

What motivated the United States to strengthen its relations with China in the 1970s?
Detente Source I, 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.

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The maintenance of a balance of power between the superpowers helped bring the Cold War to a "soft landing." Indeed, Mikhail Gorbachev and his reformers would never have embarked on their bold course in the 1980s had the Soviet leadership not felt the external environment to be relatively secure. In pondering why the Cold War continued as long as it did, however, it seems that continual, but often misguided, efforts at equilibration on both sides in turn triggered destabilizing "security dilemmas" that drove the conflict forward.

Even the master "equilibrator," Henry Kissinger, was unable to bring about anything more than a transient stability. Anxious about the impact of the Vietnam fiasco on perceptions of American power, U.S. leaders jumped at the first opportunity to reestablish the balance of power. By playing the China card in the 1970s, however, the United States initiated a dangerous game for higher stakes than were ever on the

table during the Vietnam War (ended 1975). The world was fortunate that this policy only helped to scuttle detente, but did not precipitate crisis of the magnitude of the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962), though the potential for such an event existed.

In order to grasp the significance of the ultimately destabilizing role China played in the balance of power during the 1970s, it is necessary to understand the basic concept of the "security dilemma," which ultimately explains how international conflict may be driven at root by fear and not just by "evil." Indeed, fear has been recognized as a cause of war at least since Thucydides assured that Spartan fears of the growing power of Athens was the primary cause of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). Lacking a world-state to enforce rules, countries in conditions of "anarchy" are forced to adopt a "self-help" posture toward their own security. These measures, however, ranging from building arms to searching for alliance partners, may inadvertently cause other states to fear. They in turn react with similar measures, resulting in a spiral of dangerous behaviors, and often, ultimately, in war. Even Hans Morgenthau, who maintained that international politics was simply a naked struggle for power, appeared to recognize the pernicious effects of the security dilemma when he enjoined Americans to encroach on the vital interests of competing powers. Thus, instability is likely to result when a state acts to alter the balance of power, perhaps with the intention to equilibrate, but often provocatively "over-shooting" in practice.

From the beginning of the Nixon administration the eventual goal of extrication from Vietnam was recognized. It was felt, however, that the military withdrawal could not be seen as a capitulation, lest adversaries of the United States, particularly the Soviet Union, be emboldened. Therefore, while gradually withdrawing American soldiers from combat, Richard M. Nixon ordered punitive actions, such as the bombing of Hanoi and the mining of North Vietnamese harbors, to induce cooperation at the negotiating table. In addition to North Vietnamese negotiator Le Du Tho's stubborn and utterly uncompromising diabetes, the confidence of U.S. leaders in American power was additionally shaped by their impression of turmoil at home. Kissinger reports in *The White House Years* (1979) that Nixon "inherited near civil-war conditions." Hindsight, of course, is twenty-twenty, but it seems clear in retrospect that fears concerning domestic stability were exaggerated—there was no "crisis of capitalism," and normalcy returned to domestic politics quickly after the Vietnam commitment had been liquidated. It is easy to see how such concerns, however, might have affected perceptions concerning the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Thus, U.S. foreign-policy elites took from Vietnam a deep and abiding fear that Americans would not stand up to the "real test" to come.

If American leaders sought to rankle the Soviets, they found the right place in focusing on East Asia. Playing the China card forced Soviet strategists seriously to consider the discomfiting scenario of fighting a two-front war. Other states facing similarly precarious strategic circumstances had undertaken such awesome projects as building the Panama Canal (1904-1914), but also extreme and tragic measures as carrying out the notorious Schlieffen Plan prior to War I. Moreover, underlying the difficult Soviet strategic problem in the East was their pathological fear of Asians, occasioned by the pre-modern conquest of Muscovy (1223) by Genghis Khan—that this brute had also conquered China proved no comfort.

Twentieth-century history reinforced, that the eastern possessions of Russia extremely vulnerable, beginning with its humiliation at the hands of the Japanese in 1904-1905. Vladivostok was occupied by the Allies after World War I, and the Bolsheviks only succeeded in recapturing the East after a long and difficult civil war. During World War II Joseph Stalin was preoccupied with the possibility of war on two fronts. Various crack units in Siberia not brought west to combat the Nazis until the most desperate moment—when they were most desperate moment—when they employed to great effect in the Battle of Moscow in the terrible winter of 1941-1942. Not completely trusting of a deal struck with the Chinese, Stalin cultivated and supported virulently anticommunist Chiang Kai-shek, hoping that the Chinese

Nationalist leader could keep the Japanese busy. Such historical legacies left Soviet leaders acutely sensitive to change the East Asian balance of power.

