

American Strategic Security Concerns  
and the People's Republic of China:  
1970-1980

Anthony A. Boyles

U.S.-China Relations  
Dr. Mary Brown Bullock  
April 15, 2008

On a mid-May morning in Beijing, 1970, Chairman Mao Zedong delivered a spirited speech about America. In his selected works, the speech is provocatively titled “People Of The World, Unite And Defeat The U.S. Aggressors And All Their Running Dogs.” His distaste for America was rarely clearer or more resolute. He indicted the U.S. for meddling in the ongoing revolutionary efforts in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. In particular, Chairman Mao singled out his American equivalent and therefore adversary, saying:

Nixon’s fascist atrocities have kindled the raging flames of the revolutionary mass movement in the United States. The Chinese people firmly support the revolutionary struggle of the American people. I am convinced that the American people who are fighting valiantly will ultimately win victory and that the fascist rule in the United States will inevitably be defeated.<sup>1</sup>

Chairman Mao failed to foresee the importance of the United States in the coming decades. China was in great trouble in 1970, a fact Mao came to realize over the following six months. All throughout the 1960s, Sino-Soviet relations had been deteriorating. As the diplomatic channels grew weaker and weaker, concentrations of military forces at the Sino-Soviet border grew. Despite the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, uncertainty yielded to bloodshed in 1969 when some border skirmishes erupted. The Soviet Union bitterly cut the economic and strategic ties that had kept relations between the nations superficially cordial.

The tensions had to be alleviated before the Soviet Union carried out some none-too-subtle suggestions of pre-emptive nuclear strikes against the growing Chinese arsenal of nuclear weapons. In late 1969, Beijing and Moscow launched talks aimed at easing unrest between the

---

<sup>1</sup> Chairman Mao Zedong, “People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and all their Running Dogs” *Beijing Review*, 5/23/70.

nations. These talks were temporarily effective, but Chinese officials knew the measures taken were insufficient to deter the Soviet Union indefinitely.

The 1970 National Intelligence Estimate entitled “Communist China’s International Posture” pays a great deal of attention to the Sino-Soviet tensions, but makes a very conservative estimate of the possibility of using these circumstances to build a more favorable Sino-U.S. relationship. Clearly, the Directorate of National Intelligence had no information about President Richard Nixon’s forthcoming diplomatic venture to China. Even so, the document shows that without any expectation of political progress between the U.S. and the P.R.C., the U.S. government recognized the possibility of increased trade opportunities with China.<sup>2</sup>

Pres. Nixon’s and Dr. Henry Kissinger’s (Nixon’s national security advisor) often secretive efforts to open up the P.R.C. are difficult to access information about in government literature. Most publications are either still classified or solely accessible through the Nixon archives. That does not mean, however, that there is no material concerning Sino-US interests in this time period. One of the most valuable sources of insight into the period is the product of Nixon’s trip: the Shanghai Communiqué. While the text of the document itself often required some degree of ambiguity in order to be acceptable to both parties, some points are very resolute. For instance: “...neither [nation] should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region and each [nation] is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony.”<sup>3</sup> The almost unquestionable meaning of this statement would create muddy and difficult relations later in the decade, amidst several factionalized South-Asian revolutions.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Communist China’s International Posture*. Directorate of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate 13-7-70, 11/12/70. [http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF\\_GIF\\_declass\\_support/china%20conference/pdfs/nie\\_13\\_7\\_70.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_GIF_declass_support/china%20conference/pdfs/nie_13_7_70.pdf) (accessed 4/13/08)

<sup>3</sup> *Joint U.S.-China Communiqué*. Shanghai, China: signed 2/27/72. [http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive\\_Index/joint\\_communique\\_1972.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive_Index/joint_communique_1972.html) (accessed 4/13/08)

Foresights aside, 1972 and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué marked a high point in Nixon's administration and in Sino-U.S. relations. After the signing of the communiqué, Kissinger spent substantial amounts of time in meetings with the Chinese establishing new trade, cultural exchange, and strategic cooperation programs. It was the last of these that likely spurred on a degradation of Sino-U.S. relations in 1973. Sometime in the early summer of 1973, Kissinger accused the Chinese of failing to fully back a prior commitment to intercede in the instability in Cambodia. This hardly sat well with the Chinese, who sensed a weakening of the Nixon administration from the inside. Another fall 1973 negotiations trip for Kissinger turned sour when the Chinese spurned the idea of a highly classified intelligence sharing program, a proposition that had not previously met such resistance. The intimacy of the proposition and abruptness of its rejection made knowledge of the event highly dangerous information.<sup>4</sup>

