

Jonathan Gast, 2005

Nixon's Trip to China:

Realist foreign policy with traditional American
undertones

HIST 182

Prof. Gregg A. Brazinsky

In 1972 US President Nixon visited the People's Republic of China (PRC) in order to normalize relations between the US and China. He first submitted five principles to them which would provide a basis for talks recognizing the PRC as the official and only China. Official recognition did not take place until 1979, but Nixon privately acknowledged the PRC as the official China during the talks (Memorandum 1, p 6). Secret talks were held in Beijing between President Nixon, his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. Apart from a few friendly remarks about Nixon's touring of China, the talks consisted mostly of policy objectives in which the US and the Chinese had overlapping security interests and concerns. The talks included discussion of the political recognition of Burma, Russia's military forces on China's border, the American withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, and the American role in holding back Japan from economic and military expansion in Asia. The resulting Shanghai communique established that no country should dominate the Asia-Pacific region, and that both countries would pursue "scientific, cultural, and economic exchanges" (Lafeber 648). In terms of power politics, it made sense for Nixon to establish relations with China simply on account of its size, yet historically, Americans like Denby and Hinton have seen China as a land of opportunity. Nixon gained this opportunity through a policy of linkage. This can be observed when he said to Zhou Enlai, "there can be a better and I trust safer, world for our two peoples regardless of differences if we can find common ground" (memorandum 2, p 15). Many political lobbies in the US thought there existed no common ground between the US and China, and so it appeared that Nixon was battling the current of the popular opinion (memorandum 1, p 6). Nixon's visit to China exemplified his own unique world view, as well as showed how despite this uniqueness, his foreign policy still shared broader roots in American diplomatic thinking.

Unlike his most recent predecessors, Presidents JFK and Eisenhower, Nixon developed a

foreign policy that was neither idealistic nor moralistic; it was realist in nature, and it sought to bring foreign policy objectives in line with what American foreign policy could do, rather than what it wished would happen. This is particularly evident in Nixon's rhetoric during his visit to China when he mentions that, "a strong China can help provide the balance of power in this key part of the world - that is desperately needed." (Memorandum 1 page 31). Speaking of a balance of power is a complete rejection of the Wilsonian idealism which helped mold American foreign policy since the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. Wilson's 14 points outlined a new world order based on national self-determination and participation in a league of nations in order to prevent a relapse into balance of power thinking (Lafeber 313). In addition, this quotation shows that Nixon did not simply believe that the world was divided into two spheres, as Eisenhower did¹. As a realist, Nixon saw the world in terms of centers of power comprised of significant and insignificant countries². Nixon's true interest in China is revealed, when he said, "the U.S. would oppose any attempt by the Soviet Union to engage in an aggressive action against China. This...is in our interest, and in the interest of preserving...world peace" (Memorandum 2, p 21). This shows that Nixon believed China to be the key to preserving world peace, and by pledging himself to their defense in the case of Soviet aggression, he would preserve peace and stability in the Pacific and the world.

To say that Nixon's foreign policy views toward China were completely unique would be incorrect. The idea of establishing diplomatic relations with Communist China was not new, although it had been rejected in the late nineteen-fourties instead for a policy of non-recognition espoused by Senator William Knowland. Nixon makes his recognition of one China clear when he states:

We seek the normalization of relations with the People's Republic. We know that the issue of Taiwan is a barrier to complete normalization, but within the framework I have previously

¹ Mentioned in class discussion on Nov. 2nd; ² Taken from lecture notes on Nov. 21st

described we seek normalization and we will work toward that goal and will try to achieve it.
(Memorandum 1, p 5)

Nixon's normalization of relations between the US and Communist China parallels a foreign policy of recognition outlined by John Leighton Stuart in a 1948 report on possible actions to a CCP (Chinese Communist Party) invitation for US diplomatic relations. In this document, Stuart said that if the US were to open relations with the CCP, it would display an "open-minded attitude towards changing political trends in China and would probably have beneficial effects on future Sino-American relations" (Stuart). Although Knowland's non-recognition of China had been dominant in American foreign policy, Stuart's advocacy for recognition represents a strand in American thought that believed improved relations with China would be beneficial to the United States. Improved relations between the two countries would have to translate into a cooperation of some sort, and Nixon believed "[national security] brings us, China and America, together; not in terms of philosophy, not in terms of [friendship]...but because of national security..." (Memorandum 1, p 12). Although national security was the main link used to solidify ties between the US and China during these talks, scientific and economic ties were also mentioned.

