Kai-shek declared that he will not recognize the "illegal action" of the United Nations by which Taiwan has been expelled. Angered by Taiwan's expulsion from the United Nations, the US Senate has rejected the 1972 foreign aid bill, which allocated \$141 million for the UN (Nixon's China Game). On 26 December, the United States began airstrikes in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. The attacks, which lasted five days, failed to disrupt Nixon's planned visit to China. Communications satellites and receiving centers were prepared to broadcast Nixon's upcoming visit to China. On 17 February, President and Mrs. Nixon departed Hawaii for China. Before leaving for China, Nixon met with French philosopher André Malraux, who told Nixon, "You're about to attempt one of the most important things of our century," and compared Nixon to 16th-century European explorers who set out for a specific goal but often arrived at a completely different discovery. Malraux then told Nixon, all those who understand what you are going to do are greeting you (Sempa, 21 February 2022).

## Nixon's visit to China

On 21 February 1972, President Nixon landed in Beijing for an eight-day visit. When Nixon disembarked from Air Force One, he greeted Chou Enlai with a handshake, which Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had famously refused to do with Chou at the 1954 Geneva Conference. This handshake marked the beginning of a new era in relations between the two countries (Swanson, 2004). On the first day, Nixon and Kissinger met with Chou Enlai and discussed important policy issues, as well as other matters of mutual interest (US-China Joint Manifesto: 1972). Later that evening, Nixon met with Mao and the two leaders “discussed Chiang Kai-shek, American politics, world affairs, and common policy issues between the two countries” (Swanson, 2004). Both the US and Chinese media celebrated the symbolic gesture between Nixon and Mao (Fells, August 2022).

President Nixon and his traveling companions visited Peking and toured cultural, industrial, and agricultural sites, and they also traveled to Hangzhou and Shanghai where, continuing their discussions with Chinese leaders, they visited similar places of interest (US-China Joint Communiqués: 1972). During more than fifteen hours of formal negotiations, Nixon and Chou discussed a variety of issues and ideas (Nixon, 1978). The historic summit concluded with the Shanghai Declaration on February 28, which initiated the normalization of bilateral relations with China and paved the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing in 1979 (Zheng, 1 March 2022).

Although China and the United States had fundamental differences in social systems and foreign policies, they overcame their differences and agreed to establish relations based on five principles – “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states, non-aggression against other states, non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.” Keeping these five principles of international relations in mind, the two countries said that (US-China Joint Communiqués: 1972):

- Progress towards normalizing relations between China and the United States is in the interests of all countries.
- Both countries want to reduce the danger of international conflict;
- No one should seek to establish hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region, and both countries oppose any attempt by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony; and
- Neither is prepared to negotiate on behalf of any third party or to enter into agreements or agreements with other parties on behalf of another state.

As part of the normalization process in the manifesto, the United States cleverly acknowledged the PRC's “one-China policy,” stating that the United States recognizes that all Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait believe that there is only one China and that Taiwan is a part of China. By this statement United States expressed its willingness to withdraw US military forces from Taiwan which China claimed was part of its “People's Republic” (Schneider, 1996). The manifesto also addressed American and Chinese disagreements over the Vietnam War, while also vaguely maintaining peace on the Korean Peninsula (Moscoe, 4 April 2014). At the meeting, Nixon assured Chou that he would withdraw two-thirds of his troops from Taiwan after the Vietnam War ended. He also reiterated that he would not support a Taiwanese independence movement. Through these promises, it seemed to the PRC that the United States would gradually distance itself from the ROC and move towards normalizing relations with the PRC (Ng, September 2010).

The revelation of Kissinger's secret visit to China in July 1971, the announcement of Nixon's upcoming visit to China in 1972, and the Shanghai Manifesto aroused a sense of distrust among the ROC leadership, who felt that their interests had been compromised. A senior member of the Nationalist Party, who asked not to be named, said –'people here have had great faith in the leadership of the United States until now, but the trust of people across the entire Western Pacific will now change' (Tofte, 2011). To appease Taiwan's nationalist Chinese leaders, Nixon sent California Governor Ronald Reagan to attend the ROC National Day celebrations. Reagan met with Chiang Kai-shek and reaffirmed the friendship and alliance between the United States and the ROC (Ng, September 2010). European countries, mainly allies of the United States, showed their support for this reconciliation as their citizens echoed the same hope for diplomacy through peace that most of the American people were calling for at this moment (Tofte, 2011).

On 22 May 1972, just two months after returning from Beijing, President Nixon arrived in Moscow to attend the Moscow Summit. Nixon and Brezhnev signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation (SALT-I) Treaty, both of which had been under negotiation for many months in Helsinki and Vienna. The SALT-I treaty marked the beginning of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union (Moravcik, 2022). Nixon and his Soviet counterpart Leonid Brezhnev also agreed to a trade agreement to send American wheat to the Soviet Union. The two countries began a joint space exploration program known as Apollo-Soyuz (Kalhor, 2023).

