“Tacit Ally,” June 1972 to 1974

Consolidating or Saving the U.S.–China Rapprochement

This chapter traces and offers some explanations for the transition, in practice, from a rapprochement relationship in which China was characterized as a “former enemy” – a fellow realist power with whom the United States cultivated a mutual distrust of the Soviet Union, and toward whom the United States “tilted” covertly while pursuing a superpower détente – to a relationship that encompassed more intimate diplomatic and military ties with a China represented as a “tacit ally.” The latter contained a much more overt anti-Soviet focus, within which Kissinger emphasized offering strategic reassurance to the Chinese and the development of conceptual and domestic opinion bases for a closer security relationship, while bargaining for more favorable terms of diplomatic normalization.

After the Beijing summit, the negotiation of the U.S.–PRC rapprochement was closely influenced both by triangular politics and by domestic politics. At the same time, the sustained interaction between the two sides had a significant impact upon the development of the discursive context and resulting policy actions. Interestingly, this process was again characterized by competing discourses: this time, Kissinger’s representation of the Soviet threat and U.S.–PRC relations versus that of the Chinese leaders. Kissinger portrayed the Chinese not just as former adversaries or friends but as tacit allies, whose strategic viewpoint increasingly coincided with that of the United States and who placed their priority on anti-Soviet aspects of the relationship rather than on bilateral issues. This contrasted with the Chinese discourse, which questioned U.S. sincerity and reliability as a friend based on disagreement with and suspicion about Washington’s détente policy, and which denigrated the Soviet threat in order to reduce American leverage in U.S.–PRC normalization negotiations.
In this context, Kissinger tried further to construct the “tacit alliance” he envisaged, at first discursively in his presentation of the outcome of his dialogues, then by offering Beijing various means of strengthening bilateral military ties.

TRIANGULAR POLITICS, JUNE 1972 TO FEBRUARY 1973: FORMER ENEMY TO TACIT ALLY?

After Nixon’s China trip, Kissinger traveled again to Beijing for talks in June 1972 and February 1973. Between those visits, Kissinger and his staff continued to meet frequently with Huang Hua, the PRC representative to the UN, in New York. According to Kissinger’s reports to Nixon, this short one-year period following Nixon’s summit trip was a “honeymoon” of sorts in the new U.S.–PRC relationship, during which their common interests were confirmed and the norms of the bilateral relationship further consolidated.

China as Kissinger’s “Tacit Ally”

For Kissinger, the two sets of dialogues in Beijing in June 1972 and February 1973 provided definitive evidence of the vitality of the strategic basis for the developing relationship. The Chinese leaders were now more forthcoming in discussing the Soviet threat, and there was such an apparent convergence of Chinese and American strategic viewpoints that upon his return from Beijing in June 1972, Kissinger told Nixon that “the Chinese have moved . . . from an adversary posture to one which can only be described as tacit ally.”\(^1\) Eight months later, Kissinger reported “remarkable” progress: the two sides, which had come together in 1972 “despite different world outlooks,” “have now become tacit allies.” In fact, “we are now in the extraordinary situation that, with the exception of the United Kingdom, the PRC might well be the closest to us in its global perceptions.”\(^2\)

There were two main elements to Kissinger’s image of the PRC as “Tacit Ally.” First, Beijing explicitly recognized the Soviet Union as a common adversary and shared Washington’s strategic assessment of the

---


\(^2\) Kissinger to RN, “My Trip to China,” 2 March 1973, Box 6, PPF, NPM, pp. 2–3 (italics in original). I am grateful to William Burr of the National Security Archive for sharing the unsanitized version of this document, which he obtained through an FOIA request.
global threat posed by the Soviets. While Mao and Zhou had been relatively reticent in their discussions of the Soviets in 1971 and at the summit, Beijing now clearly articulated the shared American and Chinese interest in containing the Soviet threat. As Kissinger put it, “the floodgates opened privately and publicly” – Mao and Zhou were “obsessed” with the Soviet Union, which “completely permeated” the talks, and they saw the Soviet hand at play in every region of the world.\footnote{Kissinger to RN, “Atmospherics of My Trip to Peking,” 2 March 1973, p. 2; Kissinger to RN, “My Asian Trip,” 27 February 1973, Box 6, PPF, NPM, p. 6; “My Trip to China,” p. 4.} The Chinese leaders asserted that Moscow harbored expansionist ambitions all over the world, competing with the United States for influence in the Middle East, expanding into the Mediterranean and South Asia, and continuing to threaten China. Zhou warned that Washington could not afford to react “too slowly and prudently” in these areas.\footnote{Zhou–Kissinger memcon, 15 February 1973, pp. 17–18. All memcons from Kissinger’s February 1973 trip can be found in Box 98, NSF, NPM.}

Second, besides affirming Moscow’s identity as a common adversary, Mao asserted that the United States and China should “work together to commonly deal with [the] bastard.”\footnote{Mao–Kissinger memcon, 17 February 1973, in Burr, \textit{Kissinger Transcripts}, p. 88.} Kissinger’s discourse of China as “T tacit Ally” drew from the way in which the Chinese leaders voiced support for U.S. policies of containment against the Soviet Union and for American involvement in various regions to counter the Soviet threat. To begin with, there now appeared to be an explicit recognition in Beijing that it was in the Chinese interest for the United States to maintain its power to counter Soviet pressure internationally.\footnote{This was noted by members of Kissinger’s staff who accompanied him on the trip. See Howe to Kissinger, “China Trip,” 24 June 1972, Box 97, NSF/HAK, NPM.} At the June 1972 meetings, Zhou and Marshal Ye Jianying probed Kissinger on the American capacity for continued international containment of the Soviet Union, expressing concern about the likelihood of cuts in the U.S. defense budget in case the Democrat George McGovern was elected in the presidential elections, and openly praising Defense Secretary Melvin Laird’s call for increasing military expenditure.\footnote{Zhou–Kissinger memcon, 20 June 1972, pp. 15–16; 21 June 1972, p. 3. The memoranda of conversations from the June 1972 trip are found in Box 851, NSF, NPM.}

Additionally, Kissinger and Mao and Zhou further developed a security dialogue, much like that between close allies – they had long discussions about the state of American alliances in Europe and Asia, and about U.S. containment strategy in South Asia and the Middle East. Mao urged that
Washington should work more closely with its allies, particularly in order to maintain NATO unity, and derided the European communist parties, favoring instead those that wanted stronger ties with Washington.\textsuperscript{8} Beijing was itself expanding contacts with Western European leaders and urging resistance to Moscow, and Zhou discussed with Kissinger the hope that West Germany would develop as a balance to Soviet power.\textsuperscript{9} In conjunction with this, Chinese attitudes toward the U.S.–Japan relationship were now clearly modified. From their previous insistence that Japan was a rising power that might help to carve up China, and their firm opposition to the U.S.–Japan treaty, the Chinese leaders moved toward the view of Japan as an “incipient ally...to counter Soviet and Indian designs.”\textsuperscript{10} Publicly, this change was evident in Sino-Japanese normalization; in private, Zhou had gone further, acknowledging that “we are not...in favour of a transition from [the]...Japan-US Security Treaty.” Implied that China saw the treaty as a brake on Japanese militarism, he reminded Kissinger that the United States had a responsibility to restrain Tokyo and to prevent it from being “won over” by the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{11} Mao himself sent the same message: “rather than Japan having closer relations with the Soviet Union, we would rather they would better their relations with you.”\textsuperscript{12}

Generally, Mao urged the United States to create an anti-Soviet axis that would include Europe, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Japan.\textsuperscript{13} Washington ought to take more action to prevent the Soviets from spreading their influence in the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the Near East, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean, he counseled. In South Asia, Beijing supported U.S. involvement and support of independent Pakistan as a balance to Soviet-supported India. The Near and Middle East were regions in which the Chinese leaders had professed little interest thus far, but Kissinger reported that they now “clearly looked with favor on our continuing presence in the Middle East to counter the Soviets.”\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, Chinese scholars note that during this time, “Mao in particular grew attached to

\textsuperscript{8} Mao–Kissinger memcon, in Burr, \textit{Kissinger Transcripts}, p. 89.
\textsuperscript{10} Kissinger, “My Trip to China,” p. 16.
\textsuperscript{11} Zhou–Kissinger memcon, 18 February 1973, pp. 29–33.
\textsuperscript{12} Mao–Kissinger memcon, in Burr, \textit{Kissinger Transcripts}, pp. 91–2.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 94. Notably, Mao did not include China in this axis, an indication of the way in which Beijing seemed to regard itself more as a source of “moral support” than as a U.S. ally or recipient of U.S. military supplies or aid.
\textsuperscript{14} Kissinger, “My Trip to China,” p. 11. This was censored in the sanitized version.
the concept of ‘a parallel’, of the Chinese uniting with the Americans in
the fight against the Soviet Union.”

