As a consummate politician, Nixon was keenly aware of the imperatives of policy advocacy and the need to present his policies in a way that was palatable to his key constituencies. Indeed, in contrast to the Democratic administrations that preceded it, the Nixon administration was remarkably proactive and firmly led public opinion on China policy. As discussed in Chapter 4, Nixon was forthcoming about his approach to China in public statements and policy gestures, and he paid particular attention to locating his moves toward China within the context of a “grand strategy” of peace through strength and negotiation. All of these moves were undertaken before it was clear that public opinion had moved decisively in favor of China.¹ Once actual policy changes had been made and the Chinese began to respond, the White House moved assiduously toward a carefully managed campaign to convince various domestic and international audiences of the rationality of Nixon’s departures in China policy. This was necessary because public distrust of China was deeply entrenched: for example, even after the announcement of Kissinger’s secret trip to Beijing in July 1971, a 56 percent majority of the public still regarded China as the world’s most dangerous country.² Thus the Nixon administration worked to disseminate the new image of China as a “Former Enemy,” with an emphasis on the potential areas for constructive dialogue between the United States and China. Notably, however, different elements

¹ For instance, it was only after “Ping-Pong diplomacy” in April 1971 that the American public registered for the first time their preference for PRC membership in the UN – Kusnitz, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy, pp. 133–5.
² Ibid., p. 138.
of the overall argument were presented to different constituencies; in this more orthodox aspect of policy advocacy, the Nixon administration consciously exploited the distinctions within its discourse of reconciliation with China.

The Nixon administration faced three main episodes of policy advocacy in the opening to China. The first was in March and April of 1971, when, as part of the process of signaling their interest in establishing direct communications, Beijing initiated “Ping-Pong diplomacy,” and Nixon responded by significantly easing the restrictions on travel and trade with the PRC. The second and most important occasion was in the wake of the announcement on 15 July 1971 that Kissinger had returned from a secret trip to Beijing and that Nixon himself would be visiting the Chinese capital. The final bout of policy briefings and clarification occurred around the February 1972 summit itself.

“REALIST RESURGENT POWER”: EXPLAINING THE FORMER ENEMY

The administration faced two key groups of audiences. The first was made up of sections of the general public that might loosely be termed the “liberals” and the “left,” and U.S. allies such as Britain and – perhaps surprisingly – Japan, South Korea, and the ROC. This was regarded by the White House as a group that required less convincing, either because they were already in favor of a change in China policy or because they were perceived to have little option but to fall in line with U.S. policy. With this group, the administration’s key aim was to establish an understanding of the opening to China sufficient to preempt charges of being duplicitous or overly simplistic.

Essentially, a satisfactory rationale for the dramatic reversal of China policy in 1971 had to be grounded in an explanation of how Communist China had changed in a way that warranted different treatment. To this first group, the White House and State Department provided an extension of Nixon’s prior arguments based on a modified “Resurgent Power” argument, placing the rapprochement within his broad strategy of reducing tensions between the United States and its adversaries and maintaining peace in the international system.

A Resurgent Power Crucial to International Peace

Nixon’s 15 July special television address announcing that he would visit China is well known. In it, Nixon repeated his claim that “there can be no
stable and endurable peace without the participation of the PRC and its 750 million people,” and he matter-of-factly presented Kissinger’s trip as a logical extension of the initiatives over the previous year to open up more normal relations with China. To the White House staff, Nixon elaborated by rehearsing his 1967 *Foreign Affairs* argument that China constituted “one-fourth of the world’s population” and would be a “decisive” military force “25 years from now.” Thus, it would now be “very dangerous” if the United States did not do what it could to end China’s isolation. Even a “total détente” with the Soviets would mean “nothing” in terms of international peace, Nixon warned, if China, that crucial “third power,” remained quarantined. Hence he sought “dialogue” with Beijing in order to “make the world . . . safer.”

To the American people, Nixon intoned: “I have taken this action because of my profound conviction that all nations will gain from a reduction of tensions and a better relationship between the US and the PRC . . . in this spirit . . . I will undertake what I deeply hope will become a journey of peace.”