Although Nixon's visit to China changed the balance of power between the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, the Soviets still hoped that they could draw the United States into some sort of de-facto alliance or coalition against the Chinese. At the Moscow Summit in May 1972, Brezhnev proposed to Nixon the creation of a quasi-alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union against China. But Nixon responded very tactfully to Brezhnev's proposal because America's relationship with China was becoming more attractive to moderate or modest US-China relations (ADST, August 2016).

On 20 June 1972 Kissinger returned to Beijing for a seven day visit to work on normalizing relations with PRC leaders. The immediate result of Nixon's policy of rapprochement was a change in American policy and a shift in America's position towards the East Asia region. Trade, cultural exchanges, and tourism between China and USA increased so rapidly. Furthermore, Nixon was able to be re-elected to a second term with the largest mandate in American history, winning 49 of the 50 states with 60 percent of the total vote. Being elected president for a second term enabled him to continue further relations with China. (Özçelik, 23 March 2017). On November 1972, US State department ended 22-year-old ban on US travel to China.

Although SALT-I and an anti-ballistic missile treaty did not end the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, they paved the way for future treaties that sought to reduce and eliminate weapons (Hughes, 2025). On 27 January 1973, the Paris Peace Accords were signed, ending US military involvement in Vietnam and guaranteeing the release of all American prisoners of war. On 15 February 1973, Secretary Kissinger returned to China for a five-day visit to lay the foundation for the Liaison Office. Accordingly, on 1 May 1973, liaison offices were established in Peking and Washington, although full diplomatic relations was not yet established (Nixon Foundation, 18 January 2017).

On 18 June, Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev arrived in Washington for the second summit. During the summit, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. On 26 June the New York Times reported that Henry Kissinger met with the head of China's liaison office in Washington and assured him that the agreements signed at the US-Soviet summit did not constitute a superpower alliance against other countries. Secretary of State

Rogers made a similar disclaimer the same day (Nixon's China Game ). On 22 September 1973, Kissinger became Secretary of State, while also retaining his position as Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Nixon Foundation, 18 January 2017). On 11 November, Secretary of State Kissinger returned to China for a five-day visit, after which he stated that the Watergate crisis was having no effect on US-China relations. In a landmark speech to the United Nations General Assembly on 10 April 1974, Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping outlined a new, more moderate Chinese foreign policy. Upon returning from Asia on 7 December 1974, President Ford announced the Pacific Doctrine, which called for normalization of relations with China and economic cooperation throughout Asia.

### **Is the triangular diplomacy applicable now?**

Now, in the early 21st century, the United States, China, and Russia are considered the world's three leading economic and military powers. China's enormous progress in recent decades has made the country significantly more powerful than Russia, and even more powerful than the former Soviet Union (Norton, 24 February 2025). The rise of China has led to increased competition between China and the United States, as both countries compete for influence in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world. Russia's strategic alignment with China, particularly its reliance on China during the Ukraine war, has significant implications for important US interests and the interests of US allies and partners (Kim, 16 December 2024). In recent years, both China and Russia have taken increasingly assertive positions in terms of military power- China in the South China Sea and around Taiwan, and Russia in former Soviet satellite states including Ukraine (Kong, 25 March 2025). Therefore, the United States now sees China as the number one threat to its global dominance. Many conservatives in the United States and Europe see Russia as a potential ally. France's far-right leader Marine Le Pen has called the China-Russia partnership "the greatest danger for US in the 21st century." Top officials in both the Trump administration and the previous Joe Biden administration have said this clearly (Norton, 24 February 2025).

To keep Chinese power in check during his second term, President Trump is keen to end the Russia-Ukraine war, supporting Russia in the hope of isolating it from its largest trading partner, China. Few Western leaders, including former US President Joe Biden, seemed willing to accept such a price in exchange for weakened Sino-Russian relations, but the situation is not the same as before (Pei, 22 February 2022). Unlike Nixon, Trump appears prepared to try to restore US relations with Moscow rather than Beijing. Western media outlets have dubbed this strategy "reverse Nixon," referring to former US President Richard Nixon. Both were hard-right Republicans who used "populist" rhetoric. Both sought to exploit the divide between Russia and China – albeit in opposite directions. Trump's strategy has also been referred to as "reverse Kissinger," because Nixon's national security advisor Henry Kissinger was the architect of this strategy known as "triangular diplomacy" (Norton, 24 February 2025).