This convergence of strategic assessments was accompanied by the fur-
ther institutionalization of the U.S.–PRC relationship in the form of an
agreement during Kissinger’s February 1973 trip to set up liaison offices
in each other’s capitals. Not only did these offices – which would be
“closely equivalent to Embassies in everything but name” – represent
a concrete advance toward normalization, but the simultaneous presence
of a GRC embassy and a PRC liaison office in Washington would also
signify Beijing’s continued willingness to downplay the contentious issue
of Taiwan. Kissinger explained to Nixon that this breakthrough was the
result of four factors: the Vietnam peace agreement, which had removed
the remaining stubborn disagreement between the two sides; “the grow-
ing Chinese preoccupation with the Soviet threat”; “the shadow of the
advancing age of the PRC leaders”; and Chinese confidence in the Nixon
administration.

For all his triangular politicking, Kissinger was noticeably taciturn
about the effect of the developing Soviet–American détente on Chinese
calculations. Although the logic of “triangular politics” underlay both
the American and Chinese moves toward rapprochement, the dynamics
of the strategic triangle became fully functional only during 1972, when
the U.S.–PRC and U.S.–USSR summit meetings were held within four
months of each other. The Nixon White House devoted the months fol-
lowing the China summit to negotiations with the Soviet Union about
Berlin, SALT, Vietnam, and the Soviet–American summit. Thus, Beijing’s
conviction that the United States and China should join in countering
Soviet expansionism did not develop suddenly in mid-1972; as the mo-
mentum of triangular politics grew, so too did the Chinese leaders’ de-
sire for closer relations with the United States as a means to counteract
U.S.–USSR ties. At the same time, Chinese disquiet and suspicions about
Soviet–American collusion also increased, leading to a significant diver-
gence in the Chinese leaders’ representation of U.S. and Soviet intentions,
which Kissinger played down in his reports to Nixon.

16 Ibid., pp. 20–1.
17 Ibid., p. 1. In fact, as far back as May 1971 the Chinese Politburo had recommended
that during the interim period, while Beijing awaited the full realization of its conditions
on Taiwan prior to normalization of relations with Washington, the two sides could set
The United States as a False Friend: Beijing Questions U.S. Intentions

The documentary record shows that – rhetorically, at least – Mao and Zhou did not share Kissinger’s representation of the United States and PRC as tacit allies or partners. In their talks with Kissinger in June 1972 and February 1973, the Chinese leaders constructed a more ambivalent account of the developing U.S.–PRC relationship. While they agreed with the United States about the shared danger and scope of the Soviet threat, Mao and Zhou put forward a diverging assessment of Soviet intentions and strategy. As part of their critique of Washington’s policy of détente with the Soviet Union, Mao in particular questioned U.S. sincerity and intentions in the rapprochement, portraying the United States as opportunistically exploiting the Sino-Soviet split in order to achieve its ultimate aim of defeating its superpower rival.

As the Chinese leaders began to make more explicit the anti-Soviet thrust of the Sino-American rapprochement from their point of view, so too Beijing articulated a stronger image of an aggressive and expansionist Soviet Union. In February 1973, Zhou warned Kissinger that the “new Czars” were “extremely sly,” “extremely aggressive,” and willing to “disregard all diplomatic promises,” so that “as soon as you slack your steps [in any key region]... they will step in.” By contrast, Washington’s policy of détente with Moscow was predicated on the assumption that the Soviet Union might choose the course of “changing its policy in a more peaceful direction.” This was an option that the Nixon administration, through negotiations and agreements, was prepared to give Moscow “every incentive” to pursue. Zhou’s blunt retort was that the Soviets’ “so-called détente is false. . . . they are engaged in expansion.” But because Moscow was “afraid of fighting a nuclear war,” it was trying to negotiate a nuclear nonaggression treaty with the United States while shifting its challenges to “remote areas” such as the Middle East. This reasoning went to the heart of Chinese suspicions about the fallout of a European détente on themselves, which underlay the tension between the U.S. policies of détente and rapprochement.

18 Zhou–Kissinger memcon, 15 February 1973, pp. 17–18. The Soviets also did not disguise their low opinion of the Chinese: Brezhnev told Nixon that they were “peculiar,” “treacherous and spiteful,” “extremely sly and perfidious,” and “ruthless.” RN–Brezhnev memcon, 23 June 1973, Box 75, NSF/HAK, NPM.
Beijing was particularly skeptical about Soviet-American negotiations regarding a nuclear nonaggression treaty during the second half of 1972, which eventually evolved into the Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War (PNW) signed in June 1973. The agreement, proposed by the Soviets, would have the two superpowers refrain from using nuclear weapons against each other and required that they consult each other in the event of conflicts that might involve nuclear weapons. Beijing denounced the proposed agreement as “nakedly aimed at nuclear world hegemony” and thus in violation of the Shanghai Communiqué principle against collusion to divide the world into spheres.

Kissinger responded to these concerns by constructing an even more menacing Soviet threat and arguing that détente was part of the U.S. strategy to aid China in containing the Soviet Union. He warned Huang that “there is a deliberate Soviet policy to isolate you”: “the many agreements the Soviet Union has made in the last two years . . . in the West, can only be explained . . . in terms of aggressive intent in the East.” Washington had every intention of helping its Chinese friends to counter this threat, but it had to negotiate with Moscow as well, in order to “to play for time.” The Nixon administration needed to get its domestic audience “used to” some “entirely new” propositions, such as the idea that Chinese security affected American interests. Ultimately, Kissinger assured the Chinese, the aim was to provide a firmer basis for resistance to Soviet hegemonic aspirations. Agreements such as the nuclear nonaggression treaty would “maneuver the Soviet Union into a position where it clearly [would be] the provocateur” if it acted aggressively, providing a moral and legal basis for U.S. military reaction.

The Chinese leaders disputed Kissinger’s representations of both Soviet and American intentions and strategy. In August 1972, Huang Hua declared frankly that the Chinese side was “not so worried about the
Soviet attempt to isolate China.” On the contrary, there were signs that Moscow was trying to create “through its anti-China propaganda a false sense of security in Europe.”25 In other words, Beijing believed that Moscow retained its primary designs on the West, and that the United States ought to reexamine its policy of détente.26

By February 1973, the suspicions expressed by the Chinese leaders about U.S. intentions shifted from an overt U.S.–USSR cabal against China toward the possibility of more subtle U.S. strategies to overcome its superpower rival by using the PRC. As their concern grew about developments in Europe – the establishment of the European Security Community, the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) negotiations, and Ostpolitik in general27 – Zhou and Mao, in the best elliptical Chinese fashion, suggested that the U.S. policy of détente in the West was really a tactic the Americans and Europeans were using to “push the ill waters of the Soviet Union...eastward.”28 In other words, it was a policy of deliberate appeasement of the Soviet Union in the West, so as to channel Moscow’s expansionist tendencies toward China, the Middle East, and the Indian subcontinent. Zhou pointed to “historical examples” of such (unsuccessful) appeasement by the Western Europeans in trying to push German aggressors eastward during World War I and World War II. Now they were trying to repeat the strategy with the Soviets.29 In this Chinese representation, the United States was not a tacit ally but a false friend.30

25 The success of the U.S.–China opening may have contributed to this state of affairs, for as a Foreign Policy Research Institute study had warned, too warm a Sino-American relationship would breed the notion in Europe and the United States that the Soviets were so concerned about the strengthened position of the PRC that it would be ready to negotiate détente in the West so as to concentrate on the East. – William Kintner, “The Impact of President Nixon’s Visit to Peking on Global Relations and US Foreign Policy in the 1970s,” 14 February 1972, Box 502, NSF, NPM, pp. 56–61.
26 Huang–Howe memcon, 14 August 1972, Box 850, NSF, NPM, p. 2. On 10 July 1972, Mao himself had warned the French foreign minister about the danger of the Soviet “feint towards the East” : “while they speak of attacking China, the reality is that they want to conquer Europe.” – Mao Zedong waijiao wenxuan, p. 597.
30 Indeed, Schurmann argues that Nixon’s new “grand design” was effective precisely because he offered Moscow a redefinition of the superpower relationship that encompassed both détente and cooperation, as well as a continued rivalry that was relocated away from Europe toward the Third World periphery. See his Foreign Politics of Richard Nixon, pp. 5, 44.
Mao ascribed to the United States even more devious intentions, suggesting that Washington’s strategy of appeasement in Europe was not only accompanied by the deliberate aim of encouraging Moscow to target the East, but also would be backed eventually by temporary collusion with Moscow there. The aim would be to let the Soviets “get bogged down in China,” as the United States had been in Vietnam. Washington might even “help them in doing business, saying whatever you need we will help against China.” The point of this would be to exhaust the USSR, and after a period of years to allow the United States to confront Moscow (“poke your finger at the Soviet back”), to “bring the Soviet Union down.”