The China opening was relatively well received by the American public. Opinion polls showed a mood of “cautious optimism,” with 82 percent of those polled agreeing that the move took “a lot of courage.” Moreover, significant pluralities downplayed the potential negative impacts of the move: while 27 percent of those polled felt that it was wrong to “sell out” the GRC, 50 percent disagreed; and 44 percent (against 29 percent) did not think that “other anti-communist nations [would] trust the US less in future” as a result. Overall, the Harris poll estimated that the move had visibly upset between a fourth and a third of the political coalition Nixon had put together in the 1968 election, but that the young and affluent sectors of the electorate had responded “overwhelmingly positively” to the move. This gave Nixon’s advisers cause for optimism; they generally felt that they had sufficient public opinion on their side to be able to afford to handle the key criticisms from the right wing.

The good public reception was related in no small measure to the appeal of Nixon’s apparent move to ensure a more peaceful world and to give hope to the Vietnam-weary nation. As Lou Harris, the polling

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3 *PPP:RN* 1971, p. 819.

4 WH memo, “Briefing of the White House Staff on the July 15 Announcement of the President’s Trip to Peking,” 19 July 1971, Box 85, POF, NPM, pp. 2–3.

5 *PPP:RN* 1971, p. 819.

6 Press release, “Harris Public Opinion Analysis,” 23 September 1971, Box 2, Scali Files, NPM.

7 Colson to Nixon, “George Meany/China,” 19 July 1971, Box 12, POF; Haldeman to McGregor, 28 July 1971, Box 85, Haldeman Files, NPM.
magnate, pointed out, “people have been hungering for something this dramatic, something bold.” Nixon’s trip to China provided welcome relief and excitement for the nation:

Millions of Americans, who must have had their own childhood fantasies of visiting far-off places, were perhaps starved for excitement in a world that by the early 1970s seemed to be closing in on them, a world where many foreigners no longer welcomed them, a world where they had been humiliated by a determined enemy in Vietnam. Millions of Americans wanted to believe that the China initiative was a grand adventure. And through television, they were able to feel part of it.8

Indeed, a Gallup poll showed that Nixon’s trip registered the highest public awareness score for any event in history up until then, and that 98 percent of the respondents viewed the Chinese people in favorable terms.9

In domestic political terms, Harris enthused that the result of this positive public response to the China opening was to “put the President in total command of the international issue and the peace issue.”10 He had demonstrated that he would talk to the enemy and was not blindly committed to the use of force. Indeed, Nixon’s left flank seemed safe. By and large, the Democrats – led by George McGovern, the only declared presidential aspirant at that point, Hubert Humphrey, Harold Hughes, and Mike Mansfield – could only praise the move, which was in line with their own policy, although they ascribed clear electioneering motives to Nixon.

However, having billed Beijing as a power that would help to ensure international peace, the administration now had to dampen congressional expectations linking the Sino-American summit to a peaceful settlement in Vietnam.11 It would seem that this element was badly managed. After the summit, there was significant speculation about the implications for the Vietnam War, including allegations that a secret deal had been made in Beijing.12 Kissinger could have reported the Chinese refusal to discuss the issue, but instead he flatly refused to comment. While this would

8 Madsen, China and the American Dream, pp. 72–3. Madsen emphasizes that what made the visit such a “powerful collective experience, a spectacular fact” for Americans was the fact that it was the first major diplomatic event since the advent of global telecommunications, which allowed its televised coverage.
9 See Kusnitz, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy, pp. 138–9.
10 WH memcon, “Lou Harris’ Comments on the President’s China Initiative,” 28 July 1971, Box 48, Colson Files, NPM.
11 Mansfield and Javits, quoted in “Officials Tell of Secret Trip by Dr. Kissinger,” NYT, 17 July 1971; Mansfield on The Today Show, quoted in “Further Reaction to President’s Announcement on PRC,” 16 July 1971, Box 149, Haldeman Files, NPM.
12 See, e.g., Alsop in Newsweek, 7 March 1972.
have reflected the concrete lack of agreement with Beijing on the issue, Kissinger’s public stance may have been calculated precisely to give the press some leeway to speculate about the biggest potential gain that the United States could have achieved in Beijing. Similarly, upon his return, Nixon ordered that all officials were to refrain from comment on future U.S. force levels on Taiwan or from statements that might imply linkage between Taiwan force levels and a possible Vietnam settlement—an omission that, in the light of the U.S. statement in the Shanghai Communiqué that it would withdraw its forces on Taiwan “as tensions in the region diminish,” could only fuel speculation.

