

The Vietnam Imperative: Kissinger, China, and the Origins of the Shanghai Communique (1969-72)

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ABSTRACT

The Shanghai Communiqué was a joint statement issued by the United States and the People's Republic of China in 1972, representing a critical step toward the normalization of relations between the two nations and a significant shift in Cold War geopolitics. While often overlooked, the Communiqué marked a decisive break within the communist bloc, deepening the divide between China and the Soviet Union. This paper examines the events leading to its signing through five chronologically ordered sections: the Sino-Soviet Split, the Vietnam War, Henry Kissinger's 1971 meeting with Zhou Enlai, Richard Nixon's 1972 state visit to China, and the drafting of the Communiqué itself. The paper is structured as a chronological narrative, beginning with the Sino-Soviet split as the geopolitical condition that made rapprochement possible, before turning to the Vietnam War as the primary catalyst for American engagement with China. Drawing on extensive primary-source evidence supplemented by secondary scholarship, it argues that the Nixon administration pursued rapprochement largely in hopes of gaining leverage over North Vietnam, but ultimately failed to secure meaningful Chinese cooperation toward that end.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nearly three and a half decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, historian and scholar of international law Stuart Ford declared the dawn of a "new Cold War" between the United States, China, and Russia, citing rising geopolitical tensions and the reemergence of an East-West dichotomy resembling the 1945-1989 era.¹ In fact, the "Taiwan Question" (a major point of contention during US-Sino negotiations) has reemerged in the form of a renewed coercive posture by the mainland Chinese government against the island of Taiwan as part of a broader military standoff in the Pacific.² In light of the renewed East-West tensions in the present, it remains imperative to examine the conditions under which China was brought into the broader world order with the United States officially recognizing the

¹ Stuart Ford, "The New Cold War," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2659&context=jil>.

² Bonnie S. Glaser, "If China Attacks Taiwan," *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/if-china-attacks-taiwan#>

People's Republic of China (PRC) government as a legitimate state.³ America's recognition of the People's Republic, however, was not the first from the Western bloc; Great Britain (1950)⁴ and Canada (1970)⁵, for example, had already taken vital steps in establishing relations with the PRC prior to 1972.

Oxford historian Margaret MacMillan, specializing in 20th-century diplomatic history, makes the case that the United States' reluctance to recognize the PRC for 23 years, since its founding in 1949, was multifaceted and founded upon two main concerns: the first that the PRC was a Soviet puppet state, the second that the rise of communism in China was part of a broader conspiracy to establish international communism.⁶ These views were concurrently part of a fear-mongering campaign in the United States led by Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who espoused that prominent members of the State Department and other public figures were secretly working with external communist agents.

The era of McCarthyism and the 2nd Red Scare solidified communism as an existential threat for both the American public and government, making non-recognition of the PRC a foregone conclusion for the following decade. Prevailing American fears are reflected in the words of then Secretary of State Dean Acheson (1949-1953), who warned that communism would first take hold in "Asia, then of Europe, then of ourselves."⁷ It was under this context of decades-long domestic antipathy towards China that the decision to begin reopening relations with the PRC was made.

Historians have long debated the motivations behind this grand diplomatic shift through the Nixon administration's opening to China. MacMillan, for example, emphasizes the strategic opportunity presented to Nixon for triangular diplomacy to disrupt the Cold War balance of power, largely underplaying the role of Vietnam.⁸ Others, like Chen Jian, however, focus instead on the domestic pressures over Vietnam and the desire to gain leverage over Hanoi.⁹ Meanwhile, scholars like John Gaddis, similar to MacMillan, frame rapprochement as a *realpolitik* attempt at gaining a long-term advantage over the Soviet Union.¹⁰

³ Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "United States–China Relations," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations, 1977–1980*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/china-policy>.

⁴ "Britain Recognises Communist Government of China, 1950," *The Guardian*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/07/britain-recognises-communist-government-of-china-1950>.

⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America," https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xw/zwbdt/202510/t20251017_11735224.html.

⁶ Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2007).

⁷ Walter H. Waggoner, "Acheson Returns from West Coast; His Resignation Is Advocated by Rep. Knowland," *New York Times*, March 18, 1950, <https://www.nytimes.com/1950/03/18/archives/acheson-returns-from-west-coast-his-resignation-is-advocated-by-rep.html>.

⁸ MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World*.