The material basis for this vulnerability was plainly apparent. The southeastern half of Russia is not only extremely remote and under populated, but the major cities from Novosibirsk to Vladivostok lie strung out west to east along a railroad that runs along the Chinese border. These "outposts," lacking any kind of possibilities for drawing on strategic depth, excepting the scenario of sending partisans into the vast northern forests, appeared to be all but sitting ducks for Mao Tse-rung's hordes. Indeed, this most precarious supply line could not be protected given the Chinese superiority in numbers, matter what the technological disparity between the armies. Edward N. Luttwak explains in an article in *China, the Soviet Union and the West: Strategic and Political Dimensions in the 1980s* (1982), that the Soviet military in Siberia and the Russian Far East was not prepared for heavy combat at the end of the 1960s: "Soviet field formations found themselves at the thinly stretched end of very long supply lines. Far from being in 'jump off' positions, many of the Soviet divisions would have had a hard time operating in any kind of combat regime." This real vulnerability helps to explain much subsequent Soviet behavior, for example, the speed and urgency with which Moscow turned to making nuclear threats after the March 1969 border clashes.

According to Luttwak, "the Soviet ability to wage non-nuclear war (against China) was quite small." In failing to grasp the extreme nature of Soviet insecurity in the East, successive U.S. administrations guaranteed a return to superpower mistrust and instability.

Kissinger's memoirs suggest that he began to consider the "China card" as the Sino-Soviet crisis was unfolding on the remote Ussuri River in March 1969. Meeting an "emotional" Soviet ambassador, Anatoly F. Dobrynin, after the first clash, in which thirty-one Soviet border troops were thought to have been killed, Kissinger says that he made every attempt to change the subject rather than listen to the ambassador's description of Chinese atrocities. Despite a consensus among academic experts, including Kenneth Lieberthal, Harry Gelman, and Harold Hinton, Kissinger maintains to the contrary that the Soviets had instigated the clashes. Thus, while the Chinese were still castigating Nixon as the "notorious god of war," Nixon and Kissinger shocked senior U.S. officials at a 14 August National Security Council (NSC) meeting when they announced that the United States would lean toward China during the present crisis. This position was shocking, of course, because not only did the Chinese appear to be the instigators of the border clashes, but Mao's neo-Stalinist Cultural Revolution had made the Kremlin appear rather moderate by contrast.

Largely as a result of the debacle in the East, Moscow began to move swiftly toward detente with the West, far in advance of the development of American ties with Beijing. Indeed, the specter of war with China was quite sufficient to make the Soviets eager to enter the arms-control process with the United States. Detente appeared to be in full gear as diplomats succeeded in negotiating the first ever limits on levels of strategic-nuclear weapons, called SALT 1. Here, however, American policy went astray. Instead of careful assurances with regard to Soviet security, the Americans chose to press their advantage, brandishing the China card in a menacing fashion. Historian R. Craig Nation, in *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917-1991* (1992), describes the psychological result for Moscow: "Nixon was officially received in the Chinese capital en route to the Moscow summit in February 1972. The result encouraged the Soviets' worst fears. On the very eve of the greatest achievements of the detente era Washington betrayed its spirit. . ."

It can also be demonstrated that Soviet anxiety vis-à-vis China during this period was extremely high- As reported by Nation, the number of Soviet army divisions east of the Ural Mountains thus increased between 1969 and 1973 from twenty-three to forty-five, with tactical aircraft increasing six fold. As these changes generally occurred prior to serious American overtures to the Chinese, it seems that Chinese

hostility alone was quite sufficient to bring about progress in arms controls and serious anxiety in Moscow. American diplomatic, and later military, overtures toward the People's Republic of China (PRC), therefore, had the effect of pouring profuse quantities of gasoline on a previously manageable blaze. The argument can be made that the enormous Soviet buildup on the Sino-Soviet border represented an expenditure of resources that would otherwise have gone into Eastern Europe. While this assertion is probably correct regarding the viability of the long-term Soviet economy, it is important to note that Soviet forces facing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) did not decrease during this period; rather, the number of divisions increased from twenty-six to thirty-one.