Nixon’s visit to China was less well received by America’s key Asian allies, the ROC and Japan. The Japanese government was seriously undermined by the move: Tokyo’s efforts to establish greater economic ties with China had been dampened at U.S. insistence, and now the Sato government was under attack by opposition parties and powerful business interests for the “great failure in the history of Japanese diplomacy.” The greatest impact of the Sino-American rapprochement fell on the ROC, which received only a few hours’ warning in advance of Nixon’s 15 July broadcast. Taipei’s palpable indignation and sense of having been betrayed were summed up in Ambassador James Shen’s remark that “it is not the kind of thing a friend and ally should do... without prior consultation or without even sufficient notice.”

Kissinger repeatedly explained the lack of advance notification by recourse to the danger of leaks through allied governments, but Nixon’s response was to emphasize the peace dividends, as it were, for these allies. He reiterated his main “imperative... to attempt to break down barriers of hostility and suspicion... [that] could threaten the peace of the world,” and he assured President Chiang that “the people of free Asian nations should be the first to benefit from efforts to lower tensions in relations

13 DoS memo, 7 March 1972, Box 1697, SNF(1970–3), RG59, NA.
14 For a succinct discussion of the impact of the rapprochement on East Asia, see Michael Yahuda, The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific, 1945–1995 (London, 1996), pp. 77–91. He argues that, in the Asia-Pacific region, the new tripolarity had more impact in changing China’s position and relations than on altering the fundamental pattern of alliances affecting the United States and the USSR.
between the US and the PRC.”17 When Marshall Green visited Taipei after the February 1972 summit, he tried to persuade Foreign Minister Chow Shu-Kai that the PRC was now a status quo power in important respects. Beijing had indicated its “acceptance of the status quo as regards the US presence in Asia and our relationship with the ROC, ROK, Japan and even Vietnam.” That Beijing was willing to sign a communiqué that avoided denunciation of the U.S.–ROC security treaty and contained no reference to the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Taiwan represented “remarkable concessions which would not have been possible a few years ago.” Thus, the Nixon visit had in fact “enhanced the ROC’s security.” Furthermore, Green pointed out that while the PRC had not renounced the use of force in the Taiwan Straits, its acceptance of the Nixon visit and the terms of the communiqué constituted “concrete evidence” of the priority it accorded to improving relations with the United States. This made it unlikely that Beijing would risk the use of force against Taiwan, which would jeopardize its more urgent policy objective vis-à-vis Washington.18

Under the circumstances, though, Taipei’s reaction was surprisingly mild. Chiang and his advisers had apparently decided that creating an uproar might only further jeopardize U.S.–ROC relations, the GRC’s increasingly precarious international status, and the Kuomintang regime’s security.19 The White House’s efforts with Taipei reflected this. Publicly, in order to reassure allies and pro-ROC sentiment, Nixon was careful to emphasize the limits of what he sought from dialogue with Beijing. In his 15 July announcement, Nixon stated that his action in seeking a new relationship with the PRC would not be undertaken “at the expense of old friends.”20 He repeated this reassurance in personal letters to the heads of state of major allies, but ultimately it would seem that the White House was not overly concerned about the negative effects on Japan or the ROC.

17 DoS to McConaughy, “Letter to President Chiang from President Nixon,” 16 July 1971, Box 67, PPF, NPM.
The extensive White House preparations for the China trip did not include any detailed plans of how to reassure Asian allies, and eventually it was Green who suggested that he should visit various Asian capitals after the trip to brief their leaders about the results of the summit.\footnote{And this was approved by the White House only days before the summit. Haig to Kissinger, 9 February 1972, Box 7, NSF/HAK, NPM.} At the same time, Kissinger somewhat ambiguously advised Taipei to remain calm and “sit tight,” and to await the “upheaval” of the coming regime change on the mainland, which might be favorable to the Nationalists’ hope of returning to the mainland.\footnote{James Shen, *The US and Free China: How the US Sold Out Its Ally* (Washington, DC, 1983), pp. 97, 110.}

This reflected the White House’s preoccupation with developing the great power triangle and its desire to downplay other bilateral problems with China. Indeed, Nixon and Kissinger evinced a certain sangfroid regarding the consequences for Taipei of the U.S.–PRC rapprochement, primarily because they were convinced that Beijing genuinely did not perceive Taiwan to be the most urgent or important issue and was content to let it rest for the time being. Besides, as discussed in Chapter 8, Nixon was acutely aware of the political stakes in not being perceived to have “sold out” Taiwan, domestically and also in terms of Washington’s international credibility. More importantly, perhaps, he felt that the Shanghai Communiqué was a more than adequate safeguard in this respect.