⁹ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁰ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

While MacMillan and Gaddis emphasize triangular diplomacy and the opportunity provided by the Sino-Soviet split, this paper argues that the Nixon administration's decision to pursue rapprochement with the People's Republic of China through the 1972 Shanghai Communique was driven primarily by the exigence of the Vietnam War. Facing diminishing leverage in ongoing negotiations with North Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger sought to use Beijing to pressure Hanoi into a settlement of the war, thereby facilitating an American withdrawal. Although isolating the Soviet Union certainly remained a secondary consideration, Vietnam remained the primary motive. In practice, however, the communique was unable to provide the United States with increased leverage over Hanoi, as the diplomacy leading up to the communique yielded little meaningful Chinese cooperation, rendering it an ineffective tool for influencing the outcome of the Vietnam conflict and securing an American withdrawal as initially envisioned by the US.

II. CONTEXT: SINO-SOVIET SPLIT

The opening for such a diplomatic maneuver and reorganization was provided by growing tensions between the formerly allied governments of China and the Soviet Union.

American concerns over the spread of communism in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the establishment of a communist regime in China fed into fears of a growing "monolithic communism" throughout the 1950s.¹¹ This theory of monolithic communism was widely held by prominent State Department officials like President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Secretary of State John Dulles, who suspected that the leading communist powers—China and Russia—were acting in concert to overthrow Western capitalist democracies.¹² The reality of the relationship between China and Russia, in contrast, was strained and not nearly as cohesive as the United States foreign policy establishment believed.

In fact, it was mutual suspicion, rather than lockstep coordination, that had characterized the Sino-Soviet relationship for decades by this point. In honor of the PRC's fifth anniversary, the freshly minted Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev, having recently solidified power following Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, made an official state visit to China to strengthen his relationship with Mao. Years later, he recalled regarding this trip, "everyone was unbelievably courteous, but I saw through their hypocrisy."¹³ This tension undermined the ideological and strategic cohesion that the Americans long presumed, gradually revealing an opportunity for triangular diplomacy. Khrushchev's sentiments reflected a longstanding Soviet mistrust of the Chinese, whom they viewed as uncivilized and primitive compared to their European counterparts, with one Soviet diplomat remarking in reference to China, "Moral individual

¹¹ Lorraine Boissoneault, "A Messy Divorce: The Sino-Soviet Split," *JSTOR Daily*, <https://daily.jstor.org/a-messy-divorce-the-sino-soviet-split/>

¹² Thomas W. Simons Jr., *How Dean Acheson Won the Cold War: Statesmanship, Morality, and Foreign Policy* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1998), <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-urasia/posts/1998/09/how-dean-acheson-won-the-cold-war-statesmanship-morality-and-foreign-policy>

¹³ Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970), 466.

conscience is the treasure and unique legacy of our Western Christian civilization!”¹⁴ Existing mistrust was only compounded by the varying interpretations of Marxism both sides had taken to, each believing the other was veering astray from revolutionary principles.

Mao, for one, had embarked on the long and calamitous Cultural Revolution, seeking to reform all facets of Chinese society in the form of revolutionary principles and eliminate older Confucianist ideology. The events that transpired included a mass reeducation program forcing millions of young urban Chinese and intellectuals into rural areas to live with and “learn from the peasants.”¹⁵ The reforms under Mao were part of his “continuous revolution” doctrine, which propagated that a series of cultural and social disruptions were necessary to achieve the idealized communist utopia envisioned by Marx and Engels. The Soviets, however, were less hardline in their interpretation of communism, leading to Mao and the Chinese officially condemning the Soviet leadership under Khrushchev as “The Revisionist Traitor Group” in 1961.¹⁶

The United States soon caught on to the rift between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic, hoping to use the division as an opportunity to further weaken the communist bloc. As early as 1962, the State Department remained aware of the vast geopolitical consequences and opportunities that the split could have, with a memorandum from James C. Thompson to the Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs discussing the possibility of providing aid to the Chinese Communists in an effort to combat the Russian threat.¹⁷ The memorandum reflected a departure from the view of previous administrations towards the Chinese, who treated the PRC as an adversary just as the Soviets. The recognition of division within the communist camp planted the seeds for what would culminate in Nixon’s official state visit to China in 1972.

