

Kissinger and China: Strategy, Diplomacy and the World Order

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When Richard Nixon appointed Dr. Henry Kissinger as his national security adviser in 1969, the main reaction was 'What an interesting choice!' He was a refugee from Nazi Germany, a dyed-in-the-wool intellectual, a Harvard professor whose PhD dissertation focused on the world order that followed the Congress of Vienna. At a time when American politics were roiled by a land war in Asia, his background led people to assume he would follow a strategy focused on Europe and the transatlantic scene. But the area where he helped give birth to a new world order was China.

The Backdrop:

Kissinger came to Washington with a clear view of what was desirable in a world order. The goal, most of the time, was stability. The configuration most likely to produce that, he had argued, was a balance of power, preferably a triangle, with broadly comparable levels of power among three parties. And yet since the mid-seventeenth century, he wrote, only two arrangements had been known for their stability: the Concert of Europe, which arose out of the Congress of Vienna in 1815; and the liberal international order that followed World War II. But neither was a classic balance of power. The former had too many players; the latter had two superpowers, and no plausible 'balancers'.²

Kissinger also had well-documented convictions about what ought to drive a nation's foreign policy, which he spelled out most clearly some years later in *Diplomacy*.

National interests and the major features of national geography came in first place. But even this student of Metternich acknowledged that in the case of the United States, a third factor had to be included: some measure of idealism. He looked on Theodore Roosevelt as the ultimate American realist, and on Woodrow Wilson as the exemplar of messianic US foreign policy. Theodore Roosevelt and others had implemented realist policies. However, without something to respond to the idealism in the US collective ethos, he argued, foreign policy would not command the popular support needed in a democracy.³

Unsurprisingly, Vietnam and the doomsday potential of US–Soviet relations occupied him most intently when he took up his position as national security adviser. But close observers might have noticed his attention already on China. Kissinger had mentioned the importance of a dialogue with China in a 1968 campaign speech he drafted for Nelson Rockefeller.⁴ Before Kissinger had finished three months in the White House, Soviet–Chinese military clashes along the Ussuri river provided an early indication that the cracks in the ‘Sino–Soviet bloc’, as it was often known in those days, might be serious. As more intelligence came in, it became apparent that the Soviet military had built up its forces all along the border, strongly suggesting that a crisis was imminent.⁵

Kissinger pinpoints this as the moment when both he and Nixon started thinking seriously about an overture to China, taking up the opportunity created by this manifestation of Sino–Soviet mutual hostility. Working up to a relationship with China would be advantageous to the United States. It might also provide a chance to achieve the stability offered by a triangular balance of power. Since the post-World War II order was set up, the distribution of global power had shifted so that the United States by itself could neither withdraw from the world nor dominate it.⁶ Balancing was now possible.

The opening

The story of Kissinger's trip to Beijing via a feigned intestinal flu in Pakistan is well known—and the stuff of legend. His memoirs describe in elaborate detail the cloak-and-dagger manoeuvres involved in opening communications. Kissinger was famous among those who worked on US foreign policy during his time for his love of secrecy.

The opening actually began more conventionally, with messages buried in what must have been achingly familiar talking points for scheduled formal meetings between the US and Chinese ambassadors in Warsaw. For fifteen years and 134 meetings, this dialogue had been the only official communications channel between China and the United States. Until that point, its main accomplishment was that it existed. The actual content of the meetings went through a complicated bureaucratic clearance process in Washington, and they were not intended to make news. The same was presumably true in Beijing.

In early 1970, a new message was passed: the US ambassador was instructed to raise the possibility of a US envoy visiting Beijing. This message and the careful but encouraging Chinese reply were reinforced by messages between the US and Chinese governments, hand-delivered to Kissinger by the Pakistan ambassador in Washington. A few months later, the US incursion into Cambodia sparked international outrage—and led the Chinese to cancel the Warsaw talks. This was 'providential', to quote Kissinger. It enabled Kissinger to turn use his channel through Pakistan into the sole means of high-level communications between China and the United States. Plenty of room to innovate—and no bothersome bureaucratic clearances.⁷

From that point on, things moved relatively quickly. The last piece to fall into place was formally naming Kissinger as President Nixon's special envoy in May 1971. His

formal invitation to visit Beijing arrived in June, once again hand-delivered by the Pakistan ambassador. Kissinger handed it to Nixon, calling it the 'most important communication that has come to an American president since the end of World War II'.⁸ Kissinger now had his triangle: China would be the third participant in a balance of power that already included the United States and the Soviet Union.

Thus far, China had primarily been a valuable piece on Kissinger's strategic chessboard. Starting in early 1970, Kissinger began reading up on China, consulting academics, commissioning studies from experts inside the US government, and starting to think about China as a country rather than a chess piece.⁹ His fascination with China and its leaders grew with his increasing contact with them.