### A Realist Power Ready to Compromise

An important component of the Nixon administration’s reassurance to the domestic audience about the consequences of the China opening was the idea that Washington had struck a good bargain. Hence, while Nixon initially emphasized the image of China as a resurgent power that was an important determinant of international stability, in the post-summit evaluation of what had been gained or lost from the negotiations, Kissinger stressed instead China’s relatively weak geopolitical position in order to persuade his audiences that the United States had gained from important Chinese compromises.

Against potential criticisms that Nixon had “sold out” American allies, “gone soft” on the communists, or been “duped” by the Chinese leaders, Kissinger argued that Beijing’s primary strategic security concerns had made it willing to make difficult compromises in order to establish a new
relationship with Washington. It had made advances toward Washington and was opening up to the United States in an attempt to overcome this strategic weakness. After the announcement of the coming summit trip, Kissinger assured his staff and opinion leaders that “we have not paid anything in this China opening and . . . we will pay nothing in the future.” The Chinese, on the other hand, had incurred a high domestic and international price in issuing the invitation – the decision was a “traumatic” one for Beijing and, once made, represented high stakes for the leadership. The nature of the Chinese turnaround and its dramatic opening to the United States could seriously undermine China’s ideological and revolutionary leadership position, and Kissinger was particularly fond of repeating the metaphor of Beijing’s having lost its “revolutionary virginity” by the very act of “simply inviting us in.”

However, the substantive results of the summit itself generated significant domestic debate about what the United States stood to gain from the China opening. The idea that, during the summit, China gave way on very little while Nixon made many concessions in his ardent wooing of Beijing was widely articulated. One of Nixon’s fiercest critics, the conservative journalist William Buckley, described the trip with the phrase “Veni, Vidi, Victus” [we came, we saw, we were conquered]. Here the key focus was Taiwan, an issue that concerned both the political left and right. There was very little mainstream political support for giving up the U.S. defense treaty or diplomatic relations with Taiwan, because the ROC was regarded as a faithful ally and was represented by a well-connected and well-financed lobby within the United States. In particular, the relationship with Taipei was “a central, sacred, passionately held principle of the conservatives who provided Nixon with key political support.” Overall, the press contingent accompanying Nixon assessed that the United States had made five concessions to China. First, it had acknowledged formally that Taiwan was Chinese, ending the long-standing position that its status was undetermined. Second, it had pledged to reduce forces on Taiwan, an undertaking unmatched by a reciprocal gesture from Beijing, such as the renunciation of force in the Straits. Third, the U.S. commitment

23 WH memo, “Briefing of the White House Staff on the July 15 Announcement of the President’s Trip to Peking,” 19 July 1971, Box 85, POF, NPM, p. 6; memcon, Kissinger briefing to group of conservatives, 12 August 1971, pp. 5–6; memcon, Kissinger to Hoover Institution Overseers, 17 December 1971, Box 49, Haig Files, NPM, p. 9.
24 Evening Star, 23 February 1972. Copy in Haldeman Files, Box 118, NPM.
III. Discourses of Rapprochement in Practice, 1971–1974

to Taiwan was not affirmed in the communiqué—a glaring omission in view of the pledge to continue close ties with the ROK and Japan. Fourth, the United States had endorsed the five principles that China had insisted upon since 1955, including “sovereignty and territorial integrity,” which could be seen as an oblique reference to “one China.” Finally, the Nixon trip itself was seen as a supplicatory gesture, and some questioned the need for the president to have made the trip at all. In return, the United States obtained only some ambiguous gains. It had unquestionably opened up dialogue with Beijing, but the two major achievements—the broad understanding that both nations would oppose Soviet dominance in Asia, and the exchanges that the PRC had agreed to in principle—were of mutual benefit rather than gains for the United States per se.