The ideological divergence between the two soon metastasized into a military threat for the Chinese in the latter half of the 1960s, when a Soviet arms buildup on the northern Chinese border raised security concerns within the PRC leadership. In 1969, border disputes reaching back to the early 1950s culminated in border clashes on the Damanskii-Zhenbao Island, with both sides sustaining severe casualties.¹⁸ Border clashes had been ongoing for the latter part of a decade, but the casualties of each successive clash were steadily rising, leading many in the Chinese leadership to consider the Soviets as a serious threat, with rumors circulating of an impending Sino-Soviet war, a far cry from the cohesive alliance the West

¹⁴ Shen Zhihua, “Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 44–68; MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao*, 126.

¹⁵ International Institute of Social History, “Record 1031244,” <https://search.iisg.amsterdam/Record/1031244>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Volume 22, Northeast Asia*, document 82, “Memorandum From James C. Thomson, Jr., to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Harriman), January 12, 1962,” U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v22/d82>

¹⁸ Liu Zhinan, “1969 nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui Mei Su guanxi de yanjiu he tiaozheng,” *Dangdai Zhongguoshi Yanjiu*, No. 3 (1999), 41–52.

envisioned.¹⁹ Although neither side was prepared for full-scale military conflict, the PRC maintained heightened security on its shared border with the Soviet Union, anticipating an invasion. Chinese fear over the Soviet threat evolved into an arms buildup, spurring on the mutual fear over Russian militarism that opened the door to Kissinger's courting of the Chinese just three years later—a crucial step in establishing triangular diplomacy and formulating the Shanghai Communiqué.²⁰

III. THE VIETNAM WAR

While the Sino-Soviet split provided an impetus for the Chinese to break out of their long-standing isolationism, the United States was urged to seek a renewed relationship with China in the hopes that Mao and the Politburo would pressure North Vietnam, utilizing their perceived close relationship, into a favorable end of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Although the Chinese would ultimately be unable to force the North Vietnamese into a settlement with the United States, it nevertheless served as the basis for Kissinger's desire to establish relations with the PRC.

At the end of Nixon's predecessor, Lyndon B Johnson's, term in office, widespread protests had been taking place across the United States in opposition to the war. In 1968, over 500,000 American troops were stationed in Vietnam, sustaining 58,220 US casualties.²¹ The institution of a draft under the Johnson administration in 1964 conscripted 2.2 million American men until the formal end of the war in 1973, many of whom felt that Vietnam was a virtual "death sentence" for a cause they didn't believe in.²² Mass conscription set off a series of anti-war protests, contributing to increased unrest and riots across the nation. Opposition to the war wasn't just contained to students and draftees. A 1966 Gallup poll found that only 47% of Americans described themselves in support of the war effort. Just two years later, in 1968, after the Tet Offensive, 54% of Americans viewed entry into Vietnam as a mistake compared to just 39% who supported entry.²³

Consequently, negative public opinion and Johnson's mishandling of the Vietnam War contributed to the election of President Nixon, who promised the American people an end to the war. In his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention (RNC) in 1968, Nixon called for an "honorable end to the war", which many historians now refer to as the basis for the "peace with honor" policy held by the Nixon

¹⁹ Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 2000), 21–52.

²⁰ Alsu Tagirova, "From Crisis Management to Realignment of Forces: The Diplomatic 'Geometry' of the 1969–1978 Sino-Soviet Border Talks," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 24, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 116–154.

²¹ National Archives and Records Administration, "Vietnam War U.S. Military Fatal Casualty Statistics," *National Archives*, <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics>.

²² University of Michigan, "The Military Draft During the Vietnam War," *Michigan in the World: The Global Turn at the University of Michigan*, https://michiganintheworld.history.lsa.umich.edu/antivietnamwar/exhibits/show/exhibit/draft_protests/the-military-draft-during-the-

²³ Lydia Saad, "The Gallup Vault: Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam," *Gallup News*, Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/vault/191828/gallup-vault-hawks-doves-vietnam.aspx>

administration.²⁴ Despite the slogan's vague wording, it promised to reconcile the two competing perspectives on Vietnam: the hawkish view that the United States extricating itself from the conflict would bring humiliation on the world stage and the dovish view that further engagement would only continue the rapid loss of American life.