By sketching this extreme scenario, Mao reminded Kissinger that Beijing was well aware that the Nixon administration’s China policy was a means toward the goal of ultimate victory in the U.S.–USSR superpower contest.

In the face of the Chinese image of the United States as an unscrupulous exploiter, Kissinger was forced to moderate his presentation of the Soviet threat and to emphasize the common threat faced by both West and East. The United States would “never knowingly cooperate in an attack on China” and had no desire for a stalemated Sino-Soviet war, he told Mao, as “this would dislocate the security of all other countries and will lead to our own isolation.” Indeed, the lesson of the two world wars was that “once a big war starts, its consequences are unpredictable”; thus, “we would consider aggression against China as involving our own national security.”

He conceded that Moscow also had aggressive intentions in Europe, since the “intense effort of major military proportions going forward [there]... cannot be accounted for unless one assumes that the option of use is being prepared.” Indeed, Kissinger now told Zhou that there were twice as many Soviet divisions in Europe as there were on the Chinese border, with far more air power. Thus, Europe and China were in equal peril, and, returning to the theme of the United States and China as strategic partners, it was important to try to prevent the Soviet Union from “breaking out in one direction or another.”


32 Ibid., pp. 89, 99–100.

33 “My Trip to China,” p. 6. Much of Kissinger’s response was censored in the sanitized version.

At one level, Mao’s calculated probes were bargaining tactics aimed at exerting pressure on Washington to deliver on its promise of Sino-American normalization, as the ultimate means of cementing bilateral relations. At the same time, Mao’s suggestion of an extreme form of U.S.–USSR collusion was designed to question the sincerity of Kissinger’s assurances against the ill effects of détente for China’s position and to indicate that Beijing disagreed with Washington about the means of dealing with their common adversary. It was clear to Beijing that the American opening to China was motivated by its desire to play the “China card” in order to motivate the Soviet Union to negotiate détente with the United States. Beijing’s fundamental concern, though, was that having successfully exploited the “China card,” Washington would deemphasize its containment policy and might not perceive the urgency of fully normalizing relations with the PRC, or of doing so on terms favorable to Beijing. Hence Zhou’s observation in February 1973 to Kissinger that “[y]ou want to reach out to the Soviet Union by standing on Chinese shoulders,” and his warning that “[t]he more you do this, the more naughty the Soviet Union becomes.”

Essentially, Zhou’s remark was the barest statement of the basic Chinese concern regarding the U.S. strategy of détente, as opposed to the preferred Chinese style of direct containment of the Soviet Union. Both the Chinese and American sides clearly perceived the link between Beijing’s security concerns and the Nixon administration’s grand strategy, but they envisaged different means and ends to the relationship. Nixon and Kissinger wanted to exploit Chinese worries about Soviet intentions in order to tie Beijing to a closer, more “normal” relationship with the United States, so that the “China card” could be played more effectively in persuading the Soviet Union to develop détente and restraint. Mao and Zhou,


36 Memcon, 15 February 1973, p. 18. Kissinger tried twice to forestall this Chinese worry by making attempts, somewhat embarrassing in their obvious transparency, to convince Zhou that the “speeding up” of U.S.–USSR relations in the wake of the China summit was “not a case that we particularly sought.” Memcon, 20 June 1972, pp. 3, 22–3; memcon, 16 February 1973, p. 11.
III. Discourses of Rapprochement in Practice, 1971–1974

on the other hand, saw Chinese security as bound up with the U.S. role as a strong countervailing force to the Soviet Union, and tried to use the new Sino-American relationship to influence Washington toward a firmer containment policy against the Soviet Union. In other words, Nixon and Kissinger prioritized a triangular balance of power (my Option 3), while the Chinese sought U.S. support against the Soviet Union (Option 4).37

Moreover, as John Garver has argued, Beijing’s opening to America in 1971 was not motivated primarily by the desire to deter a Soviet attack on China – there was an extensive leadership debate about this, and the Chinese decided to depend mainly on self-defense. Instead, Beijing’s key aim was the longer-term one of preventing superpower collusion to contain China, which seemed increasingly likely as the Sino-American détente developed.38 Thus, the détente that Nixon and Kissinger sought with the Soviets in parallel to rapprochement with China was anathema to Beijing.

Building the Tacit Alliance: Linking U.S. Strategy and Chinese Security

In response to the Chinese leaders’ portrayal of the United States as an opportunistic superpower and a false friend, and in order to counter Beijing’s divergent views on U.S. and Soviet intentions and strategies, Kissinger was obliged to reinforce his discourse of China as a crucial strategic partner of the United States by taking steps to demonstrate that American strategy was indeed one of developing closer relations with the PRC in order to contain Soviet power. Central to this exercise was the explanation of how maintaining China’s national security was intrinsic to America’s contest against its superpower rival, and how the policy of détente fitted into the shared goal of constraining the Soviet drive for hegemony.

Nixon and Kissinger had tried from the beginning to convince the Chinese leaders that Washington perceived itself as having a vital stake in China’s national security, that “a strong, self-sufficient, independent China exercising control over its destiny is in our own interest.”39 As the Chinese leaders became more insistent regarding their doubts about U.S. intentions, Kissinger expressed this principle more clearly. In August 1972, he told Huang Hua that Washington wanted to establish “enough of a relationship with [the PRC] so that it is plausible that an attack on you

37 Harding discusses this divergence in aims in Fragile Relationship, pp. 48–50.
38 Garver, Chinese Decision for Rapprochement, Chapters 1–3.
involves a substantial American interest.” The Nixon administration would do this in three ways. To begin with, the growing convergence of Washington’s and Beijing’s strategic assessments must be accompanied by a strengthening of the bilateral relationship. This could be done most effectively by “speeding up the process of normalization and mak[ing] it more visible” in terms of trade, exchanges, and liaison offices.

Second, Washington would continue to pursue détente with Moscow. In addition to buying time to prepare domestic opinion, Kissinger argued that the U.S.–USSR détente was a means to ease Moscow’s suspicions. With U.S.–PRC rapprochement, in order to avoid giving the Soviet Union “the pretence of claiming they are being encircled,” Washington had to “do enough with the Soviet Union to maintain a formal symmetry.” This allusion to a “formal symmetry” between U.S.–USSR relations and U.S.–PRC relations was a transparent attempt to elevate the status of the latter, since the superpower relationship clearly outweighed the Sino-American one in form as well as substance.

Kissinger also provided a time line for this strategy: “the period of greatest danger” for China, he told Huang, would be 1974–6, when the USSR would have completed the “pacification” of the West through détente and disarmament, the shifting of its military forces, and the development of its offensive nuclear capabilities. This time period, of course, coincided with that by which Nixon and Kissinger had promised the Chinese that they would achieve normalization. Thus, the implication was that Beijing should prioritize U.S.–PRC normalization, and in the meantime trust that U.S. engagement with the Soviets through negotiations might help to temper some of the excesses of Soviet ambitions. In order to indicate their seriousness, Nixon and Kissinger sought other ways of sending this message to Beijing. At the end of May 1972, they met with French President Pompidou, who was shortly due to visit Zhou in Beijing. In discussing the PNW agreement, Kissinger was explicit in explaining
that “our objective is to gain some years for the Chinese-American relationship to mature as a counterweight to Soviet power,” and that part of the reason for the nuclear agreement was to forestall “the possibility of pre-emptive Soviet aggression to humiliate China.” Kissinger reasserted that there was “no sense in choosing the stronger against the weaker” and that America’s “deliberate policy” was to support China against the Soviet Union. Indeed, it had “the intention to turn rapidly toward China in the space of two or three years.” These loaded remarks – which could have implied diplomatic or military relations – were probably made with the expectation that Pompidou would “leak” them to the Chinese, and perhaps also the Soviets. In any case, Kissinger showed Huang the transcripts of this meeting.