Kissinger responded to these negative assessments by emphasizing the fact that these bilateral agreements would have been unthinkable a year earlier. Mostly, though, he concentrated on arguing that the Nixon administration had not compromised its ally and old friend, stressing instead Chinese concessions on Taiwan. Along with some “old China hands,” he pointed out that the blandness of the communiqué compared to past Chinese rhetoric was a dramatic indication of muted ideology. Kissinger also drew press attention to the fact that Beijing had neither asked for the abrogation of the treaty nor reaffirmed its usual position that it was “null and void.” Furthermore, it had acquiesced to the U.S. statement at a press conference in Shanghai a few hours after the communiqué had been issued, reaffirming the defense commitment to Taiwan.

Kissinger insisted that, fundamentally, the Chinese did not get “a hell of a lot concrete on Taiwan” because the two sides had not come together in the first place for a deal on Taiwan. Instead, Beijing had been drawn to the United States because of its realist assessments of geopolitical needs: “They did it because necessity has brought them, not our brilliant

27 Press conference, Kissinger and Green, Shanghai, 27 February 1972, Box 48, Colson Files, NPM.
28 Ibid.
30 Kissinger post-summit press briefing; Kissinger–Green press conference. This was done in a painfully indirect manner: Kissinger told the assembled journalists that the U.S. position on the defense treaty as set out in the president’s World Report remained unchanged and requested that no more be asked about the issue at that time. Rogers later made the same points to the ROC ambassador. DoS telegram, “ROC Ambassador Shen Calls on the Secretary,” 3 March 1972, Box 2206, SNF(1970–3), RG59, NA.
policy. . . . our policy only took advantage of the opportunity. . . . necessity has shown them that they needed a parallelism with us on a number of policies.” The Chinese leadership had to demonstrate that they could agree with the United States on something, and “this common statement of principles was a hell of a lot more crucial to them than these waffled phrases on Taiwan.”\(^\text{31}\) In other words, the Chinese were somewhat reluctant conciliators, driven by a strategic necessity that, fortunately, had been recognized by Nixon and Kissinger and turned effectively to U.S. advantage. According to this presentation, China, because of its strategic weakness, had become a reduced threat, and Chinese leaders were now people with whom American leaders could conduct serious dialogue. It also portrayed the United States as a realistic power, willing to open dialogue with the Chinese Communists in the pursuit of peace, but without compromising its allies and key interests.

**CHINA AS “THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY”: REALPOLITIK FOR THE RIGHT**

The group of constituents that occupied most White House attention consisted of the conservative end of the domestic political spectrum that might oppose Nixon’s policy for anticommunist, pro-Taiwan, or commercial protectionist reasons. Nixon’s aides expended considerable effort in identifying and cultivating Republicans who supported the China opening and in defending the policy change against right-wing opponents. Also included in this group were policy “insiders,” particularly members of the White House staff, who had the potential to harm the opening in its earlier stages by leaks and innuendos. To this group, Kissinger deliberately stressed the practical geopolitical advantages of the China opening against the Soviet Union.

To the general public, Nixon and Kissinger admitted – however cryptically – the contributing factor of the Sino-Soviet dispute in the China opening, but they flatly denied exploiting the split. Instead, they portrayed it as a factor pushing Beijing to improve relations with the United States, providing an opportunity that Nixon had grasped for the purpose of furthering peace. Thus, Nixon’s key caveat in explaining the China opening was that “It is not directed against any other nation. We seek friendly relations with all nations. Any nation can be our friend without being any other nation’s enemy.”\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{31}\) Kissinger post-summit press briefing.