Following the 1968 Tet Offensive, Johnson refocused his efforts from a military victory, now improbable, to diplomatic negotiations, halting the bombing of North Vietnam and initiating the Paris Peace Talks prior to leaving office.²⁵ Once Nixon took office, "Peace with Honor" seemed increasingly difficult to execute due to North Vietnam's lack of cooperation with American demands during negotiations. Nixon and Kissinger resumed the talks initiated by Johnson in the hopes that a peaceful de-escalation of the war could be agreed upon with Hanoi. In November 1969, Kissinger was met with stiff resistance from the North Vietnamese delegate Xuan Thuy, who maintained a hard line during negotiations based on the NLF's ten points, stating that any departure from those points would necessitate Hanoi to "continue the fight."²⁶ The demands put forward by Thuy required the United States to withdraw all military presence in Southeast Asia and called for the reunification of Vietnam under Hanoi's leadership, per a declassified CIA report.²⁷ The report further opines on the obstructive elements of Thuy's demands, which contained no mention of "an explicit withdrawal of North Vietnamese forces" from the South.²⁸ Hanoi's reluctance to commit to South Vietnamese independence was unacceptable to Nixon, who desired a withdrawal from Vietnam without abandoning his South Vietnamese allies. Accepting such terms of withdrawal as suggested by the NLF's ten points would have been humiliating to the US after five years of a gruelling war effort and thousands of American casualties. Such an end to the war would have, in essence, admitted that American troops had perished in vain, an outcome unacceptable to Nixon and Kissinger.²⁹

Nixon's inability to withdraw from the conflict was followed, like with Johnson, by prolific antiwar

²⁴ Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida," August 8, 1968, *The American Presidency Project*, University of California, Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-miami>

²⁵ Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, "The Tet Offensive, 1968," *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/tet>

²⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume 42: Vietnam: The Kissinger–Le Duc Tho Negotiations, August 1969–December 1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v42>.

²⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute," *Intelligence Memorandum*, April 1969, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/LOC-HAK-285-8-11-5.pdf>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 213.

protests. On November 15, 1969, just months after Kissinger's trip to France for the first round of negotiations with Thuy, the largest anti-Vietnam War protest in US history took place. The Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam was an organized march of over 500,000 protesters in Washington, D.C., just across from the White House, calling for an immediate end to the war.³⁰ The protests in D.C., along with the earlier wave of protests in October, placed increasing pressure on the administration to end the war. The immediacy of the domestic call for peace in Vietnam was infeasible for Nixon due to Hanoi's unwillingness to cooperate. For the next two years, Hanoi remained resistant to giving the United States a way out of the war that would, in some way, preserve America's image abroad.³¹

In the eyes of many, both domestic and foreign, the Vietnam War was a David v. Goliath's struggle with the world's predominant military and economic power—the United States—matched against a fledgling third-world state in North Vietnam. The United States's inability to subdue a seemingly much weaker power raised questions over American power within the international community. While at this time the US was by no means as hegemonic as it is today, it had been looked to by much of the Western world as its protector from a belligerent Soviet Union. Defeat in Vietnam, however, threatened this image of American prestige, with MacMillan singling out Vietnam as the “chief symbol of the decline in American power.”³² NATO, for one, had long operated within a nuclear umbrella protection framework heavily reliant on the United States to counter the Soviet threat; a structure that would increasingly come under question.³³

It is important to note that despite the origins of the Vietnam War lying with France, by 1971, it was the United States that stationed the most troops in Vietnam. Since its initial presence in 1964, the US attained minimal success in fighting off North Vietnamese forces, leading to many Western European nations, with the exception of France, expressing their dismay at the American war effort, viewing it as “futile.”³⁴ The faith of American allies had been on a significant downturn due to the inability of what was supposed to be the American military juggernaut to subdue a “backward” nation.³⁵ Decaying European confidence in

³⁰ Michael Gonchar, “Nov. 15, 1969: Anti-Vietnam War Demonstration Held,” *The New York Times Learning Network*, November 15, 2011, <https://archive.nytimes.com/learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/15/nov-15-1969-anti-vietnam-war-demonstration-held/>.

³¹ Margaret MacMillan, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the Opening to China,” in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969–1977*, ed. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

³² David L. Prentice, “Choosing ‘the Long Road’: Henry Kissinger, Melvin Laird, Vietnamization, and the War over Nixon’s Vietnam Strategy,” *Diplomatic History* 40, no. 3 (June 2016): 452, <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhv002>.

³³ Heidi Hardt, “The United States,” in *The Nations of NATO: Shaping the Alliance’s Relevance and Cohesion*, ed. Thierry Tardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 45, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192855534.003.0003>.

³⁴ Christian F. Ostermann and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, “Western Europe and the Vietnam War,” in *The Cambridge History of the Vietnam War*, ed. Andrew Preston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 549–78.

³⁵ MacMillan, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the Opening to China,” 24.

