

What motivated the United States to strengthen its relations with China in the 1970s?  
Detente Source II, Week 3, Assignment 4

Viewpoint: The Sino-American rapprochement was a deliberate and provocative constriction of U.S. global containment of the Soviet Union that increased superpower tensions.

Viewpoint: The Sino-American rapprochement was part of a U.S. attempt to reduce tensions with the communist world.

*The increasing tensions between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union in the 1960s created an intriguing opportunity for American diplomacy. To many strategic thinkers in the West it seemed possible that Beijing could be drawn out of its once close relationship with Moscow and possibly even become a Cold War ally of the United States.*

*The election of Richard M. Nixon to the presidency in 1968 made that possibility into a reality. Despite his well-established credentials as a firm opponent of communism and defender of Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist forces in Taiwan, Nixon moved to take advantage of Chinese disenchantment with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). Nixon's political instincts were supported by the historical studies of his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, who concluded that multi-polar international systems were more stable than bipolar ones. After exploratory talks through the Chinese diplomatic mission in Warsaw, Kissinger made a secret visit to Beijing in July 1971. The positive outcome of these talks led to Nixon's own visit to China in February 1972 and to the evolution of Sino-American rapprochement. On a broader diplomatic level, the Nixon administration forged trade relations with Beijing, formally recognized separatist Taiwan as Chinese territory, favored the eventual reunification of the island with the mainland, and pursued a mutually agreeable outcome of the Vietnam War (ended 1975).*

*The implications of these events for international politics were legion. It seemed likely that the Soviet Union's largest ally, and the world's most populous country, might abandon its solidarity with the communist world and become an ally of its chief adversary. Many scholars and policymakers have pondered how wise these developments truly were for keeping the peace between the superpowers.*

Detente Source II: The Sino-American rapprochement was part of a U.S. attempt to reduce tensions with the communist world.

Did the balancing of Soviet power by the United States through strengthened U.S.-Chinese ties work to stabilize the international system in the 1990s? The answer is the opposite. The balance-of-power strategy improved U.S.-Chinese relations, but worsened Sino-Soviet relations, and left stability of U.S.-Soviet relations short-lived. By the early 1980s all three bilateral relations were snared in tensions, and the international system became rather fragile.

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis triggered U.S. policymakers' thinking of a new international system, where bilateral confrontation between the United States and Soviet Union could be ameliorated. President Richard M. Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger envisioned a multi-polar world, for which the two statesmen adopted the classic balance-of-power strategy. Realizing the absence of some key elements of balance-of-power among major European powers in the nineteenth century, they applied the U.S.-Soviet-Chinese strategic triangle. The main feature of this strategy was to establish better

relations with China, which was a rival of the Soviet Union. Then, two goals were attempted: stabilize the international system and obtain leverage to manipulate the three-power relations.

After the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, it had encountered resistance from the United States from Korea to Vietnam. The hostile relationship showed visible signs of change by the end of the 1960s when the United States initiated with some peace feelers, such as allowing bank credits for China. In 1969 more tangible and predominant concerns about a massive Soviet attack on China made the latter edge quietly toward a close security relationship with the United States. China simply could not afford a confrontation with both superpowers, and the border conflicts with the Soviets that year convinced China about its vulnerability and the necessity of military collaboration with the United States.

In December 1969 diplomats from the United States and China met publicly in Warsaw. In early 1971 the United States ended its restrictions on travel to China, and the U.S. Ping-Pong team made a high-profiled tour of the country. In June, the United States partially removed trade restrictions on China, and in July, Kissinger made a secret and historical visit to Beijing. After the road was paved, Nixon met with Chairman Mao Tse-tung and Premier Zhou Enlai in China in February 1972. The meeting of the two adversaries set the stage for Nixon-Kissinger's multi-polar world based on the U.S.-China-Soviet triangle.