\(^{32}\) *PPP:RN 1971*, p. 819.
Yet, if it should seem that Nixon’s remarks were meant as much to draw the attention of certain parties to the maxim that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” the idea would not be off the mark. Nixon and Kissinger had hoped to play the “China card” in order to exert pressure on the Soviet Union to pursue détente, and they duly did so in imparting the news that Nixon was going to visit China. Kissinger spoke to Ambassador Dobrynin a few hours before the 15 July announcement and told him bluntly, “It is not directed at you.” However, he also made clear that some of the negative impact of the China opening on the Soviet position was Moscow’s own fault. Washington had given priority to a U.S.–USSR summit, but “your government’s decision to delay the date for such a summit has forced us to proceed first with [the China announcement].” Thus, Kissinger’s emphasis that the China opening was not aimed at Moscow carried a veiled warning that Washington nevertheless possessed this option. Therefore, he advised that they should now proceed on the course of détente rather than retreat to an “agonizing reappraisal” of U.S.–USSR relations. Furthermore, Kissinger brandished the China card in order to goad Moscow into helping to end the Vietnam War. The war, he told Dobrynin, “introduced distortions” to China’s status and power – the Soviets insisted that China was “very weak,” but it was undeniable that Beijing was crucial to resolving regional issues. Thus, because of Vietnam and because of “the rather ungenerous reactions of the Soviet Union to our repeated efforts to bring about a fundamental change in [the Soviet–American] relationship,” Washington had turned to China.

The Nixon administration was most concerned about justifying the president’s planned China trip and China policy to domestic conservatives, and Kissinger held numerous briefings with groups of Republicans and other influential conservative figures. To these audiences, Kissinger was most explicit about triangular politics. The geopolitical angle and balance of power logic were deployed because they lent the enterprise a crucial element of hard-headed necessity. In the face of conservative anti-communist sentiment, it was essential to emphasize that the turnabout on

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33 NSC, “Talking Points for Ambassador Dobrynin,” ca. 15 July 1971, Box 1036, NSF, NPM; Dobrynin, In Confidence, pp. 226–7; Kissinger to Nixon, “My Conversation with Ambassador Dobrynin, July 19, 1971,” 27 July 1971, Box 492, NSF, NPM. Indeed, the White House had made a final effort to get the Soviets to agree to a date for the summit just before Kissinger left for Pakistan and China, but the Soviets had not been forthcoming. Haig to RN, “Soviet Response,” 6 July 1971, Box 1031, NSF, NPM.

34 Memcon, 18 November 1971, Box 492, NSF, NPM, pp. 6–7.
China policy had not occurred because Nixon had suddenly found virtue in communism; rather, it was an action taken for power political reasons, in consideration of strategic national interest.

In explaining the China opening to conservatives, therefore, Kissinger concentrated on justifying how and why Washington’s perception of the PRC and of the kind of relations it would like to have with Beijing had been modified. The focus was shifted away from the identity of China per se; rather, the opening to China was portrayed as a means to the more important ends of the superpower competition with the Soviet Union and defending the domestic political position of the conservatives. That is, Kissinger’s focus was more on building a particular political image of America – and of Nixon – than on representing China itself.35

Leverage against the Greater Adversary

Kissinger told his conservative audiences that while the Nixon administration understood that for them, the Chinese appeared to pose a “peculiarly devilish threat,” the China opening was designed to afford Washington leverage against the Soviet Union, which was “a far more formidable threat than the Chinese.” While Moscow possessed 1,500 intercontinental ballistic missiles, Beijing had none. Moreover, the Soviets had built up their forces on the Chinese border and had again revealed their hegemonic ambitions during the South Asian crisis. While Haig was telling Zhou this in Beijing, Kissinger explained to a group of Nixon administration supporters that they faced a situation “not unlike that in which the Germans attacked Russia, and Churchill commented that if Hitler invaded hell, he [Churchill] would make a pact with the Devil.”36 The Chinese might not be the most desirable of partners, but the rapprochement was necessary for the greater goal of “prevent[ing] the Eurasian land mass and its resources from . . . falling exclusively under the control of the Russians.”37 To the White House staff, Kissinger acknowledged that the Chinese “don’t wish us well,” but in view of the greater Soviet pressure, “it is in our interest

35 This is consistent with Schurmann’s argument that the key objective of triangular politics was to regain a position of leadership and centrality for the United States in international politics. See Schurmann, Foreign Politics of Richard Nixon, p. 2.
37 Rodman to Haig, “Hawk Talkers – Peking Summit,” 2 December 1971, Box 49, Haig Files; report of Kissinger remarks to a group of conservative administration supporters, 5 January 1972, Box 1026, NSF, NPM, p. 6.
to bring the Chinese in.” From a realist balance-of-power viewpoint, “[w]ith two formidable opponents contesting against each other, it is not obvious that it is in our interest to side with the stronger one against the weaker one.”