Kissinger's pathbreaking secret visit to Beijing took place in July 1971. The announcement of Kissinger's mission a few days later dominated the news. Two events in late 1971, before Nixon's visit to Beijing, made clear how far-reaching the resulting changes were. The first was the annual debate in the United Nations over who should represent China there. The Republic of China, on Taiwan, had held the China seat since the beginning of the UN, and the yearly vote count had been sliding slowly towards the People's Republic. The critical vote for the 1971 debate was scheduled for 25 October. The United States had been pushing a compromise solution that would bring the PRC into the world body without expelling Taiwan. As the US government had anticipated, neither Beijing nor Taipei was willing to accept that. A further coincidence, and an embarrassment to the officials assigned to push for the 'ChiRep' resolution (including Taiwan's retention), was that as the vote took place, Kissinger was once again in Beijing, advancing Nixon's visit. The vote to bring in Beijing and expel Taiwan was overwhelming.

The second incident came to public view only some years later. On 10 December, as India and Pakistan were a week into a war that would eventually conclude with the former East Pakistan becoming the independent Bangladesh, Kissinger met in New York with the Chinese ambassador to the United Nations. His message was startling: 'If the People's Republic were to consider the situation on the Indian subcontinent a threat to its security . . . [the United States] would oppose efforts of others to interfere with the People's Republic.' The Chinese took no action, but certainly registered that the United States was prepared to act as China's quasi-ally, and to do this in the face of incontrovertible evidence that the Pakistan army had conducted a genocidal massacre in their Eastern wing.¹⁰

Finding the 'new normal'

Nixon's visit to Beijing in February 1972 ratified and formalized what the two countries had accomplished: the end of the bipolar division of the world. Television coverage brought the glamour and majesty of the visit home to the American public—the visit to the Great Wall and other memorable sites, the spectacular banquet, and the encounters with Zhou and Mao. The State Department members of the visiting delegation handled the litany of issues from decades of Cold War. By Kissinger's account, the president's top-level meetings, especially with Zhou, focused on the global balance of power and the emerging international order.

The concluding document, the Shanghai Communiqué, summarized the basis for relations between the US and China. Each side stated its position on the most neuralgic bilateral issues, including Taiwan, and on Asian security issues. They pledged to implement scientific and educational exchanges and undertook to open trade. They agreed to move towards establishing full diplomatic relations, to avoid international

conflict and not to seek hegemony.¹¹ It also started the process of building the emerging world order. Kissinger made six more visits to Beijing, deepening the strategic dialogue and preparing for eventual normalization.

In 1973, both sides set up 'liaison offices' in each other's capitals, charged with handling US-China relations. These were 'non-embassies', embassies in all but name. The US liaison office was headed by a galaxy of prominent people, including David Bruce, long-time US Ambassador to Britain; George H.W. Bush; and the former president of the United Auto Workers, Leonard Woodcock. Six years later, the US formally recognized the People's Republic and established diplomatic relations with it. By this time, Jimmy Carter was president, and Woodcock negotiated the agreement on opening diplomatic relations. It required the US to break off diplomatic relations with Taiwan, terminate the mutual defense treaty with Taiwan, and withdraw US military personnel from the island. The US and Taiwan established private institutions to carry out their 'non-official' relations. The US office was called the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT).

Two episodes illustrate how this process affected relatively junior officials in Washington. The first is the elaborate structure of rules governing US relations with Taiwan. Most of the staff of AIT were drawn from the US Foreign Service. In deference to the unofficial character of the office, they were required to submit a technical resignation when they were assigned to Taipei. This would then be rescinded when they finished their assignment. Some of the special arrangements for AIT were much more convenient than the conventional ones. Most embassies, for example, have to thread their way through three different appropriations when they spend official money; Taiwan got all its funding in one pot. There was a whole vocabulary that was required (or forbidden) for dealing with Taiwan, starting with no references to 'government', or 'official'. US government officials travelling there on business were forbidden to travel on diplomatic

or official passports. When I travelled to Taiwan in 1980 as part of a trade negotiating delegation, I was told to apply for a non-diplomatic passport. On the application form, I was not to give my occupation as 'Foreign Service officer' or even 'US government employee'. I was simply an 'economist'. I was also cautioned not to claim the passport fee on my travel voucher. However, the State Department lawyer who was the ultimate authority on Taiwan vocabulary told me, 'you can submit a fake taxi voucher in the same amount'. The opening of relations and the Shanghai Communique were high strategy. By the time the implementing regulations had been written further down the bureaucratic food chain, it seemed more like Alice in Wonderland. One of the early heads of AIT, Ambassador Charles T. Cross, told me that despite its unofficial character, this assignment was 'the most diplomatic job I ever had'.