Given the effect of Nixon's visit to China on the Soviets, it is hardly surprising that in the subsequent years a resurgence of superpower competition occurred in the developing world. During the crisis surrounding the Yom Kippur War (1973), Kissinger played the American hand well, but then, once again overplayed that hand, choosing to exclude the Soviets from the peace settlement altogether. Where moderation was required to maintain detente, Kissinger went for an outright American political victory. Having lost in an area that mattered, the Middle East, the Soviets turned to making mischief elsewhere in Africa. Thus, the Soviets airlifted Cuban combat troops to Angola in 1974-1975, then to Ethiopia in 1978. While these interventions had little real effect on the balance of power, the experience of watching Soviet "power projection" in action played into the pathology that American elites took from Vietnam-that the Soviets were seeking to take advantage of post-Vietnam weakness of the United States. This situation may even have been true to some extent, but Soviet adventures in Africa should not have created the anxiety that they did in Washington.

Having created mistrust by playing the China card at a particularly inopportune moment, American leaders sought to retaliate for aggressive Soviet moves in Africa by endeavoring to construct a functioning Sino-American alliance. The first steps were taken down this road in December 1975 when Kissinger and President Gerald R. Ford decided to permit the sale of a jet engine factory and two Cyber 72 computers with military applications to the Chinese. Apparently there were voices within the Carter administration that recognized that military links with the Chinese could be counterproductive, and thus Presidential Review Memorandum 24, which was leaked to the press in June 1977, observed: "Moscow would then be compelled to make a fundamental reassessment of its policies toward the U.S. . . . At some undefined point, Soviet perceptions of the threat of U.S. Chinese military collaboration would stiffen the Soviet positions. "

In dramatically accelerating Sino-American relations, President Jimmy Carter made a fundamental mistake. He raised the temperature of the superpower competition considerable by retaliating for Soviet moves on the geopolitical periphery (Horn of Africa) with U.S. initiatives aimed at the Soviet security core. In May 1978 Carter's national security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, traveled to Beijing, where it was widely reported that arms transfers were discussed. For Americans to appreciate the significance of such steps, one would have to imagine the Soviets selling high-tech weapons to a hostile, nuclear-capable Mexico that possessed many times the American population and claimed parts of U.S. territory that were inherently difficult to defend. When Carter announced full normalization of Sino-American ties in December 1978, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance was apparently appalled at the implications for the SALT talks.

Rather than stabilizing the balance of power in Asia, the new Sino-American alliance helped to precipitate two dangerous crisis in this region at the close of the decade, which had the cumulative effects of destroying what was left of detente. Despite Washington's protests to the contrary, this alliance seemed to be at work during the Chinese punitive attack on Vietnam in 1979 that occurred just after Deng Xiaoping's return from a visit to the United States. If the Vietnamese had not succeeded in blunting China's initial thrust so effectively, one wonders how a wider Sino-Soviet confrontation, potentially enveloping even the United States, could have been avoided.

By 1979 China had already succeeded in purchasing Western antitank weapons and surface-to-air missiles. Negotiations were ongoing for the purchase of ninety Harrier jump-sets, with the option of building two hundred more under license. The visit of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown during the summer of 1979 caused further anxiety in Moscow. In October 1979 a Pentagon report leaked to the press advocated that Chinese and U.S. forces undertake joint military exercises. Thus, by the time of the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviets could claim with some justification, according to Nation, that "The occupation of Afghanistan did not occasion détente's failure. It was, rather, the product of that failure."

In playing the China card, American leaders successfully tipped the global balance of power in their own favor. They sought this advantage largely out of the humiliation and insecurity that flowed from the Vietnam quagmire, but in pursuing the policy they aggravated a Soviet pathology of insecurity regarding the defense of Russia's far-flung eastern possessions against the "yellow peril." In a classic security dilemma, the reckless pursuit of unilateral advantage decreased the security of all. The opening to China might have been accomplished in a more subtle manner. The greatest mistake was Carter's setting in motion the establishment of Sino-American military ties. Seduced by Brzezinski, he recklessly answered Soviet meddling on the periphery with a body-blow to the core of Soviet security, ensuring that Cold War crises would continue for at least another decade.

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