Third, Washington would make certain commitments to the PRC as a counterbalance to U.S.–USSR agreements. In the run-up to the U.S.–USSR summit in June 1973, Kissinger reaffirmed to the Chinese that “anything we are prepared to do with the Soviet Union, we are prepared to do with the People’s Republic.” But in view of the impending PNW agreement, he added, “we may be prepared to do things with the People’s Republic that we are not prepared to do with the Soviet Union.” Specifically, he offered to consider “some joint declaration that neither of us will engage in any negotiation against the other or that neither of us will join in any agreement without consultation with the other.” Furthermore, “we are prepared to do it publicly.” Here Kissinger appears to have been somewhat carried away by the momentum of negotiating “watered down” agreements, for it is difficult to see how the Nixon administration could have justified such an agreement with a country with which it still had no diplomatic relations. In the event, the Chinese declined the offer, and Nixon contented himself with sending Zhou a formal note promising that “in no case will the US participate in a joint move together with the Soviet Union under [the PNW] agreement with respect to conflicts... where the PRC is a party.” The Nixon administration also paid attention to material demonstrations of U.S. interest in strengthening the PRC. In response to Chinese requests for Rolls Royce technology, the U.S. government, which could not supply it due to existing trade restrictions on strategic

---

47 Kissinger–Huang memcon, 14 June 1973, Box 95, NSF/HAK, NPM, p. 5.
48 Kissinger to PRCLO charge Han Xu, memcon, 15 May 1973, Box 238, Lord Files, p. 7.
49 Kissinger to Huang Zhen, memcon, 29 May 1973, Box 328, Lord Files.
50 RN to Zhou, 19 June 1973, Box 328, Lord Files.
goods, arranged for the British to provide the technology instead, thus circumventing U.S. regulations.\footnote{Kissinger to Huang Zhen, memcon, 6 July 1973, Box 328, Lord Files.}

It is worth noting that Kissinger’s more earnest attempts to reassure the Chinese might have reflected a degree of genuine concern that Moscow was contemplating an attack on China. As he informed the Chinese, Brezhnev had suggested to Kissinger during his preparatory trip to the Soviet Union in May the possibility of taking “joint action against Chinese nuclear facilities.”\footnote{Kissinger to RN, “Reports on Meetings with Brezhnev,” 11 May 1973, Box 75, NSF/HAK, NPM, p. 7; Kissinger–Han memcon, 15 May 1973, pp. 5–6. The transcripts of this trip have not been declassified.} In his report to Nixon after the visit, Kissinger had emphasized the “ominous overtones” of Brezhnev’s remarks, which suggested that he was “obsessed” with the China problem. Kissinger surmised that China was a “major variable” in Soviet policy, one that might lead to a “major crisis” in the next twelve to eighteen months. Thus, there was a need to “look at our contingency planning for the event of Soviet military action against China.”\footnote{Kissinger, “Reports on Meetings with Brezhnev,” p. 7.} In this connection, the Department of Defense was asked to examine the scenario of a Soviet attack on PRC nuclear facilities and to develop options for a U.S. nuclear response.\footnote{Odeen to Kissinger, “NSSM 169 – Nuclear Policy,” 8 June 1973, NSA Doc. 265.}

The pressures on Washington of reconciling the policies of détente with the Soviet Union and rapprochement with the PRC had built up significantly by mid-1973. Chinese perspectives on détente diverged from American reasoning, and Kissinger reacted to Beijing’s skepticism and questioning of U.S. sincerity by reinforcing his arguments about the U.S. interest in Chinese security. He tried subtly to remind the Chinese leaders that the United States might be the ultimate guarantor of Chinese security against a Soviet attack, and he urged that it was in Beijing’s best interest to further improve relations with the United States. As Michael Yahuda has pointed out, even though China’s international status was elevated by its inclusion in tripolar diplomacy, it was obvious that the dominant relationship in the international system remained that between the two superpowers.\footnote{Yahuda, \textit{International Politics of the Asia-Pacific}, p. 78.} Therefore, as a form of discursive compensation, Kissinger’s explanation of United States strategy to the Chinese deliberately placed the PRC at the center of U.S. foreign policy and downgraded...
the importance of the superpower détente. But Kissinger and Nixon also supplied Beijing with concrete commitments not to use U.S.–USSR agreements against China, much as they might have done for an undeclared ally. At the same time, they hinted that Washington would soon take significant steps toward consolidating the U.S.–PRC relationship, and they made gestures to increase the ease of supplying military technology to China. These steps were taken to develop the “tacit alliance” relationship Kissinger envisaged with Beijing, and to reassure the Chinese about U.S. strength and credibility against the Soviet threat. Kissinger’s construction of this need is important here, because during this period, Chinese doubts about the United States need not necessarily have impinged seriously on the relationship, since fundamentally, Beijing had limited room to maneuver. “Triangular politics” was working against the Chinese, because the apparent success of the superpower détente left China in a position whereby it had worse relations with both of the superpowers than they did with each other. Beijing continued to need the U.S. relationship as a counterweight against Moscow, as evinced by the agreement to set up liaison offices and by Beijing’s desire to work toward normalization.

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM IN U.S.–PRC RELATIONS, JULY–NOVEMBER 1973

From July 1973 onward, however, Washington’s strong bargaining position began to fade as external and internal political pressures increased, challenging the détente policy and limiting the administration’s flexibility regarding China policy. As Beijing’s worry that U.S.–USSR relations would continue to improve began to fade, its bargaining position regarding normalization also became stronger. In the face of these pressures, Kissinger escalated along his preferred trajectory of maintaining the U.S.–PRC rapprochement through greater strategic assurance, but with less effectiveness.

Downturn?

The sour note struck in U.S.–PRC relations by Chinese suspicions about the U.S.–USSR détente and the June 1973 PNW agreement was soon followed by a further downturn in relations from July onward. First, there were delays in setting the date for Kissinger’s next trip to Beijing. This was
partly the fault of the White House, which tried to tie the Kissinger trip to Chinese assistance in seeking a ceasefire and peace talks in Cambodia.\textsuperscript{56} In the event, Beijing, which had been offering to mediate the conflict since the end of 1972, declined to help as Congress voted to end the bombing campaign in Cambodia on 15 August, and as Prince Sihanouk refused to engage in talks.\textsuperscript{57}

Signs of a downturn were also manifested in bilateral issues. In late August 1973, the Chinese government asked that the Marine Guards deployed at the U.S. liaison office (USLO) compound in Beijing be withdrawn, in spite of an earlier agreement. At the same time, little progress had been made in advancing exchanges and trade. The bilateral exchange program was still “flagging and erratic,” and no final action had been taken after the agreement in principle in February to conclude the claims/assets issue so as to remove impediments to bilateral trade.\textsuperscript{58}

Kissinger was enraged by the uncertainty over the arrangements for his coming trip to Beijing, and in line with his preoccupation with the strategic element of the U.S.-PRC rapprochement, he insisted that Beijing’s actions must reflect “fundamental” Chinese doubts. He was worried about the state of “triangular relations” in the context of the unfolding Watergate crisis and congressional challenges to the war in Cambodia, U.S. force deployments in Europe, and the defense budget. Kissinger feared that the Chinese leaders now questioned the value of the relationship with the United States, since they saw “a paralyzed President unable to provide firm support in matters affecting their security.” As he had often stressed before, the relationship depended upon U.S. strength, and “all this talk about 25 years of mutual estrangement was crap. What the Chinese wanted was support in a military contingency.”\textsuperscript{59}

Other China watchers, however, stressed a combination of domestic political factors and strategic considerations on the Chinese side. NSC


\textsuperscript{58} Solomon to Kissinger, “Your Meeting with PRC Liaison Office Chief Huang Chen, Saturday, September 29, 9am in the White House,” 28 September 1973, Box 328, Lord Files; Bruce to Kissinger, 6 October 1973, Box 40, NSF, NPM.

\textsuperscript{59} Memcon, Kissinger, Scowcroft, Eagleburger, Lord, Howe, Solomon, Rodman, 19 July 1973, Box 328, Lord Files.
China specialist Richard Solomon argued that in the run-up to a Chinese Communist Party Congress, Zhou and the moderates were under attack from hard-line factions and were “backing off from the recent high-profile posture of US-PRC normalization.” Ambassador David Bruce, chief of the USLO in Beijing, agreed that this reflected temporary “domestic political maneuverings” rather than “an outright rejection of their policy toward us.” However, Bruce’s deputies Al Jenkins and John Holdridge added that the Chinese might have felt that they could afford to “show pique” recently because “they no longer believe a Soviet attack to be at all likely, or at least imminent, though the hatred and mistrust thrive thumpingly.”

EA agreed, noting that Zhou had privately claimed that the Soviet would not provoke a major war with China in the foreseeable future. This assessment can be attributed in part to the “mere passage of time during which the Soviets have not attacked,” but also to the “the altered position of the US in the US-USSR-PRC strategic triangle.” In other words, in spite of Chinese misgivings about Soviet intent and the U.S.–USSR détente, and despite Kissinger’s continued efforts to stoke the fires of Sino-Soviet antagonism, the very success of Nixon’s and Kissinger’s policy of trying to restrain Moscow by détente and by linking Chinese security to the U.S. interest had bred this situation.

Observations about this apparent slowdown in U.S.–PRC relations prompted the question of what Washington ought to do about it, particularly once the date for Kissinger’s next trip to Beijing was finally set for 10–15 November. Kissinger’s key aide, Winston Lord, wrote him a personal memorandum in which he identified a “watershed” in relations with the PRC: “the opening of institutional and personal contacts has about run its course,” he warned, and they were now at an “ambiguous and fragile stage where if we do not go forward, we may go backwards.”