While Nixon's impeachment hearing and subsequent resignation in 1974 did not outwardly affect the strategic interests of either the U.S. or the P.R.C. with regard to the Soviet Union, it did carry the strange story of Sino-U.S. relations full-circle in less than four years' time. Mao's belligerent prediction from his 1970 speech about Nixon's impending political demise had actually come true. And Mao ironically couldn't publicly relish in his prescience because of the political friendship he had established with Nixon in 1972. And so, as Gerald Ford took the presidency, the process of normalization was quietly set aside by most in the U.S. government, though Kissinger continued to carry on regular diplomatic meetings with the P.R.C.

Though the diplomats were effectively silent during Ford's administration, the Department of Defense was hard at work exploring new opportunity. A Defense Department memorandum dated September 4, 1975 discussed in-depth the possibility of selling military

---

<sup>4</sup> Memo, Mr. Michel Oksenberg to Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski. 2/4/77, Vertical File "Sino-American Relations, 1969-1976, and Their Implications." China, Jimmy Carter Library

technology to the P.R.C. While the document is explicit in specifying that no arms sales would be permissible, the possibility of military technology exchange would have been a publicly unpalatable proposition. After all, no American would want to be caught selling weaponry to a communist nation in the middle of the Cold War. The Defense minds understood this, and so kept this proposition as quietly and as subdued as they could.<sup>5</sup> It likely never escaped from the Defense Department (the memo was addressed to the Assistant Secretary of Defense—Mr. Robert Ellsworth), except perhaps to Kissinger.<sup>6</sup>

Kissinger might have explored the issue of defense-technology trade with the Chinese, if not for the unfortunate events of the following month. During his trip to China in October of 1975, Kissinger endured some degree of difficulty with the Chinese. They were acting under the impression that Kissinger was solely interested in China as a diplomatic counterbalance and military buffer against the Soviet Union. The Chinese came to this conclusion based on Kissinger's bargaining behaviors--Kissinger only described the Soviet Union using the same terms the Chinese used.<sup>4</sup> This conclusion was naturally very offensive to the Chinese, but not wholly incorrect.<sup>7</sup> Kissinger's primary concern was obtaining the security benefits from cordiality with China, though he did pay due attention to related topics during dialogues with Chinese diplomats.

President Gerald Ford's administration closed with little to be said about the status of the United States' relationship with China. When President Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, however, he wasted no time in arranging a meeting with Ambassador Huang Chen. During the meeting, the Ambassador laid bare the Chinese view of the Soviet threat (among many other

---

<sup>5</sup> Memo, Office of the Secretary of Defense to Mr. Robert Ellsworth. 9/4/75 "Nuclear C<sup>3</sup> Foreign Assistance."

<sup>6</sup> Memo, Assistant Secretary of Defense to Secretary of Defense. 10/14/75. "Sales of Defense Related Equipment to the PRC – ACTION MEMORANDUM."

<sup>7</sup> Memo, Mr. Zbigniew Brzezinski to Pres. Jimmy Carter. 2/4/77. Vertical File. "Meeting Next Week with the Representative of the PRC (Tuesday, February 8)." China. Jimmy Carter Library

issues of mutual interest and importance). Chen apparently thought little of the 1972 Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (S.A.L.T.), as though he fully expected the Soviet Union to set the agreement aside in pursuit of their “expansionist” policies. He paid due attention to nuclear policy, calling gratuitously for the signing of a global resolution of all nations to never be the first to launch a nuclear assault, and other international agreements. Chen also called attention to the Soviet “wild ambitions” elsewhere in the world. He showed surprising concern for the Western developed world. Describing Western Europe as “soft, weak, and disintegrated,” he called for stronger ties between Europe and the United States in order to counterbalance Soviet strength. Chen arrogantly claimed China was strong enough to counter the Soviets if necessity demanded that the two nations face off. However, he also insisted that China would under no circumstances be the initiating party in any combat.<sup>8</sup>

A meeting the following August (1977) between soon-to-be Ambassador Leonard Woodcock and Mao’s successor Hua Guo Feng revealed the basis for Ambassador Chen’s steadfast confidence in Chinese ability to stand under the pressure of a Soviet military campaign against them. Hua conceded that the U.S. and Soviet militaries far outstripped the People’s Liberation Army in terms of technology, but he believed “the factor which will decide the next war is the human factor, not guns.” He then elucidated the historical ground for this belief, with several examples of the Chinese as the victorious underdog.<sup>9</sup>

Much of Chen’s language from the earlier meeting was replicated in a March 1977 intelligence memorandum entitled “The Value of the United States to China’s National Security.” The report detailed many aspects of China’s strategic interests in the United States, as

---

<sup>8</sup> Transcript of meeting, Ambassador Huang Chen and Pres. Jimmy Carter, Vertical File. 2/8/77. China. Jimmy Carter Library.