Nixon's role as a trade envoy for the US during this trip was not made very apparent in these memoranda, although there was a brief moment when VM Chiao brings up trade, saying:

The question of trade between China and the United States was not mentioned in our original draft communique and only when General Haig came, he mentioned your side desired we say a few words about this matter of the development of Sino-American trade.
(Memorandum 4, p 20)

Kissinger replied, "after the election we will bring this into greater consistency" (Memorandum 4, p 20). It appears that General Haig brought up the issue of trade, not Nixon. One may speculate that Nixon and Kissinger thought the Chinese might be uneasy about trade relations, given the role trade played in the division of China between the great powers at the turn of the century. However,

Kissinger's reply shows that the US desired trade relations, but due to election politics in the US, this would not be expressly mentioned until after the election. Trade relations were not a major factor in these memoranda, yet a closer analysis of America's historical role of trading with China reveals a striking parallel to Nixon's perception of China being a key to peace in the Pacific.

Nixon told Zhou Enlai that, "peace in the Pacific is going to be the key to peace in the world, there being a relative balance in Europe" (Memorandum 1, p 30). Also, to ease Zhou Enlai's fears that Japan might seek to retake Taiwan or Korea, Nixon said, "Our policy is, to the extent possible, to restrain the Japanese from going from economic expansion to military expansion" (Memorandum 2, p 19). Nixon recognizes not only that trade has historically led to the domination of China and the Pacific, but he also emphasizes that if the Pacific is not made peaceful, then the result would be a state of upheaval. This recognition of the Pacific (or the East) as being key to either domination or peace in the world has also been noted by Richard Hinton in the 1870's:

History shows that the commercial control of the East has enabled whatever power possessed it to become for that era the controlling one of the world. Great Britain has had, for a hundred and fifty years past, the lion's share...That commercial supremacy is already menaced, and will soon be seriously contested, not only by the United States, but perhaps even in a more formidable degree by Russia. (Hinton 180)

On the one hand, Nixon may not have pursued commercial relations with China during his visit, because he realized how sensitive the subject could have been for the Chinese. Perhaps Nixon was influenced simply by Hinton's underlying assumption that control of the East meant control of the world. Thus if peace could be maintained in the East, there would follow peace in the world.

Jumping at the opportunity to enroll China as a friend of the US would put the USSR in a position, such that it could not succeed in gaining extensive influence in Asia or the Pacific. In doing so, the US would stand to benefit from any future trade with China, as is made evident in a quote from Nixon: "800 million Chinese open to the world...will become an economic force with enormous

potential.”³ Despite the lack of initiative for trade relations with China during his visit, Nixon, like Hinton, still treated China as the key to Asia, the Pacific, and subsequently the world.

In American Foreign Policy, Kissinger advocated replacing micro-management of world affairs with a framework of regional groupings which would carry out tasks associated with commonly shared US interests (Kissinger 97). Despite this distinguishing feature of Nixon’s foreign policy, he still ended up pursuing containment, even though it was shaped in terms of a balance of power directed toward offsetting the Soviet Union:

The Soviet Union is moving to reach its hands out in that area. It must be resisted. That is why we have taken a position in the Jordanian crisis... a position warning the Soviets that if they move aggressively in that area, we will consider our own interests involved.
(Memorandum 3, p 31)

Nixon is inexplicably linked to the foreign policies of Truman (containment) and Eisenhower (CIA operations) even though he is attempting to implement a different kind of framework padded by détente. Surely, by pursuing good relations with China, the US would not have to challenge the USSR directly on that front, but in other parts of the world where allies lacked, the US would still have to meet the Soviets head on. Nixon’s foreign policy was not willing to simply leave such areas uncontested. In the areas where allies were needed, supporting a coup d’état was seen as viable, as was the case with Pinochet in Chile⁴. Kennedy’s ideals of development were the least represented, because Nixon was faced with an India which had used development funds to buy weapons from the USSR (Memorandum 2, p 9). Despite this, even Nixon offers “heavy economic assistance to Cambodia, Laos, and North Vietnam for rehabilitation and to South Vietnam in the event a settlement is made” (Memorandum 1, p 26). In this way, despite his innovative, realist solutions to the Cold War, Nixon still relied on foreign policy thinking which took its roots in Hinton and Denby, as well as Stuart, Truman, and Eisenhower.

³ This was a quote taken from class lecture on November 21st; ⁴ Taken from lecture notes from November 21st

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