He reviewed the difficulties in reassuring Beijing about U.S. dealings with the USSR, but concluded that China basically did not have an alternative to balance Moscow, and that strengthening the relationship with the United States remained a priority. Additionally, given the twin pressures

---

60 Solomon to Kissinger, “Mao and Chou Under Pressure? Some Recent Pieces in the Chinese Puzzle,” 24 July 1973, Box 328, Lord Files; Bruce to Kissinger, 19 August 1973, Bruce to Kissinger, “My Meeting with Ch’iao Kuan-hua,” 29 August 1973, p. 4, Box 95, NSF/HAK, NPM.

61 Jenkins/Holdridge to Kissinger, 20 July 1973, Box 328, Lord Files, p. 2.

of domestic politics and advanced age, Mao and Zhou would want to accelerate U.S.–PRC relations in order to “lock their country on a course that could not be lightly reversed in the successor struggle.” Thus, Lord urged that Kissinger, on his coming trip to Beijing, must seek a “major advance” in relations in order “to strengthen the policy hands of Mao/Chou.” The time had arrived for the rapid turn toward China that Kissinger had discussed with Pompidou. As Lord saw it, Kissinger now had two options by which to produce significant momentum in U.S.–PRC relations: they could establish a “more concrete security understanding” with the Chinese, or they could seek significant progress in the normalization of bilateral relations.

Lord favored the latter; but Kissinger tried to do both.

Confirmed Tacit Allies versus Doubtful Strategic Partners

According to Kissinger, his November 1973 trip to Beijing resulted in a “confirmation and deepening” of the close identity between Chinese and American strategic perspectives. He told Nixon that they were more than ever “tacit allies” sharing similar views about Soviet strategy, the necessity of a strong American world role and defense capability, and the strategic importance of the Europe–Japan–Middle East–Near East–South Asia axis.

Washington, he said, was “walking a delicate tightrope of public détente with Moscow and tacit alliance with Peking,” but the “meticulous care and feeding of the Chinese on our Soviet policy” continued to pay off. Indeed, he had been able to reinforce the justifications for the PNW agreement by citing the way in which Washington reacted to Soviet actions in the Middle Eastern crisis that developed after the Yom Kippur war in October. Kissinger told Zhou that the U.S. strategy of forcing the USSR into “a posture of provocation” had worked: when Brezhnev had sent Washington a message demanding that it join a Soviet-American expeditionary force to the Middle East, and declaring Moscow’s intention to move unilaterally otherwise, Nixon had been able to justify putting U.S. forces on alert because a unilateral Soviet move would violate Article 2

63 Lord to Kissinger, “Your Trip to China,” 11 October 1973, Box 370, Lord Files, pp. 1–2.
64 Ibid., p. 3.
66 Ibid., pp. 2–3.
of the PNW treaty. Both Mao and Zhou welcomed Nixon’s strong handling of the Middle Eastern crisis.

Reflecting Kissinger’s assessment of the deepening tacit alliance, the joint communiqué issued at the end of the trip broadened the implications of the Shanghai Communiqué by specifically extending the mutual agreement to refrain from and oppose hegemony beyond the Asia-Pacific region to “any other part of the world.”

Yet again, however, the transcripts of the dialogues reveal that the tenor of the Chinese leaders’ discourse on U.S.–PRC relations was more ambivalent. In their central three-hour long interview, Mao expressed to Kissinger continuing suspicions about the Soviet–American détente. More significantly, he deliberately constructed a reduced Soviet threat to China itself, and he reminded Kissinger about the mutual dependency of American and Chinese interests in countering Soviet expansionist ambitions. These were obviously attempts to reduce Washington’s perceived strategic leverage in the U.S.–PRC relationship and to improve Beijing’s bargaining position with regard to conditions for normalization.

Mao denigrated the Soviet threat in two ways. First, he argued that Moscow had very little reason to want to attack China. When Kissinger again discussed the “realistic possibility” that Moscow would attack China, “above all . . . to destroy your nuclear capability,” Mao declared that Chinese nuclear capability was “no bigger than a fly” and thus was not worth attacking. Kissinger qualified the assessment by saying that the Soviets were worried about China’s nuclear capability “ten years from now,” but Mao dismissed the argument on the basis that China would need thirty to fifty years to develop a nuclear capability significant enough to threaten the Soviet Union.

Mao’s second key theme was that the Soviets’ “ambitions [were] contradictory with their capacity.” Because they had to deal with “so many adversaries” around the world – in the Pacific, the Middle East, and

---

67 Zhou–Kissinger memcon, 11 November 1973, Box 372, Lord Files, p. 12. Article 2 stated that the United States and the USSR would refrain from threat or use of force against third parties in circumstances that might endanger international peace and security.
68 Ibid.; Mao to Kissinger, memcon, 12 November 1973, in Burr, Kissinger Transcripts, p. 188; Kissinger to Scowcroft for RN, Situation Message No. 42, 12 November 1973, Box 41, NSF, NPM. Nonetheless, as Kissinger’s staff acknowledged, Moscow’s initial threat to take unilateral action during the crisis showed that the PNW treaty itself failed to encourage restraint. NSC briefing paper, “US-Soviet Relations,” n.d., Box 97, NSF/HAK, NPM.
Europe – Moscow’s forces were thinly spread, making attempts at Soviet expansionism “pitiful.”71 In China’s case, this overextension meant that only one million troops were spared for the Sino-Soviet border – “not enough even for the defense of [the Soviet eastern front] and still less for attack forces.” Thus, the Soviet threat to China was greatly diminished, this time in conventional military terms.

Here Mao also took the opportunity to question again U.S. sincerity and intentions. He noted that the Soviet Union could not attack China “unless you let them in [by] … first giv[ing] them the Middle East and Europe so they are able to deploy troops eastward.”72 This reinforced Mao’s probes in February and conveyed the enduring Chinese concern about: (a) at best, the possibly unintended consequences for the East of the superpower détente, or, (b) at worst, the possibility of deliberate U.S. collusion with the Soviets against China. In this regard, Mao broadly hinted at Beijing’s conviction that Washington and Moscow had made secret deals at the Washington summit.73 In order to stress the point that the U.S. ought to regard China as a coequal partner in containing the Soviet Union, rather than as a pawn in the game, Mao reminded Kissinger that China was “also holding down a portion of [Soviet] troops which is favourable to you in Europe and the Middle East.” That is, just as the United States helped to prevent a Soviet attack on China by keeping the Soviets occupied in the Middle East and Europe, China’s posture toward the Soviet Union served U.S. interests. Washington and Beijing were mutually dependent in strategic terms, and there was a need to pursue a “coordinated course” so that “nobody will be attacked.”74

Against Mao’s portrayal of the United States and the PRC as doubtful strategic partners, Kissinger exercised his option of offering Beijing a stronger security understanding in order to preserve the momentum in Sino-American relations. In his pre-trip memorandum, Lord had been openly skeptical of this option, which would indicate a change “from our currently balanced (evident) diplomacy to one that clearly favors Peking over Moscow.” Lord had particularly warned against any secret commitments for “constitutional, legal and political” reasons, particularly in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. Besides, he argued, secret commitments would be useless to Beijing as a deterrent against Soviet attack and thus

71 Ibid., pp. 183, 180.
72 Ibid., p. 184.
73 Ibid., pp. 182–3.
74 Ibid., p. 184.
would inevitably be leaked. More importantly, though, the Chinese leaders “don’t expect, and probably wouldn’t even want such a move”; in any case, they “would not necessarily believe such a commitment, or at least this President’s ability to fulfill it.”

Against Lord’s advice, Kissinger tried to bring about significant movement in the U.S.–PRC relationship by offering to consolidate the bilateral security dialogue with concrete measures. On the night of his arrival in Beijing, Kissinger told Zhou that the United States could aid China against Soviet attack in ways that were “very secret and not obvious.” A “formal relationship” (that is, an alliance) was not desirable, but Washington could unilaterally provide help of a “technical nature” to lessen the vulnerability of Chinese forces and increase the warning time in the event of an attack. Specifically, they could set up a “hot line” arrangement that would allow Washington to provide Beijing with early-warning information about Soviet military action directed against China; and Washington could also sell to Beijing its superior high-resolution satellite images to heighten the accuracy of Chinese targeting of Soviet sites. After his meeting with Mao, Kissinger brought up the subject again with Zhou. In the event of a Soviet attack on China, Kissinger stated that the United States could help in two additional ways: first, if the war should be prolonged, it could supply “equipment and other services.” Second, it could also help with the improvement of communications between Beijing and the various Chinese bomber bases “under some guise,” and it could provide the technology for “certain kinds of radars” that the Chinese could build.

In sum, Kissinger offered to aid the PRC materially in the event of a war and to establish the beginnings of a military supply relationship between the two countries. Together, these steps indicated Washington’s

75 Lord to Kissinger, “Your Trip to China,” p. 3.
willingness to “lean toward” Beijing in a far more obvious and concrete way than hitherto acknowledged. Zhou’s response was measured, but reasonably receptive. He commented that American cooperation with early warning would be “intelligence of great assistance,” but this had to be done in a manner “so that no one feels we are allies,” since “such a course of action . . . would have great impact internationally.” Thus, “we would need to study it before we can consult you further.”