<sup>9</sup> Transcript of meeting, Ambassador Hua Guo-Fang and Mr. James Woodcock, Vertical File. 8/25/77. China. Jimmy Carter Library

best as could be surmised by Chinese diplomatic behavior. Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Advisor, in turn wrote Presidential Review Memorandum 24 (P.R.M. 24), calling overtly for the sale of defense technology to the P.R.C.<sup>10</sup> While the document was classified, the debate it sparked attracted some media attention (and subsequent leak of the document). A New York Times article by Bernard Weinraub addressed the issue fairly under the misleading headline of "U.S. Study Advises Against the Sale of Arms to China." (*New York Times*, June 24, 1977) The language of P.R.M. 24 is far more subdued than its 1975 predecessor<sup>5</sup>, which lends credence to the claim that any leak of the earlier document would have been nothing short of disastrous.

China was not, however, to go unarmed under the favor of the United States. On April 18, 1978, Brzezinski drafted a memo to Carter announcing the joint decision of the Defense and State Departments to begin selling "dual-purpose items" to China ("Dual-purpose" being technologies with both civilian and military applications, such as high-fidelity communications infrastructure outlines). On this memo, Carter hand-wrote a note:

*I'm concerned about transferring advanced electronics & other technology to P.R.C. if it can later be used for military purposes. Also a policy of favoring P.R.C. over S. Union. Give me specific examples to illustrate.*

Carter's concerns were well-founded, and related to a recent effort by the U.S. Government to block some advanced microchip sales to other communist nations. However, Brzezinski had already addressed the probable outcome, calling for a careful review of all technology to be sold, and strategic denial of some information simply to avoid giving the Soviet Union a sense of America's "Pro-China tilt."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Policy Review Memo, National Security Council to Pres. Jimmy Carter. 4/5/77. "People's Republic of China." <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/prmemorandums/prm24.pdf>, (accessed 4/13/08)

Some lower-level diplomatic meetings intended to address technicalities of new Sino-U.S. agreements were the first hint about the old but growing issue of unrest in South Asia. Old because South Asian politics had always been a topic of discussion between the U.S. and the P.R.C., but growing because Soviet efforts to factionalize the ongoing revolutions in Laos and Vietnam had further agitated a sore conflict. Like the Soviet Union, the P.R.C. had attempted to exert a similar influence over Cambodia to counterbalance Vietnam, which had long-standing ambitions to develop hegemonic influence over the region. In a 1977 dialogue with Brzezinski, Ambassador Han Hsu shared intelligence that the Soviet Union had capitalized on the opportunity to exert more influence in the region by selling arms to Vietnam in 1976.<sup>11</sup> This was information the Office of the Director of Central Intelligence didn't promulgate until a full year after the interview.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the unrest in surrounding regions, the fact that international politics was the topic of most dialogues indicated that all socio-political issues had been hammered well-enough into a viable normalization agreement. Carter and Deng Xiao-ping signed just such a document on December 15, 1978, effective January 1, 1979. Immediately the White House was inundated with letters from congressional representatives, senators, state and local elected officials, and old friends in other high places, all of which either praised or chastised Carter for his bold move. Brzezinski in particular received a letter from a personal friend with a severe concern: the new U.S. alignment favoring the P.R.C. might push America's allies in Taiwan to look for support from the Soviet Union. While the Guo Min Dang (G.M.D.—Taiwan's ruling party at the time) was based on the Leninist Party model, the Republic of China's (R.O.C.) interests had so diverged in strategic interests from the Soviet Union that any suggestion of a possible alliance is

---

<sup>11</sup> Transcript of meeting, Ambassador Han Hsu and Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Vertical File. 8/2/77. China. Jimmy Carter Library

<sup>12</sup> Memo, Director of Central Intelligence, "Sino-Soviet Competition in Indochina." 11/14/78

little short of paranoia. Brzezinski, fortunately, had the confidence to duly respond without paying the possibility much credence.<sup>13</sup>