American power put the entire postwar NATO security framework at risk, with Kissinger himself conceding that the alliance was in “a state of malaise.”³⁶

As Vietnam put the United States in a declining position in the Cold War and degraded its national prestige, Kissinger and Nixon dedicated themselves to finding a way out of the conflict through a policy referred to by Nixon as “Vietnamization”. This policy set the basis for a full military withdrawal of US armed forces from Vietnam, but in alignment with Nixon’s “Peace with Honor” doctrine, seeking not to abandon their South Vietnamese allies.³⁷ Failed attempts at negotiations by Kissinger at the Paris Peace Talks, however, pushed Nixon into seeking an alternative route to Vietnamization—China. Nixon, in his memoirs, remained confident that “the Chinese communists were training and supplying Vietminh forces.”³⁸ Nixon and his closest advisors had been operating under the assumption that China exercised immense influence over the North Vietnamese, similar to the Korean War. This assumption would prove untrue. The upper echelons of the United States government, by this point, hoped that better relations with China would help geopolitically isolate Vietnam both in terms of trade and arms shipments, thus giving them more leverage in negotiations with Hanoi.³⁹

As referenced prior, the United States had a history of antipathy towards China, whom the foreign policy establishment viewed as an existential communist threat.⁴⁰ A move from a history of antagonism towards a cooperative relationship on the part of the US required a seemingly larger threat: Vietnam. While discussing the potentiality of an end to the Vietnam conflict, Nixon realized “There are only two logical candidates for the role of intermediary, China and Russia.”⁴¹ Given the fraught state of US-Soviet relations Nixon was forced to turn to China to solve his Vietnam problem. Domestic and international pressure over the war, as well as a string of military defeats, led the foreign policy bureaucracy under Nixon to view China as the antidote, rather than the source, of their problems in Asia. Specifically, initial contact and communication between Nixon and his Chinese counterparts were sparked due to optimistic sentiment that a renewed relationship with China could help pressure the North Vietnamese. China was now a strategic necessity for the Nixon administration.

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 1, *Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969–1972* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2003), 110.

³⁷ Mark Dziak, “Vietnamization (Policy),” *EBSCO Research Starters: Military History and Science* (EBSCO Information Services, 2023), <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/military-history-and-science/vietnamization-policy>.

³⁸ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 126.

³⁹ Daniel W. Lemon, *Vietnam’s Foreign Policy Toward China Since the 1970s* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2007), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA475924.pdf>.

⁴⁰ National Security Council, “Statement of Policy by the National Security Council,” November 6, 1953, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, vol. 14, pt. 1, *China and Japan*, ed. David W. Mabon and Harriet D. Schwar (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1985), Document 149, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v14p1/d149>

⁴¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 13, *Soviet Union, October 1970–October 1971* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 985.

IV. KISSINGER'S SECRET MEETING WITH CHOU

While the worsening situation in Vietnam played a primary role in opening to China, the change of guard at the Oval Office was also a contributor, as Nixon had always viewed American policy towards the Chinese as a missed opportunity. In a 1967 article in *Foreign Affairs* titled "Asia After Viet Nam," written two years before he assumed the presidency, Nixon argued that the United States should not leave China isolated from the international system:

"We simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors. There is no place on this small planet for a billion of its potentially most able people to live in angry isolation."⁴²

The statement suggests that, even prior to his presidency, Nixon recognized that the longstanding American strategy of diplomatic isolation had contributed to Chinese hostility rather than moderating it. Thus, by late 1970, Kissinger acted upon Nixon's pro-China sentiment, making repeated attempts to contact the Chinese government through a Paris channel.

A memo from Kissinger to Nixon lists opportunities to meet with the Chinese in concurrence with the worsening on-the-ground military situation in Vietnam.⁴³ Kissinger's repeated diplomatic efforts with the Chinese came amidst North Vietnamese reluctance to negotiate an end to the conflict with the United States, despite Le Duc Tho's presence in Paris.⁴⁴ The timing of these initiatives indicates that Nixon and Kissinger viewed the opening to China not merely as an opportunity to exploit the Sino-Soviet split but also as a strategic means to pressure Hanoi and reach a favorable end to the Vietnam War.