Kissinger’s proposal would be controversial and explosive, given the bitter Sino-Soviet rivalry and the internal dissent in the Chinese bureaucracy about Zhou’s U.S. policy. However, given the decline in his position and his health, and because of Mao’s personal opposition, Zhou never managed to steer the proposals through the decision-making channels, and there is no evidence thus far to show that any Chinese official responded to Kissinger’s proposals.

Normalization: China as a Realist or Nationalist Power?

Ultimately, though, concrete progress in Sino-American relations after rapprochement could be achieved only if advances were made regarding the modalities that would allow the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC. On this count, too, Kissinger reported success after his November 1973 trip, in the form of the statement in the joint communiqué: “The Chinese side reiterated that the normalization of relations . . . can be realized only on the basis of confirming the principle of one China.” Kissinger told Nixon that this indicated that normalization would require “only the ‘principle’ of one China . . . as opposed to requiring the practice.” It suggested that Beijing might be willing to settle for “considerable autonomy for Taiwan and continuing US ties [after U.S.–PRC normalization] so long as the nominal juridical framework reflects the one China approach.”

According to Kissinger, therefore, a potential solution to the central obstacle to normalization was in sight; Washington could perhaps, after all, have its mao tai and drink it too. To him, this represented a “major concession” on Beijing’s part, suggesting that China was still a realist power primarily motivated by its security concerns, and that it was willing to compromise on the Taiwan issue in order to maintain its leverage against the Soviets.

79 Tyler, A Great Wall, p. 174.
80 Kissinger, Situation Message No. 51; “My Visit to China,” pp. 1–2, 4–5.
And yet, the ambiguity in the communiqué sentence on Taiwan should be noted. There is a hermeneutic difference between the two grammatical expressions: “only on the basis of confirming the principle of one China,” and “on the basis of confirming only the principle of one China.” The former leaves open the question of how the principle is to be confirmed, while the latter more clearly expresses the idea that it is the principle, rather than the practice or anything else, that matters. It was the former version which was used in the communiqué, while Kissinger’s interpretation derived from the latter.

That the Chinese leaders might not have compromised to the extent that Kissinger indicated is also suggested by the transcripts of the dialogues. During his February 1973 trip, Kissinger had probed Zhou about the possibility of the United States retaining “some form of representation” on Taiwan even after establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing. In November, he offered to speed up the process of normalization if, instead of the Japanese formula – which would involve severing all official ties between Washington and Taipei – the two sides could work out a “more flexible” formula. In the course of a circuitous presentation, Kissinger suggested to Zhou that this formula – “along the lines of the Shanghai Communiqué” – would “make clear that that principle [of one China] is not being abandoned.” In other words, Kissinger was asking for a declaration of principle in exchange for Chinese acquiescence to the continuation of some form of official U.S. relations with Taiwan while U.S.–PRC relations were being normalized. Zhou’s response to this was markedly evasive: he did not reply directly, but repeatedly referred to the interpreter, saying that she knew what Kissinger meant.

Mao, on the other hand, conveyed a clearer message. He told Kissinger that “[s]o long as you sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, then it is possible for our two countries to solve the issue of diplomatic relations... like we did with Japan.” That is, the Japanese formula for

---

82 For a succinct summary of the six alternative normalization formulas considered by the Nixon and Carter administrations, see Yufan Hao, Dilemma and Decision: An Organizational Perspective on American China Policy-Making (Berkeley, 1997), pp. 61–6.
83 Note that Kissinger was not retreating from Nixon’s earlier positions that Taiwan was a part of China, that the United States would not support Taiwan independence movements, and that Washington would work toward normalization with Beijing. While these principles implied that the United States would move to de-recognize the ROC and extend diplomatic recognition to the PRC, Nixon never explicitly undertook to end all official ties with Taipei in the process.
normalization was the only acceptable one for Beijing. Moreover, Mao presented a harder line on the issue of the use of force, declaring, “I do not believe in a peaceful transition… They [the Nationalists] are a bunch of counter-revolutionaries. How could they cooperate with us?” Nevertheless, he suggested that Beijing would wait upon the issue instead of employing force now: “we can do without Taiwan for the time being, and let it come after one hundred years.”

When Kissinger alluded to the possibility of finding a formula to “demonstrate symbolically that our relationship is now normal in every aspect,” Mao declared that there was no rush to normalize relations and that the issue was not important, unlike “the issue of the overall international situation [i.e., the Soviet threat] [which] is an important one.” The import of this part of the discussion was ambiguous. In effect, Mao refused to commit to peaceful reunification with Taiwan, and declined to discuss any formula other than the Japanese model for U.S.–PRC normalization. For the Chinese leaders, Taiwan clearly remained a central, nationalistic issue, and strategic cooperation with the United States against the Soviet threat, while important, was not sufficiently critical to induce Mao to compromise on Taiwan. Yet Mao seemed to suggest, to no avail, that the Soviet factor ought to be important enough to induce Washington to deliver on its promises for normalization with China.

By November 1973, therefore, it seemed that the U.S.–PRC relationship had washed indeterminately over a watershed. The principal interlocutors on both sides desired some forward movement in the relationship. For the Chinese side, in spite of Mao’s rhetoric playing down the Soviet threat to China, closer ties with the United States remained an important means of countering Beijing’s Soviet adversary. This was evident in Zhou’s thoughtful – though cautious – reaction to Kissinger’s offers of an intensified strategic relationship. On the other hand, the brewing power struggle in Beijing acted as a significant constraint on moderates like Zhou, who would forge closer relations with Washington rather than seek rapprochement with Moscow. As the factional challenges intensified, Zhou in particular had to tread a tightrope between maintaining

---

85 Mao–Kissinger memcon, 12 November 1973, in Burr, *Kissinger Transcripts*, p. 187; Kissinger, “My Visit to China,” p. 7. This would have been in line with Zhou’s more direct statement in February that “I can assure you that we don’t mean… to liberate it [Taiwan] by armed forces.” Crucially, though, Zhou’s remark also contained a degree of long-term ambiguity, since he added, “We have no such plan at the moment.” See Kissinger–Zhou memcon, 16 February 1973, p. 4.

the momentum in his policy of rapprochement with the United States while avoiding criticisms that he had leaned too far toward the American imperialist camp. An important consequence was that, as Kissinger’s staff had pointed out, Zhou now needed to produce results in terms of progress in regaining control over Taiwan in order to demonstrate that the policy of reconciliation with America was yielding results for China. The November 1973 communiqué language on Taiwan reflected Zhou’s need to give Kissinger reason to expect that some flexible resolution of America’s Taiwan dilemma might be possible, while preserving sufficient ambiguity to defend against charges of having made a significant concession to Washington.

Similarly, the fact that Kissinger exercised both the strategic and normalization options bears testimony to the Nixon administration’s need for movement, and preferably a breakthrough, in U.S.–PRC relations. The extent to which Kissinger was prepared to lean toward Beijing in order to achieve this was clearest in the strategic element. The eventual move toward a military relationship with China during the Carter administration is well known, and was seen as a way to strengthen the U.S. position vis-à-vis the Soviet Union with the collapse of détente. But the foregoing analysis shows that the seeds had been planted by Kissinger five years earlier. Initially, at the height of détente, it was a means to reassure the Chinese and to keep them in play in the strategic triangle; in late 1973, it was employed as a strategic incentive to persuade Beijing to consider normalization of relations on U.S. terms. However, Kissinger’s attempt was singularly unsuccessful. The strategic offers failed to sweeten the pill of U.S.–Taiwan relations, and they were never again mentioned during the rest of the Nixon administration. As Lord had warned, Taiwan and normalization remained key Chinese concerns, and the centrality of the

88 Ross argues that the factional succession struggle in Chinese domestic politics did not affect Beijing’s willingness to normalize relations with the United States between 1973 and 1975, as Mao remained the clear authority, and that it was not until he fell critically ill in mid–1976 that the policy environment changed markedly. See his Negotiating Cooperation, pp. 60–77. Yet Ross also notes that in 1973, Zhou was attacked by Mao himself for being too liberal on the Taiwan issue. Hence, even though Mao still controlled foreign policy in 1973, it was evident that the Chinese political winds had begun to blow leftward, as they inevitably did in uncertain times, and Kissinger’s interlocutors must certainly have felt the need to exercise caution.
Taiwan issue was reinforced as domestic pressures increased on both sides, and as U.S. leverage was reduced with rising domestic challenges to the détente policy. During the last eight months of the Nixon administration, the sense of momentum toward normalization that Kissinger had lauded at the end of 1973 proved to be an illusion.