As a sort of celebratory measure of the normalization, Premier Deng Xiao-Ping visited the United States, just as Nixon had visited China nine years earlier. In addition to numerous cultural events and tours, Deng's itinerary left ample time for dialogue with President Carter. During their most extensive dialogue—January 29, 1979 in the White House—the two heads of state walked through a lengthy list of the recent changes in relations with nations all over the world. Amidst all of this discussion was the undertone of concern for Soviet developments, but talk about the Soviet Union directly was reserved for its own meeting.<sup>14</sup>

On September 4, 1979, Michel Oksenberg, a lower-level official in the National Security Council, wrote a memo to Brzezinski calling attention to two articles, one in the New York Times and the other in the Washington Post. Each article discussed the possibility that it was a desire to counter the Soviet threat that led Carter to normalize relations with the P.R.C. Oksenberg appreciated the potential danger of this allegation<sup>15</sup>, likely recalling the misfortune that had befallen Kissinger in 1975 after he had made the same error. While the converse belief—that China's primary interest in America was strategic—was common belief in the U.S. government,<sup>16</sup> Kissinger's error and subsequent humiliation set an enduring boundary for all American diplomats to respect: do not hide the advantages of improved relations with China, but do not oversell the strategic motivations.

---

<sup>13</sup> Letter, Mr. Eugene Rostow to Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brzezinski Collection. 2/21/79. Jimmy Carter Library

<sup>14</sup> Transcript of meeting, Premier Deng Xiao-Ping and Pres. Jimmy Carter. Vertical Files. 1/29/79. China. Jimmy Carter Library

<sup>15</sup> Memo, Mr. Michel Oksenberg to Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, 10/24/79. Brzezinski Collection, "Press Analysis Linking the Soviet Brigade and China," Jimmy Carter Library

<sup>16</sup> NLC-26-42-3-5-9

## Bibliography

1. Chairman Mao Zedong, "People of the World, Unite and Defeat the U.S. Aggressors and all their Running Dogs" *Beijing Review*, 5/23/70.
2. *Communist China's International Posture*. Directorate of National Intelligence, National Intelligence Estimate 13-7-70, 11/12/70.  
[http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF\\_GIF\\_declass\\_support/china%20conference/pdfs/nie\\_13\\_7\\_70.pdf](http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_GIF_declass_support/china%20conference/pdfs/nie_13_7_70.pdf)  
(accessed 4/13/08)
3. *Joint U.S.-China Communique*. Shanghai, China: signed 2/27/72.  
[http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive\\_Index/joint\\_communique\\_1972.html](http://usinfo.state.gov/eap/Archive_Index/joint_communique_1972.html) (accessed 4/13/08)
4. Memo, Mr. Michel Oksenberg to Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski. 2/4/77, Vertical File "Sino-American Relations, 1969-1976, and Their Implications." China, Jimmy Carter Library
5. Memo, Office of the Secretary of Defense to Mr. Robert Ellsworth. 9/4/75 "Nuclear C<sup>3</sup> Foreign Assistance."
6. Memo, Assistant Secretary of Defense to Secretary of Defense. 10/14/75. "Sales of Defense Related Equipment to the PRC – ACTION MEMORANDUM."
7. Memo, Mr. Zbigniew Brzezinski to Pres. Jimmy Carter. 2/4/77. Vertical File. "Meeting Next Week with the Representative of the PRC (Tuesday, February 8)." China. Jimmy Carter Library
8. Transcript of meeting, Ambassador Huang Chen and Pres. Jimmy Carter, Vertical File. 2/8/77. China.
9. Transcript of meeting, Ambassador Hua Guo-Fang and Mr. James Woodcock, Vertical File. 8/25/77. China.
10. Policy Review Memo, National Security Council to Pres. Jimmy Carter. 4/5/77. "People's Republic of China." <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org/documents/prmemorandums/prm24.pdf>,  
(accessed 4/13/08)
11. Transcript of meeting, Ambassador Han Hsu and Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Vertical File. 8/2/77. China.
12. Memo, Director of Central Intelligence, "Sino-Soviet Competition in Indochina." 11/14/78.  
<http://www.foia.cia.gov/> (accessed 3/17/08)
13. Letter, Eugene Rostow to Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brzezinski. 2/21/79. Jimmy Carter Library
14. Transcript of meeting, Premier Deng Xiao-Ping and Pres. Jimmy Carter. Vertical Files. 1/29/79. China. Jimmy Carter Library
15. NLC-26-42-3-5-9
16. Memo, Mr. Michel Oksenberg to Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, 10/24/79. Brzezinski Collection, "Press Analysis Linking the Soviet Brigade and China," Jimmy Carter Library