Contacting the Chinese was especially difficult for Kissinger, as there had been a drought of diplomatic relations between the American and Chinese parties since 1949. The complete lack of communication networks limited options for Kissinger, relying instead on Pakistani President Yahya Khan to relay messages.⁴⁵ The usage of an intermediary to transmit messages was also informed by the Nixon administration's need to keep the negotiations completely secret, so as to insulate negotiations from any media or congressional backlash. In a similar vein, communications from the United States to China

⁴² Richard Nixon, "Asia After Viet Nam," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (October 1967): 121.

⁴³ Henry Kissinger to Richard Nixon, "Contact with the Chinese," circa September 12, 1970, with excerpt from "Daily Brief" attached, Top Secret/Sensitive/Exclusively Eyes Only, in *Chronology of Exchanges with the PRC, Feb. 1969–April 1971*, document 1, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-01.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Henry Kissinger and Jean Sainteny, "Memorandum of Conversation," September 27, 1970, Top Secret/Sensitive/Eyes Only, box 1031, *Exchanges Leading Up to HAK Trip to China—December 1969–July 1971 (I)*, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-02.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "Recent Messages Between U.S. Government and the People's Republic of China," intelligence document, 1971, CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/RECENT%20MESSAGES%20BETWEEN%20U%5B15826098%5D.pdf>.

through the Khan backchannel especially stress the need to set up a secret meeting between Kissinger and Chinese officials.⁴⁶

In the leadup to Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in 1971, President Nixon publicly announced his intention to defrost relations with China in an address to the nation, although the exact details of the trip and concessions to be made along the way remained secret: "In the coming year I will carefully examine what further steps we might take to create broader opportunities for contacts between the Chinese and American peoples, and how we might remove needless obstacles to the realization of these opportunities."⁴⁷ In the very same speech, Nixon announced the removal of several restrictions limiting the movement of goods and people between the two nations in an effort to build Chinese trust for Kissinger's secret visit.⁴⁸

To set up this official state visit, Kissinger embarked on a secret visit involving him and a select few from the NSC to determine the logistics of the trip. In July 1971, Nixon and his close advisors made a public trip to Pakistan. At the end of the Pakistan visit, Kissinger told the on-staff doctors in Islamabad that he had come down with "Delhi belly."⁴⁹ Feigning an illness, Kissinger was driven to Rawalpindi airport, just seven miles from Islamabad, where he boarded a Pakistan International Airlines Boeing 707 for Beijing, avoiding all media and press coverage. Accompanying Kissinger were three of his closest aides: John Holdridge, a staffer specializing in Far East relations; Winston Lord, a special assistant; and Richard Shymser, a Foreign Service officer with expertise on Southeast Asia. The rest of his staff, however, remained in the dark about Kissinger's secret trip, along with the rest of the media.⁵⁰ At noon on July 9th, Kissinger and his aides landed on a remote airstrip north of Beijing. A few hours later, at 4 p.m., Kissinger met with Chinese Premier Chou En-lai, and substantive discussions between the two commenced over dinner and continued late that night.⁵¹

The secret meeting between Kissinger and Chou was intended to set up a later announcement from Nixon to the rest of the world proclaiming his intentions to pursue closer ties with China. Chou initiated this meeting by voicing his concerns over the Soviet Union: "The worst would be that China would be carved up once again by the USSR and Japan."⁵² Chou's concerns were deeply rooted in Maoist ideology, predicated upon the humiliations of the 19th century, where various European and Japanese imperialist powers effectively reduced China to a puppet state. The 'Century of Humiliation,' as later described in Chinese political discourse and popularized by Mao, guided Chinese paranoia regarding territorial

⁴⁶ "Memorandum," in *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 49, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.27.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Richard Nixon, "Statement on Travel and Trade with the People's Republic of China," April 14, 1971, box 1031, *Exchanges Leading Up to HAK Trip to China—December 1969–July 1971 (I)*, National Security Archive, George Washington University, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-14.pdf>

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ "The Nation: The Secret Voyage of Henry K.," *Time Magazine* 98, no. 4 (July 26, 1971): 16–17.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 13, 828.

sovereignty and foreign incursions.⁵³ The Sino-Soviet Split and border disputes in Northern China reinforced the possibility of a Soviet invasion into mainland China, providing an impetus for China to shift towards the American camp. Kissinger responded to Chou's concerns by reiterating the United States' commitment to oppose any attempts at military expansionism by either the Soviet Union or Japan.⁵⁴ Further, Kissinger's assurance to Chou that the US would oppose Soviet expansion was a pronounced example of triangular diplomacy, playing Chinese and Soviet paranoia of one another off to the benefit of American foreign policy interests. For the Nixon administration, increasing animosity between Chinese and Soviet factions created an opportunity to reshape the strategic balance of the Cold War and solve one of Nixon's most pertinent issues during his first term by playing the "China card" to alleviate the rapidly worsening Vietnam situation.⁵⁵