**STALEMATE: U.S.–PRC RELATIONS IN 1974**

Kissinger’s active reconstruction of China from a former enemy to a tacit ally ground to an ignominious halt after his November 1973 trip to Beijing. In fact, for the first half of 1974, he did not pay much attention to China policy. Kissinger had promised to contact the Chinese regarding the new language on Taiwan and normalization in the joint communiqué within a month, but he did not do so. By late May of 1974, Kissinger’s China advisers were obliged to write him a long memorandum outlining the “imperatives for planning and action” on the China issue. They pointed out that “our China policy is drifting without a clear sense of how we will move towards normalization, or indeed what the shape of a future normalized relationship with the PRC will look like – particularly as it affects Taiwan. We are in danger of losing a sense of momentum... and need a normalization strategy which will give coherence to... our China policy.”

If the November 1973 communiqué did indeed promise the breakthrough that Kissinger proclaimed it to, why did he put off considering this issue? The delay, according to Winston Lord and to Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Arthur Hummel, was mainly keyed to the increasing signs of uncertainty on the Chinese domestic front. However, the domestic political crisis in Washington probably played a larger role – the question was not whether particular changes in Taiwan policy would be defensible domestically and to the PRC, but “whether the gain would be worth the risk and effort to an administration already up to its ears in problems.” The Watergate imbroglio was closing in on Nixon and his immediate circle of advisers, and the administration’s policy of détente was coming under sustained attack in Congress. Thus, Kissinger was preoccupied not only with shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East, the oil crisis,

---

91 Osborn (ConGen/HK) to Lord, 14 December 1973, Box 380, Lord Files. See also Tyler, *A Great Wall*, pp. 185–6, 201–4.
and the U.S.–USSR relationship, but also with defending and maintaining the overall fabric of the administration’s foreign policy in general.  

Against this backdrop, delay and confusion dogged China policy thinking in Washington. Having bought themselves “breathing space” on Taiwan in 1972, it seems that Kissinger and his advisers proceeded not to think very much about it after Nixon’s trip to Beijing. Because of the exclusion of the State Department from the China policy process, Kissinger’s staff did not seriously consider what shape the U.S.–Taiwan relationship would take when Washington and Beijing eventually normalized relations. The first detailed studies on the subject were produced only in January 1974, and they could only point out the same dilemmas that had been identified in 1971.

On the other hand, it would seem that once they began to think about it, Kissinger and his advisers concluded that the administration’s goal must be the maintenance of the “greatest possible links” with Taiwan as the normalization process with the PRC was carried to its diplomatic conclusion. In this vein, Washington appointed a new ambassador to the embassy in Taipei, which had been headed by a chargé for over two years. Also, plans for the construction of a new U.S. embassy building in Taipei went forward, and the ROC was allowed to open a new consulate in New York. As a result of these moves, Kissinger’s staff reported that Taipei was wont now to hope that a combination of Beijing’s political problems and Nixon’s domestic difficulties might save the U.S.–ROC relationship.

Kissinger’s failure to follow up on the normalization process during the first half of 1974 irked the Chinese. There were indications throughout this period that Chinese leaders were making an effort to heighten Washington’s awareness of their concern for movement on the Taiwan issue and normalization. On 2 April, Vice Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua called in Bruce to protest about developments in U.S. policy toward the ROC, and to warn that the United States “should not go too far” on the Taiwan issue, in directions not in the spirit of the Shanghai Communiqué. In May, Qiao and Vice Premier Li Xiannian stressed to a group

92 Kissinger’s account of this period during which the Nixon administration was under siege fills an entire volume of his memoirs – see his Years of Upheaval.
95 Hummel/Lord/Solomon, “Imperatives for Planning and Action,” p. 2.
of American state governors visiting Beijing the need to settle the Taiwan issue, which was impeding further steps toward normalization.\footnote{NSC memo for Kissinger, “Indicators of PRC Internal Debate and Desire for Movement on the Taiwan Issue,” 23 May 1974, Box 371, Lord Files.} From Beijing, Bruce warned of the “disappointment” among Chinese leaders that the United States had not fulfilled their “expectations” of the “fruitfulness” of the bilateral relationship. He identified four factors that contributed to their concern: (1) “latent fears” that the U.S.–USSR détente would be inimical to the PRC; (2) a suspicion that the United States would not within the next couple of years proceed to full diplomatic relations with the PRC and a corresponding break in ties with Taiwan; (3) impatience with alleged lack of U.S. interest in a decisive solution of the Cambodian problem; and (4) fears that U.S. concern with crises elsewhere and domestic problems would have repercussions on U.S. China policy. Despite claims of patience, Bruce reminded Washington, Mao and Zhou were “two old men in a hurry.”\footnote{Bruce to SoS, “Present US-PRC Relationship,” 24 May 1974, NSA Doc. 301, p. 1.} This was exacerbated by renewed leadership infighting in which Mao and Zhou’s “soft” approach toward the United States had come under attack from the left. That the pro-U.S. section of the Chinese leadership was under pressure was evident in Beijing’s “increasingly aloof” posture toward the United States in official bilateral contacts.\footnote{Solomon to Kissinger, “The PRC’s Domestic Political Situation and Foreign Policy as a Context for Your Meeting with Teng Hsiao-ping and Chiao Kuan-hua,” 12 April 1974, Box 371, Lord Files.} The direction of U.S. China policy during this time helped to weaken the moderate Chinese leaders.

Nixon resigned on 8 August 1974, whereupon Gerald Ford took over as president. He retained Kissinger as secretary of state and quickly confirmed with Beijing the validity of “all discussions, understandings, and commitments made with President Nixon as well as by [Kissinger].”\footnote{Huang–Kissinger memcon, “The Secretary’s Reassurances to the PRC Upon Mr. Ford’s Assumption of the Presidency,” 9 August 1974, Box 376, Lord Files; White House to Bruce, 9 August 1974, NSA Doc. 306.} In the China briefing papers prepared for Ford, Kissinger stated that they now had to make clear that “we are not committed to delivering Taiwan to Peking rule, and that US public opinion would not allow us to make unilateral decisions about the future of 15 million people.” Washington also had to make Beijing understand that the ROC had “substantial capabilities for actions that would make serious problems for both the PRC and the US (declaring independence, or going nuclear, or flirting with a
third country such as the USSR whose overtures it has so far rejected) and therefore a strict ‘Japan formula’ of no real US-Taiwan ties would not serve either PRC or US interests.”

Thus, Kissinger had decided that Washington should dig in its heels on the Taiwan issue. Perhaps he calculated that the domestic political climate would not permit Ford to even try to normalize U.S.–PRC relations by severing ties with Taiwan. At the same time, Kissinger might still have believed that Washington retained the “Soviet card” leverage over Beijing, since, as he told Ford, while Taiwan was “a question of national destiny,” the Soviet threat remained Beijing’s “overwhelming national security problem.”

That was not Beijing’s assessment. Kissinger’s hardened position coincided with a parallel resolution on the Chinese side against further compromise. During Kissinger’s next trip to Beijing in November, he duly emphasized to Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping the need for some Chinese undertaking for a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan issue as well as Washington’s desire to retain liaison offices in Taipei after normalization. But this was a doomed effort, given the hardening of Beijing’s position all through 1974. The leadership succession was now under way, and with Zhou critically ill, Deng and Qiao Guanhua were the new American policy principals. Both made concerted attempts to flatten out the ambiguities in Mao’s November 1973 comments and to emphasize only the hard-line elements. On the Taiwan issue, Qiao had asserted in April that “as Chairman Mao told you,” normalization could proceed only on the Japanese model – “No other pattern is possible.”

By November, Deng added that Beijing would brook no external interference in the reunification process and would not consider a renunciation of force. As regards the Soviet threat, Deng repeated Mao’s observation that there were only a few Soviet troops at the Chinese border, not enough for an attack, and that they were intended only to scare people with “weak nerves.” He also pointed out that the Soviet military strength in the East was not directed against China alone; it was also directed against Japan and “your Seventh

Fleet, your air and naval forces.” Picking up Mao’s earlier theme that Soviet attention was fixed equally on the West, Deng taunted, “the Polar bear is after you.”