Hence the main aim of Nixon’s rapprochement with China was to exacerbate Soviet concerns about a possible U.S.–PRC alliance, and thus to encourage Moscow to engage more actively in negotiating détente with Washington and to exercise restraint in its involvement in other parts of the world. The implication, as the Nixon administration hastened to assure conservatives in particular, was that it had little interest in improving relations with China for its own sake. Thus, the statement that “Richard Nixon has no illusions about Chinese Communism” featured prominently in talking points for conservative groups. The Nixon administration was not proceeding on the “naïve assumption” that the many bilateral differences – especially Taiwan – could be overcome quickly. There remained many fundamental differences in policy, and there were “no preconditions” to Nixon’s trip, “no secret deals” resulting from it, and “absolutely no sell-out” of the ROC.

China Policy and Domestic Conservative Politics

The Nixon administration was forced to be particularly attentive to its conservative supporters in view of the presidential election in late 1972. Predictably, Nixon came under attack from right-wing conservatives such as George Meany (an influential labor leader) and William Buckley, who led the opposition to Nixon within the Republican campaign. Two weeks after Nixon’s announcement, a group of eleven prominent conservative leaders issued a public statement suspending their support for Nixon, mainly for “his failure to call public attention to the deteriorated [U.S.] military position in conventional and strategic arms,” and in part because of his “overtures to Red China, done in the absence of any public concessions by Red China to American and Western causes.”

While these attacks were relatively contained and confined to the more extreme elements of the right, the White House was conscious in trying

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38 “Briefing of the White House Staff on the July 15 Announcement,” p. 5.
39 Holdridge to Kissinger, “Your Briefing on China for Billy Graham and Influential Conservatives,” 9 August 1971, FG 6–11–1 HAK folder, Box 15, WHCF, NPM; Rodman, “Hawk Talkers.”
40 Press release, “Prominent Conservative Leaders ‘Suspend’ Support of President Nixon,” 29 July 1971, Box 149, Haldeman Files, NPM.
to forestall their spread within the conservative electorate. At his brief-
ings to insiders and conservative leaders, Kissinger portrayed the China
opening as being fully in line with conservative values and strategies, and
as a shrewd political move by Nixon in the face of liberal opposition.
Sketching a scenario of a domestic political siege on the administration,
Kissinger told the White House staff, “The choice for us was this: to sit
still, with our whole foreign policy under assault at home, and let our-
selves be chopped up, or try to bring the Chinese into play.”
Kissinger reiterated to leading conservatives that Nixon wanted to strengthen
the United States’ strategic capabilities vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, and he
emphasized that the administration had come into office facing “an erosion of
power” against the Soviets, compounded by Vietnam fatigue at home and
an “irresponsible” Congress. Nixon’s efforts at building up the defense
arsenal had been attacked at every step by Congress, the bureaucracy, the
intellectuals, and the newspapers, Kissinger railed. But Nixon had gone
ahead with the ABM program as a means to pressure the Soviets into
negotiating SALT, and had developed the MIRV programme as well as
new fighter projects. Given this situation in which the administration’s
instruments for a “stick-and-carrot” approach to Soviet policy – military
strength, military aid, economic aid – were being “hobbled by liberal
assault” domestically, it needed new forms of leverage. In this context,
the opening to China provided the vital “diplomatic maneuverability”
against the Soviets.
Kissinger urged that Nixon needed the full spec-
trum of conservative support, complaining that “[t]his
... is the loneli-
est administration imaginable” and pointing out that there was a “great
need to develop a counterweight to the liberal consensus” within domestic
politics.

Overall, Nixon’s China policy received significant support from many
conservatives. There were some highly publicized critiques and breaks,
but these were relatively contained within the extreme right wing. Among
the conservative press generally, Nixon’s staff reported responses that
were more moderate than expected, and key conservatives such as Ronald
Reagan and Barry Goldwater supported Nixon after July 1971.
For his part, Goldwater told Nixon: “Get me the forums and I’ll speak anytime

41 “Briefing of the White House Staff on the July 15 Announcement,” p. 5.
42 Kissinger briefing to group of conservatives, 12 August 1971, p. 2; Kissinger to conser-
vative administration supporters, 5 January 1972, p. 5; Rodman, “Hawk Talkers.”
43 Kissinger briefing to group of conservatives, 12 August 1971, pp. 7–8.
44 Klein to Nixon, 19 July 1971, Box 19, WHCF/CO; Warren to Haldeman, 22 July 1971,
Box 273, Haldeman Files, NPM.
on your behalf.” He seemed convinced by Nixon’s line that “You know me . . . I am not going to sell us out.”