The meeting between Chou and Kissinger was a milestone in 20th-century diplomacy, representing the first time any member of the American government had met with the Chinese government since Mao's rise to power in 1949. In their meeting on July 10, 1971, Kissinger vowed not only to oppose potential efforts of Soviet expansion into China but also to relay any relevant information pertaining to Chinese interests.⁵⁶ Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or SALT, had been ongoing between the United States and Soviet Union since 1969 in an effort to combat the nuclear arms race.⁵⁷ China remained suspicious of American efforts to negotiate with Moscow over arms control as a conspiracy against Chinese interests. To alleviate Chinese paranoia over the issue, Kissinger assured Chou, "I am prepared to give you any information you may wish to know regarding any bilateral negotiations we are having with the Soviet Union on such issues as SALT, so as to alleviate any concerns you might have in this regard."⁵⁸

While much of the meeting was spent addressing potential Chinese concerns over rapprochement, another key issue of the meeting brought up specifically by Chou was the status quo in Taiwan-China relations, the chief obstacle in negotiations. Chou, for one, refused to concede on the Taiwan issue, citing it as the principal concern between the United States and China, demanding a full withdrawal of American forces from Taiwan and the surrounding Taiwanese straits.⁵⁹ The Chinese government, headed by Mao, viewed the issue of Taiwan solely as one pertaining to internal affairs, condemning foreign involvement, especially by the United States, on the issue.⁶⁰ When Chou mentioned Taiwan, Kissinger inextricably related it back to the United States' interests in Vietnam—rather than with ongoing diplomacy with the

⁵³ Gregory Moore, "The Current State of U.S.-Chinese Relations: An Assessment," *Security Science Journal*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2023), 45.

⁵⁴ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 13, 828.

⁵⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 1, 94.

⁵⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 13, 829.

⁵⁷ John D. Maurer, *Competitive Arms Control: Nixon, Kissinger, and SALT, 1969–1972* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 6.

⁵⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 13, 829.

⁵⁹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, Document 139, "Memorandum of Conversation," Beijing, July 9, 1971, 4:35–11:20 p.m. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), 362.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 368.

Soviet Union—believing that “they are linked to some extent.”⁶¹ Kissinger’s linkage of the two issues faced by the US and China reflected his hope for some sort of *quid pro quo* arrangement where American withdrawal from Taiwan would ensure that China would pressure Vietnam to the negotiating table. While ‘linkage’ commonly refers to Kissinger’s policy with the Soviet Union on nuclear arms control, a similar strategy was taken towards China, although with respect to rapprochement rather than arms control. This sort of arrangement aimed to solve the pressing issues of both countries: China would be free to pursue expansion into Taiwan, and the US would find it easier to negotiate a withdrawal of troops with Hanoi.

With reference to Taiwan, the United States had long maintained a position of support for the fledgling anti-communist government as part of the Truman Doctrine, which hoped to contain the spread of communism worldwide. Thus, the US has long maintained political and military support for Taiwan since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950.⁶²

Consequently, Chou’s insistence on a full military withdrawal of American troops from the Taiwan Strait posed a political issue for Kissinger at home to convince the cabinet and congressional hawks to reevaluate their support for Taiwan. To appease hawkish factions at home and Chou, Kissinger utilized intentionally vague language, assuring Chou that the US would not support a permanent division of Taiwan and China under a ‘two China’ policy, and pledged to withdraw two-thirds of US troops from the region.⁶³ Further, Kissinger suggested that a natural “political evolution” would eventually lead to reunification of the mainland and Taiwan under the PRC government, and confirmed that the US would not attempt to block such a movement.⁶⁴

With the Taiwan issue, at least momentarily, squared away, the two moved to discussing another main roadblock in arranging Nixon’s upcoming formal visit—Vietnam. Throughout the conversation, Kissinger attempted to steer the negotiations towards the administration’s more pressing concerns in Vietnam, seeking a withdrawal while allowing the US to save face in the international community. Despite American concessions over Taiwan, Chou remained unhelpful to Kissinger’s repeated requests, telling him, “We never intervene in their internal affairs. The final decision lies with the Vietnamese.”⁶⁵ Chou, however, notes that the PRC had been providing the North Vietnamese forces with large amounts of aid. A CIA report from November 1968, just seven months after the Tet Offensive, revealed that although a vast majority of arms shipments to North Vietnam were through Soviet lines, China routinely provided