About two years later, the textile industry in the United States petitioned the Commerce Department to impose countervailing duties on Chinese-made textiles, arguing that China's multiple exchange rate system amounted to a prohibited export subsidy. The US system for adjudicating such petitions involves an elaborate process of computing the unsubsidized price, and the regulations prohibited the Commerce Department from taking foreign policy considerations into account. So, the Commerce Department, with clearances from half a dozen other agencies, instructed the US embassy in Beijing to distribute a questionnaire to the major textile exporters, asking them for the details of their cost structure. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese foreign ministry took umbrage at this intrusive procedure. When the US embassy explained that the Commerce Department was prohibited from treating this like a foreign policy issue, the Chinese government in effect said, 'that is YOUR problem'. Thus were the Chinese textile industry and the Chinese government introduced to the inscrutable ways of the US bureaucracy.

Kissinger's approach to diplomacy

Strategy and policy are what one does to advance one's country's interests. Diplomacy is how one does it. Achieving an objective requires both the 'what' and the 'how'.

Kissinger was clearly more intellectually interested in strategy than in diplomacy, but recognized that he needed both. In writing about his opening to China, he spelled out his strategic thinking but devoted far more space to the details of his diplomacy. This involved not only the special communications channels but also his thinking about how best to make sure that his Chinese interlocutors accurately heard the message he was trying to transmit. His memoirs reflect at length on the subtlety of Zhou Enlai. Forty years after his first visit, Kissinger wrote a lengthy book about China.¹² His analysis of Chinese culture and history is regarded as a bit facile by China scholars, but his personal contact with Chinese leaders, starting with Zhou, engaged him deeply. These are the most basic element in diplomatic tradecraft, and the time he spent reading up on China before his first trip was a critical investment in his success.

Kissinger was much admired, but not as much loved, by the US Foreign Service.¹³ By all accounts, he was frustrated with many of his diplomatic subordinates. According to one story that was widely repeated in Foreign Service circles, Secretary Kissinger was chatting at the end of a long day on a visit to a large US embassy with the senior diplomats assigned there and asked them what they thought about relations with the Soviet Union. No one wanted to answer the question; they explained that they were not Soviet specialists. Kissinger was shocked at what seemed to him like a scandalous lack of strategic thinking. That was a reasonable criticism, but it also reflected their fear of saying something wrong in the presence of the secretary of state, especially one with a reputation for blackballing those who crossed him. Foreign Service officers are known to be risk averse.

There is an irony here. From Kissinger's perspective, career diplomats spent too much time becoming experts on a narrow slice of their country's foreign relations and were too focused on individual other countries. And yet, when one looks at Kissinger's diplomatic accomplishments—not just the opening to China but also his negotiations in the Middle East—he relied heavily on members of his team who possessed precisely this kind of granular, focused expertise on the countries they were dealing with. Kissinger prided himself on his understanding of China, but his knowledge owed much to the members of the team that worked with him at the NSC, some of them Foreign Service China experts, in particular John Holdridge. Similarly, in Kissinger's Middle East negotiations, he leaned heavily on Hal Saunders's encyclopaedic knowledge of the countries involved. Saunders was a career civil service officer and a professional icon to Foreign Service officers who worked with him.

The opening to China also illustrates one important point Kissinger has in common with the diplomats who worked for him. Career diplomats believe in communication. They want to have diplomatic relations with others; they want to understand those with whom they share the world. They tend to dislike sanctions, precisely because they so often cut off communications.

Forty years on: US–China relations

The 'new normal' that the US and China developed in the 1970s and 1980s reflected their experience of the opening of relations. It also reflected the changing power relationships within the 'balance of power triangle'. The Soviet Union broke apart and Russia's economy stagnated, while China became an economic powerhouse. At the turn of the century, the main issues between Moscow and Washington remained security and

military ones. After Putin came to power, his determination to recreate Russia's old sphere of influence led to troubled relations with Washington and somewhat warmer ones with Beijing. The geometry of Kissinger's triangle was under strain.

Meanwhile, the events at Tiananmen Square in 1989 delivered a shock to China-US relations. But it soon became apparent that many of the most active issues on the US-China agenda were economic. The Chinese economy surged ahead, especially after 2000.¹⁴ China joined the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in 1980, a decade before Russia. China's export-led growth made it the largest trade partner for the United States and an important one also for Japan and the countries of western Europe. China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001 was greeted at that time with the hope that its integration into global supply chains and trade rules would encourage China to become a 'responsible stakeholder'.