The expulsion of the ROC from the UN in October 1971 presented a setback for this conservative support, as Republicans in the Senate, including Goldwater and Senator James Buckley, campaigned to reduce U.S. support for the UN. As discussed earlier, some eleven prominent conservatives publicly broke with Nixon in part because of China policy. However, other high-profile conservatives continued to support Nixon, among them Ronald Reagan, who, convinced by the realpolitik explanation that Kissinger offered to him in a private briefing, agreed to act as Nixon’s personal envoy, traveling to Taipei at the end of 1971 to reassure the GRC about the new China policy. Ultimately, this conservative support probably stemmed in large part from the unique room for maneuver that Nixon enjoyed because of his background as a conservative and a staunch anticommunist. Also, the breakthrough and the summit—labeled “TV’s biggest show since man-on-the-moon”—were undeniably dramatic and reaped significant domestic political gains for the Republican Party, and for Nixon as the incumbent candidate, in an election year. In terms of results, too, the “China card” appeared to be effective, as Moscow accelerated negotiations over Berlin and SALT after July 1971 and agreed to the Moscow summit in June 1972.

CONCLUSION

The Nixon administration was relatively successful in garnering support for the China opening. This was due in no small part to the altered domestic perception of China, which was tied up with the prominent changes in China policy discourse of the late 1960s and with Nixon’s own process of policy relaxation beginning in 1969. It also stemmed from a strong desire for peace among a Vietnam-weary public. However, a crucial factor was the careful policy advocacy employed by the White House.

45 WH memo, “The President’s Meeting with Senator Barry Goldwater,” 31 August 1971, Box 49, Haig Files, NPM.
46 Bob Dole press release, “Setback for Reason”; UPI news telegram, 26 October 1971, Box 48, Colson Files, NPM.
48 NYT, 18 February 1972.
For the benefit of the “doves,” the liberals, and the left, Nixon emphasized the themes of peace and negotiation and continued to present China as a resurgent major power with which the United States had to engage in order to maintain international peace. At the same time, in reiterating the practical and realistic aims of the Nixon administration in not compromising allies and old friends in its search for dialogue with the Chinese, Kissinger also found it expedient to argue that China was in a weak geopolitical position and therefore ready to compromise with the United States on important issues such as Taiwan. Strikingly, however, the White House’s main concern was with its domestic, rather than allied, audience – the ROC had to be content with the same reasons that were being offered to the general public, as it was seen to be in a weakening position and increasingly dependent on the United States.

To the anticommunist conservatives, on the other hand, Kissinger flagged the realpolitik, anti-Soviet triangular politics rationale to demonstrate that Nixon remained true to his conservative credentials and acted in the best national interest. In this hard-headed discourse, China was in itself a diminished threat, primarily because it now clearly shared with the United States the greater adversary of the Soviet Union. Nixon and Kissinger, for their part, were unsentimental realist operators who were taking advantage of the Sino-Soviet split in order to turn the balance of power to U.S. advantage vis-à-vis its superpower rival. At the same time, Kissinger stressed the party political aspect of the challenges faced by the Nixon administration, arguing that the new China policy was an integral part of Nixon’s attempts to rescue his strong and realistic foreign policy from the enemies of the Republicans and conservatives – the Democrats and liberals.

Thus, in spite of the prominence of the triangular politics rationale in Kissinger’s memoir accounts, it was rather the “liberal” revisionist school of thought about the opening to China, which originated in the 1960s and was then modified by Nixon, that was emphasized for public and allied consumption. The realpolitik argument was articulated only on a “limited distribution” basis at the time, for instrumental reasons, principally to help to protect the administration’s domestic right flank by arguing that Nixon was in fact driving a good bargain against the two communist adversaries. This strategy of selective reasoning was effective, and support for Nixon’s China policy in the next year or so began to unravel seriously only with the Watergate crisis.