Between 1972 and 1980 U.S.-China ties warmed up. In 1973 the two countries signed agreements on trade, liaison offices, debt settlements, and the exchange of journalists. In 1976 both sides agreed on the construction of agro-chemical complexes in China and on the export of U.S. computers to China for both civilian and military purposes. In 1979 President Jimmy Carter normalized relations with China, and Deng Xiaoping visited the United States to consult on a range of economic and security issues. After Deng's return, China launched a military attack on Vietnam, now a Soviet ally and Chinese enemy. In January 1980, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, U.S. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown visited China and elaborated U.S.-China military cooperation. U.S. intelligence monitoring stations were set up in China along the Soviet border. The United States timely utilized the strategic environment around the world and significantly improved U.S.-China relations. The result from managing U.S.-Soviet relations, however, was a short-lived success and a decisive backfire.

As the United States and China entered a cooperative relationship, the United States also turned to open broader economic and security agreements with the Soviet Union in order to smooth interactions. The idea led to a major grain deal in July 1972 and a trade pact in October. Between May 1972 and May 1974 the Americans and Soviets signed forty-one treaties and agreements. Among them was the Basic Principles of Relations, signed by Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev in May 1972, to prevent the development of situations that would pull their relations into serious danger, to do their utmost to avoid military escalation and the outbreak of nuclear war, and to exercise mutual restraint and settle differences peacefully. In the same month the two countries signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) treaty and the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) treaty. In June 1973 the superpowers signed an agreement on the prevention of nuclear war.

Thereafter, the U.S.-Soviet relations deteriorated. During the Yom Kippur War (1973-1974) the Soviet Union provided arms to Egypt and Syria to fight a U.S. ally, Israel. In 1975, the Soviet Union assisted Cuban military intervention in Angola. The two events not only estranged the superpower relationship but also sent the Third World into turmoil. The Soviet Union complained about the link made between congressional approval of U.S.-Soviet trade relations and Soviet permission on the increase in the emigration of Jews.

In 1976 the Soviet Union warned against U.S. intervention in the Lebanese civil war, and the United States criticized Soviet involvement in Somalia and Angola. In 1977 Carter launched his human-rights campaign against the Soviets, while Moscow criticized proposed U.S. changes in the 1974 SALT II

agreements. Although the two countries managed to sign SALT II in June 1979, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in December. As a result SALT II was pulled out of Senate ratification and the United States imposed a grain embargo on the Soviet Union, as well as boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics.

If U.S. strategy meant to stabilize the international balance-of-power system, the balancing of Soviet power through improved U.S.-China relations actually worsened Sino-Soviet relations. The 1950 Sino-Soviet military alliance evolved into mutual criticism by the late 1950s and border conflicts by the late 1960s. In 1968 the Soviet army invaded Czechoslovakia, which alarmed China. By the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine the Soviet Union possessed the right to intervene militarily in other communist states that were not following communist dictates. Beijing began to see the Soviets as the largest security threat. In March 1969 China and the Soviet Union fought a bloody war, resulting in hundreds of fatalities, over the islands in the Ussuri River. Later that year the Soviets even threatened to conduct a "surgical strike" to wipe out Chinese nuclear capabilities. The two countries were on the verge of a larger war. Between the 1969 Sino-Soviet conflicts and the 1972 U.S.-China summit, however, Sino-Soviet relations were mixed with goodwill policies. The Soviets endorsed the Chinese application to join the United Nations (UN) and the two countries signed agreements on trade, navigation, and border protocols. Still, Sino-Soviet hostility left the window open for Washington to approach Beijing for a common strategy against Moscow. In January 1972 the Soviets criticized Nixon's upcoming visit to China. As a result of U.S.-China strategic cooperation, Moscow virtually faced a scenario of possibly having to fight on both European and Asian fronts. Indeed, Moscow deployed more troops along the Chinese border by reducing its forces in Europe. Between 1972 and 1975 Sino-Soviet relations remained tense, whereas the United States maintained better relations with China and the Soviet Union, respectively. Yet, both Moscow and Beijing were aware of the U.S. "card-playing" strategy and tried to raise their own positions within the triangle.

The Sino-Soviet hostility intensified during the late 1970s and the trend was not necessarily in favor of U.S. interests. China worried about Soviet moves to fill the power vacuum left by the United States in Vietnam. In May 1978 China accused the Soviet Union of supporting Vietnamese regional expansionism and criticized Soviet-Cuban actions in Africa. In November 1978, Moscow and Hanoi signed a treaty to provide Soviet access to Vietnamese ports and military bases, renewing Chinese fears of encirclement. In the wake of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, China attacked Vietnam in February 1979.