Two decades later, there is a darker assessment. After four decades of astonishing growth and twenty years of membership in the WTO, China had become increasingly willing to bend global trade rules to its own benefit. Despite an economic slowdown China now has the second-largest GDP in the world. As the world discovered during the coronavirus pandemic, China is at the heart of many global supply chains, and countries around the globe are struggling to diversify their sources of inputs for a variety of manufactured goods, notably those connected with dealing with pandemic illness. The Trump administration launched a trade war with China. Few considered it unwarranted. Rather, those who objected to this move complained about the in-your-face style and the absence of any US effort to make common cause with other countries affected by Chinese competition. It is not clear that this move has resolved the problems facing the US economy.

Whither the world order?

Where does this leave the global order to which Kissinger's opening to China gave birth? The basic model is still the triangular balance of power that Kissinger envisaged. Russia and China were always asymmetrical, but today, China's economic power greatly exceeds Russia's. The United States and China are both economic and potentially military rivals; at the same time, they are huge trade partners, with complex links tying them together through global supply chains. This is true despite the Trump administration's trade war.

Another arena in US–China rivalry is the regional politics in the Indo-Pacific area. Both countries are stepping up their activities—not only military, but also their commercial presence—in Southeast Asia. The US policy prioritizing its economic and security relations throughout the Indo-Pacific started during the Obama administration and continued into President Trump's presidency. China has made cartographic claims in the South China Sea, has displayed its unhappiness with Australia by cutting off certain exports and imports, and has ramped up its presence in the Indian Ocean. In August 2020, a faceoff in a previously peaceful part of the disputed India–China border left some twenty Indian soldiers dead. Talks are taking place, but the Indians are seriously concerned by what they believe is a Chinese effort to 'create new facts'. And the tone of Chinese public statements seems to have become more strident, in what some are calling 'wolf warrior diplomacy'.

Kissinger's 1970s-vintage triangular diplomacy had played out against the background of a military buildup at the Soviet–Chinese border, and involved the United States enticing China to distance itself further from the Soviet Union. So far, although Russo–Chinese relations have improved, there is little evidence of the two countries

making common cause against the United States. What is clearly going on, however, is Sino–American competition for close ties with the countries of Southeast Asia. None of those countries wants to be the object of competition, but neither do they wish to alienate either China or the United States. The maintenance of the standing the United States has enjoyed in the Indo-Pacific since the end of World War II is more vulnerable than it has been for years. Either a Russo–Chinese alliance against the United States or a determined Chinese move to cut the US down to size in Southeast Asia would call to mind the statement attributed to Mark Twain that ‘history doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes’.

Did Kissinger bring about the rise of China?

Kissinger will probably be remembered more for his opening to China than for any of his other diplomatic exploits. Does this mean that Kissinger caused the rise of China? His overture to China created circumstances that made China’s rise more likely. But I would look inside China for the factors that so fundamentally changed the country’s course.

When Kissinger first began his correspondence with the Chinese government, it had extraordinary leadership, big ambitions, and a long-term time horizon. China made the fundamental decisions that turned an opportunity into a change in the country’s trajectory. The Chinese gave priority to economic growth. In another historical irony, they used the institutions that represented the ‘liberal international order’ to create internal incentives for growth. This changed the behaviour of economic actors in China and of the Chinese government, building the Chinese economic machine into a juggernaut. Contrary to what the stewards of U.S. policy had hoped, however, it did not lead the Chinese government to give up the control they had of the population and economic

activity. Those more steeped in Chinese history can assess better than I whether the government had made an implicit deal that China's people would accept subjugation if they could count on being more prosperous, or whether there was some other logic at work. The expanding economy also made it easier for China to expand its military, to develop a larger footprint in international organizations, and otherwise to expand its power.

Kissinger did, however, complete the work on the world order that he started as a PhD student. He brought about a new balance of power. Like other world orders before it, it did not last forever.

Notes

¹ Ambassador Teresita C. Schaffer, Senior Adviser at McLarty Associates in Washington, D.C., spent 30 years as a US diplomat, serving primarily in South Asia.

² Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 702–735.

³ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, pp. 17–29 and 703–733.

⁴ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), p. 334.

⁵ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 722; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979). pp. 171–173.

⁶ Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 19.

⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 684–693; Isaacson, *Kissinger*, 336–343.

⁸ Isaacson, *Kissinger*, p. 333.

⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 704–706.

¹⁰ Gary J. Bass, *The Blood Telegram: Nixon, Kissinger, and a Forgotten Genocide* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 302–303; Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 205, 240–256.

¹¹ Joint Statement Following Discussions with Leaders of the People's Republic of China, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, vol. XVII, China, 1969–1972, website of the State Department Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>.

¹² Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

¹³ Kissinger knew this. I attended a function in Kissinger's honour about fifteen years ago, and went to say hello to him on the way to lunch, adding that I had worked for him in the State Department. Kissinger looked behind me and said, 'Funny, I don't see any scars on your back!'

¹⁴ World Bank website. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-US-IN-RU>.