From the start, Kissinger had privileged the strategic aspects of the U.S.–PRC rapprochement and emphasized Beijing’s national security motivations. However, as triangular politics intensified and then began to break down in 1973 and 1974, Washington’s leverage was seriously reduced. While yet another leadership crisis accounted to some extent for Beijing’s harder line toward normalization, it was also the result of a perceived strengthening of China’s position in the strategic triangle as a result of the U.S. domestic disarray and heightened U.S.–USSR tensions. Thus, Kissinger’s continuing efforts progressively to construct the Soviet menace increasingly fell on deaf ears, as Beijing could afford to downplay the Soviet threat and to bargain harder with Washington on the terms of normalization. For his part, serious domestic constraints aside, Kissinger appeared to retain considerable faith in the continuing overriding value of the shared Soviet threat in propelling Sino-American relations forward. It seemed that having pulled off the coup of the compromise on Taiwan in the Shanghai Communiqué, he believed that the Chinese would be indefinitely patient on the subject. Yet the fact that the Chinese ultimately measured the developing U.S.–China relationship by progress toward normalization and thus a resolution of Taiwan’s status was made clear by the way in which low-level bilateral talks and exchanges were halted and USLO contacts in Beijing soured in 1974. At the same time, Kissinger’s personal credibility declined in Beijing, and the Chinese leaders tried to cultivate more sympathetic interlocutors such as Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, who was known to oppose the policy of détente. In a situation where the Nixon administration’s strategic

107 Memcon, “Europe; Japan; Middle East; South Asia; Cambodia, Energy and Food; Normalization,” 27 November 1974, pp. 1–2; Deng-Kissinger memcon, 28 November 1974, Box 372, Lord Files. For a good analysis of the Chinese leaders’ increasing concern over Soviet-American relations after the June 1973 summit based on Bruce’s memoirs and meetings with Chinese leaders, see Priscilla Roberts, ed., Window on the Forbidden City: The Beijing Diaries of David Bruce, 1973–1974 (Hong Kong, 2001), pp. 28–30.
108 For instance, when Kissinger informed Huang Zhen after the June 1974 Moscow summit that Washington would not consider Brezhnev’s suggestion to Nixon of a treaty of mutual assistance if either were attacked by a third party – meaning China – Huang replied, “We don’t care.” Memcon, “The Secretary’s Meeting with PRC Liaison Office Chief Huang Chen after the Moscow Summit,” 15 July 1974, NSA Doc. 303.
109 Author interview with Richard Solomon, 26 February 2001. In November 1974, Deng extended an invitation to Schlesinger to visit China, which was rapidly quashed by...
option of closer clandestine military ties with China had been exercised and found wanting, while domestic constraints prevented the fulfillment of earlier understandings on Taiwan and normalization, a stalemate had developed by the time Nixon resigned, and had deepened by the end of 1974.

CONCLUSION: TRIANGULAR BALANCE OF POWER TO TACIT ALLIANCE

This chapter has analyzed the way in which Nixon and Kissinger’s real-politik rapprochement discourse was reconstructed during the two years following the Sino-American summit in February 1972. In 1971 and early 1972, as discussed in Chapters 6 and 9, Kissinger and Nixon had indicated to selected audiences that the opening to China was part of a strategy of building a triangular balance of power in which the United States would enjoy better relations with Beijing and Moscow than they did with each other. In this way, Washington would act as the balancer between the two communist rivals, orchestrating a general reduction of tension and promoting equilibrium in the international system. This is what I have labeled Option 3 in the Introduction.

The analysis in Chapter 6 showed that Nixon’s and Kissinger’s immediate aim in seeking rapprochement with China in 1969 was to boost the momentum of détente with the Soviet Union; that is, it was conceived as leverage to improve relations with and seek cooperation from Moscow, not as a way to form a quasi-alliance to contain it. However, the concepts of triangular balance of power (Option 3) and a de facto Sino-American alliance to contain the potential Soviet hegemon (Option 4) often coexisted. In 1969, the scenario of a large-scale Soviet attack on China was presented by the Nixon administration as the determining factor for choosing Option 4, although short of that, its key aim was Option 3. Chapters 7 and 8 revealed that in the process of constructing the bases for the new relationship with the Chinese, Kissinger played up the Soviet threat and the value of the U.S. relationship to China, thus


implicitly presenting Option 4 as U.S. policy. However, the continuing superpower détente, agreements, and summitry suggested that Option 3 was still Washington’s priority. This chapter has argued that as pressure mounted on the détente policy and on U.S.–PRC normalization owing to the inherent tensions of triangular politics and to domestic pressures, Kissinger began to pursue Option 4 to a greater degree than before. He not only articulated China’s identity as a “tacit ally,” but actively tried to construct a tacit alliance relationship by means of bilateral security agreements and a new military relationship. This moved the tenor of U.S.–PRC relations much closer to neo-realist defensive balance-of-power behavior.

Kissinger would argue that this was part of the normal vagaries of triangular politics – there was a need to balance the U.S.–USSR détente with closer U.S.–PRC relations as part of maintaining better U.S. relations with each of the two communist powers while ensuring that their mutual relations remained acrimonious. And yet the extent to which Kissinger’s propositions to the Chinese represented judicious balancing for equilibrium is arguable. He ran the risk of overcompensating for détente. This becomes evident if we consider the consequences should the Chinese have accepted the offers: the secret arrangements would almost certainly have been leaked, for, as Lord observed, they had no deterrence value if kept secret. Brezhnev had specifically warned against such a U.S.–PRC quasi-alliance in mid-1973, although the question of what he might have done in the event was an open one. More importantly, though, Soviet worries about the apparently stagnating U.S.–China relationship had diminished from the end of 1973 onward, and leaks about Kissinger’s proposals to Zhou might have rekindled Moscow’s concerns with unpredictable consequences. At the same time, the Nixon administration’s actions in excluding the Soviet Union from the process of brokering a settlement in the Middle East crisis of 1973 left Moscow feeling disgruntled and posed problems for détente. Brezhnev was coming under pressure domestically, as doubts and debates about the wisdom of a policy of détente without a corresponding emphasis of defense, and about the expected economic

111 Brezhnev–Nixon–Kissinger memcon, 23 June 1973, Box 75, NSF, NPM. During the June 1973 U.S.–USSR summit, Brezhnev speculated that Washington and Beijing might conclude “a military arrangement” that year, adding: “We do not intend to attack China but it will be different if China has a military arrangement with the United States. That will confuse the issue.” He did not elaborate.

benefits of détente, grew within some factions in the Soviet leadership.\footnote{Burr, Kissinger Transcripts, pp. 218–9; Garthoff, Détente and Confrontation, pp. 480–5.} These, in combination with the growing domestic political pressures faced by the White House, might have caused revelations of Kissinger’s attempts at a secret alliance with the Chinese to have had further negative effects on the prospects for détente and the sustainability of the strategic triangle. Thus, even if Kissinger had intended the offers as a further demonstration to the Soviets that the United States had other options that could complicate Moscow’s policies, this would have been a risky move.

So why did Kissinger try to advance along the “tacit alliance” trajectory in developing U.S.–PRC relations during the second half of 1973? There are two possible reasons. First, he miscalculated. Kissinger’s own deliberate progressive construction of the Soviet threat to China, and his conviction that Beijing was motivated primarily by its security requirements, produced a “discursive entrapment” effect.\footnote{The term “discursive entrapment” was brought to my attention by Rosemary Foot.} He overcompensated for détente because he had overperceived Beijing’s need for reassurance, and had thus decided that the United States should more blatantly tilt toward the PRC rather than maintain equilibrium in the triangle. The alternative explanation is that Kissinger’s offer of a closer strategic relationship with China was “cheap talk.” On the one hand, it could have been aimed at unsettling Moscow at a time when détente was again slowing down. On the other hand, it could have been predicated upon Lord’s argument that the Chinese neither wanted nor needed it, and so would not accept it, and thus was a deliberate gesture during increasingly trying times to demonstrate America’s commitment to the U.S.–PRC relationship and to reassure Beijing that Washington understood its strategic concerns.

Kissinger’s actions can probably be explained by a combination of both these factors. In any case, as domestic pressures in the United States and deepening Chinese intransigence prevented any movement on the Taiwan issue and normalization, he had little alternative in trying to maintain some momentum in the young U.S.–PRC relationship. The findings of this chapter will deepen the controversy about the impact of triangular politics.\footnote{A good appraisal of the complexities of triangular politics can be found in Ross, ed., China, the United States, and the Soviet Union. See especially Stephen Sestanovich, “US Policy Toward the Soviet Union, 1970–1979: The Impact of China,” which argues that improved U.S.–PRC relations had relatively little effect on U.S.–Soviet relations during the 1970s and in fact failed to restrain Moscow’s adventurism, which culminated in the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.} Whether Kissinger harbored the intention of creating an
alliance with the Chinese in the first place – a question on which the available evidence allows only conjecture – may be the hinge on which an ultimate evaluation of the strategic triangle will turn. For now, the analysis here suggests that the inherent tensions within the logic of triangular relations, combined with domestic pressures and Kissinger’s own discursive tenacity, led him to move toward a tacit alliance with the Chinese. The transition from “Former Enemy” to “Tacit Ally” under Nixon and Kissinger was a precursor to the debate about the nature of, and about how to use, the “China card” that would plague the later Carter and Reagan administrations. In the event, U.S.–PRC relations would be sidetracked by domestic political considerations on both sides for the next four years, until Jimmy Carter and Deng Xiaoping managed to agree on the normalization of relations in 1979 under a different set of pressures, aided once again by a combination of discursive continuities and innovations.