If the balance-of-power strategy played a mixed role in stabilizing the international system in the 1970s, it scored almost a total failure in the first half of the 1980s and then became irrelevant when the Cold War came to an end in the late 1980s. In 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the Carter administration immediately instituted a series of sanctions in response, including a grain embargo and sharp cut of exports of advanced technology. When Ronald Reagan came into office in 1981, he developed a series of strategies against the Soviet threat, including the deployment of new long-range missiles and ordering full neutron-bomb production. In 1983, the Soviet Union shot down South Korean airliner KAL 007, continued to occupy Afghanistan, and consolidated its influence in Vietnam. The Reagan Doctrine was then used by the Reagan administration to support "freedom fighters" in Nicaragua, Angola, Afghanistan, and Cambodia. After the U.S. invasion of Grenada in October 1983, the Soviet Union walked out of the intermediate-range nuclear force (INF) negotiations with the United States, and shortly thereafter, suspended the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). In March 1984 a U.S. aircraft collided with a Soviet aircraft carrier collided with a Soviet submarine, and later that year two U.S. war planes provoked nervous responses from the Soviets.

Entering the 1990s the U.S.-China rapprochement also showed signs of strain, especially over the Taiwan issue. The Taiwan Relations Act (1979) already made the Chinese unhappy. The U.S.-China relationship then slipped off the track designed as the triangular balance of power. In 1981, the United States decided

to sell the sophisticated FX fighter plane and other advanced weapons to Taiwan. In 1982, as a response to the U.S. pro-Taiwan policy and overall U.S.-Soviet-Chinese relations, Beijing announced its "independence foreign policy," which essentially called for better Sino-Soviet relations while maintaining cooperative relations with the United States. Deng told U.S. Secretary of state Alexander M. Haig Jr. that China would not "beg" for U.S. military assistance or sacrifice Chinese interests to satisfy U.S. demands on Taiwan. By the mid-1980s, the United States and China continued their high level visits and military collaboration. Nevertheless, there was a strong momentum within the top Chinese leadership to distance them from the United States and improve Sino-Soviet relations.

Although the renewed Sino-Soviet tie took a slow start in the early 1980s, it eventually geared toward a new pattern of cooperation. The two powers were adjusting their strategic thinking more in terms of bilateral relations than in the triangular context. In 1982 the border negotiations resumed and two years later economic adviser Ivan Arkhipov went to China, the most senior Soviet official to visit that country in ten years. Both sides signed agreements on trade, technical cooperation, and scientific exchange.

Global politics and security opened a new chapter when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985. He started unprecedented political reforms at home and called for East-West cooperation. The original balance of power lost relevance even in U.S. strategic thinking. The Soviet Union and the United States held a series of fruitful summits, often with the Soviet initiatives. In 1987 the two countries signed an INF treaty to eliminate medium-range nuclear missiles. The United States cautiously watched and assessed the Soviet change, but finally became convinced by the shift of the Soviet policy toward peace. The Cold War gradually faded into history by the end of the decade.

At the same time, Sino-Soviet relations made substantial progress as the Soviets cut troops along the Chinese border withdrew troops from Afghanistan, and ended military support of Vietnam. Gorbachev visited Beijing in 1989. By the end of 1980s, for the first time since 1945, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China were in a cooperative relationship. There was no longer room for the balance of power. The balance of power in the 1970s left important lessons for the future. First, as Nixon had suggested in 1971, all would be better off if there were a "strong healthy United States, Europe, Soviet Union, China, Japan, each balancing the other, not playing one against the other, an even balance." Nevertheless, that was not what had happened. Second, the structure of international systems did not necessarily determine cooperation or conflict among nations. The bipolar U.S.-Soviet Cold War was just as dangerous as the multi-polar (triangular) U.S.-Soviet-Chinese balance of power. The stability of the international system can only be defined by cooperative or hostile behavior. Third, it was not the balance of power that brought the Cold War to an end. The most urgent driving force, among other factors, was economic restraints on global confrontation and common aspirations for economic prosperity. Gorbachev was right: we all lost the Cold War and we all won by enduring it.

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