While the Western world has described Trump's policies as "reverse Nixon", referring to former US President Richard Nixon, China foreign policy expert Michael Clarke told Al Jazeera that "there is a real historicity to the 'reverse Nixon' argument", because the current situation bears little resemblance to the one Nixon and Kissinger faced in 1969-70 (Kasturi and Hale, 14 March 2025 Aljazeera). In fact, those advocating this type of strategy are ignoring four important differences with the Nixon era. First, China and Russia are not competing for international leadership over a bloc of more or less committed states (Kue, 06 January 2017). In 1971, when Nixon visited Beijing, relations between the Soviet Union and China were very bad. There was an ideological conflict between the two communist neighbors over the future of the international communist movement. In 1969, they engaged in a bloody military conflict over their shared border. Unlike President

Nixon, Trump's relationship with Russia is normal. Secondly, without interdependence, the defection of one power has little effect on the behavior of the other. Today, Russia and China are closer than ever before; they have strong economic, military, and strategic cooperation, and they also share a hatred for the West (Kasturi and Hale, 14 March 2025 Aljazeera). Third, unlike Trump, who is eager to end the Ukraine war by siding with Putin in the hope of separating Russia from the Chinese bloc, Nixon did not have to make any real concessions to China (Conversation, 11 November 2014). Moreover, unlike Trump, Nixon was never accused of 'personally benefiting' from establishing ties with Beijing (Kasturi and Hale, 14 March 2025 Aljazeera). Fourth, it is also difficult to imagine America's open communication with Moscow, unlike Beijing, because America's European partners, except for Hungary and Slovakia, are unlikely to make any deals with Russia (Conversation, 11 November 2014).

However, despite the declaration of "unlimited friendship" between Russia and China, a split between them may be possible, because in international relations neither unity nor division is permanent; they are forever feeding and propagating each other (Clemens, March 2020). For example, in the absence of Cold War dynamics, the United States could encourage Moscow's strategic relationship with India, which China views with some concern - especially when there are still disputed territories on the Sino-Russian border (Kong, 25 March, 2025). But in a multi-polar world, this seems impossible. The best part is that shared economic interests will create good relations between China and the United States. The powerful China that Nixon predicted is now a reality, and America must move forward with this reality in mind (Sempa, 21 February).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Nixon wanted to establish diplomatic relations with China in order to strengthen the global position of the United States, as it was caught up in the Vietnam War and seemingly faced difficulties in the US-Soviet rivalry for dominance in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Zheng, 1 March 2022). The Sino-Soviet split helped both the United States and China move toward reconciliation. But both sides faced internal pressure against reconciliation from their conservative politicians. Therefore, during the two years of his presidency, both Nixon and China took very subtle steps to reduce tensions, including the lifting of travel restrictions. The normalization process began with ambassadorial-level dialogue. Nixon's China policy was not without risk, as recognizing Red China could have alienated America's powerful allies and weakened support for the US position in Vietnam (Harmon 23 April 2021). Therefore, Nixon and Kissinger very skillfully used Russian and Chinese desires and fears against each other to establish a non-ideological basis for relations between the three great powers. As a result, the Soviet Union ushered in new Sino-American relations as a common threat (Ozcelik, 23 March 2017). Ultimately, Nixon's historic visit to Beijing not only established cooperative relations with China but also changed the power struggle between the United States, the USSR and the PRC. It helped Nixon achieve his desired foreign policy title of peacekeeper (Tofte, 2011). Although the Shanghai manifesto contained no dramatic surprises, it was also no major disappointment for the Nixon administration (New York Times, 28 February 1972). Close relations with China allowed Nixon to use China as a strategic ally against the Soviet Union, which also sought to balance China's rising influence. Nixon showed unusual skill in the geopolitical aspect of shaping the world order. He patiently linked the various elements of strategy together and showed extraordinary courage in dealing with crises and great perseverance in achieving long-term goals in foreign policy (Kissinger, 2014). Through his triangular policy, Nixon was not only able to reduce tensions between the three superpowers, but also set an example of how diplomacy could be used strategically to enhance national security.

Nixon's symbolic visit to Beijing not only opened up US-China relations, but it also paved the way for China to open up to the world more broadly. The current strong China is an indirect result of Nixon's historic landmark visit to China, which brought China into direct contact with the most developed countries in the world, especially the Western world (Khan, 4 March 2022). Although some scholars insist that Nixon's visit did not change US-China relations overnight, but it was true that the impact of his visit on world diplomacy in the 20th century was undeniable (Tofte, 2011). This was essential for the development of business, military, cultural, and people-to-people relations between the United States and China in the decades that followed (Kraus 21 February 2022). Finally, Nixon's triangular diplomacy was so unique in the history of American diplomacy that it is not possible for Donald Trump to implement the same approach as a means of foreign policy in the current context of world politics, because the necessary geopolitical conditions and deep hostility that existed during the Cold War no longer apply.

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