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Susan V. Lawrence, “The U.S. ‘One-China’ Policy and Taiwan,” Congressional Research Service, IF12503, updated August 18, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12503>

⁶³ *Memorandum of Conversation, Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai*, July 9, 1971, 4:35–11:20 PM, Top Secret / Sensitive / Exclusively Eyes Only, with cover memorandum by Winston Lord, July 29, 1971, Document 34, National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/ch-34.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *Memorandum of Conversation, Beijing, October 21, 1971, 4:42–7:17 p.m.*, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. E-13, *Documents on China, 1969–1972* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 11.

the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) with munitions and infantry weapons, totalling \$450 million from 1954-68.⁶⁶

The only concession made by Chou throughout the negotiations was that China would not send ground troops to intervene in the conflict, as it had done earlier in the Korean War. Kissinger, in turn, reemphasized the political quagmire confronting the administration was in, confessing, "Vietnam is a very anguishing problem for us."⁶⁷ The discussion ultimately yielded little concrete progress on Vietnam, apart from vague assurances that Chinese forces wouldn't directly intervene in the war.

Nevertheless, Kissinger's careful diplomacy proved pivotal in securing support for an official state visit by Nixon in 1972. As the trip concluded, Chou extended an invitation to President Nixon for a visit in the spring of 1972, which Nixon graciously accepted.⁶⁸ With the diplomatic groundwork laid during Kissinger's secret visit to Beijing in July 1971, the path was now open for formal rapprochement between the United States and the People's Republic of China. Nixon's historic visit in February 1972 would culminate in the issuance of the Shanghai Communiqué, altering the bipolar Cold War status quo.

V. NIXON'S 1972 VISIT

With the groundwork laid by Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing in July 1971, President Richard Nixon prepared to undertake what would become one of the most consequential journeys of the Cold War. On February 21, 1972, Nixon boarded Air Force One for Beijing, marking the first visit by a sitting American President to the People's Republic of China.⁶⁹ Nixon's visit was a culmination of months of covert negotiations between the two governments. As Nixon walked up the steps of Air Force One, a local crowd greeted him, with one sign humorously reading "Be a nice guy with Chou En Lai," indicative of changing domestic attitudes towards China.⁷⁰

Immediately after Nixon's landing, he was promptly received by Chou and taken to the Diaoyutai, where the American delegation was to be stationed for the remainder of the trip. While settling into his room, Nixon kept with him a note that he had scribbled down before leaving Washington: "1. Taiwan → most

⁶⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *Intelligence Memorandum: Communist Military Aid Deliveries to North Vietnam*, ER IM 68-149 (November 1968), https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000969833.pdf.

⁶⁷ Memorandum of Conversation, October 21, 1971, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. E-13, 11.

⁶⁸ *Memorandum of Conversation, Ye Jianying and Henry Kissinger, Beijing, July 11, 1971*, U.S.-China Institute, <https://china.usc.edu/sites/default/files/article/attachments/19710111-kissinger-reports-to-nixon-on-bogdan-note-from-zhou.pdf>.

⁶⁹ "When Nixon Went to China," *Harvard Law Today*, February 17, 2022, <https://hls.harvard.edu/today/when-nixon-went-to-china/>

⁷⁰ "Photos: President Richard Nixon Visits China," *National Review*, <https://www.nationalreview.com/photos/nixon-visits-china/>

crucial 2. V. Nam → most urgent.”⁷¹ The note epitomizes Nixon’s mindset while negotiating with China and drafting the Shanghai Communiqué: balancing the domestic Taiwan lobby while prioritizing a resolution to the Vietnam War, which had been plaguing the entirety of the administration’s first term. The negotiations between American Chinese diplomats led by Kissinger and Chou respectively started later that night. Kissinger immediately told Chou that all consequential conversations must be handled only through him, as the State Department could not be trusted. They would be briefed fully only upon their return to Washington.⁷² The entire affair, at least all those of importance, was handled in utmost secrecy by Kissinger and Nixon due to their paranoia of the State Department and foreign policy establishment. While Secretary of State William Rogers accompanied Nixon on the trip, he was largely relegated to dealing with lower-level Chinese bureaucrats, focusing on the more minute details of the communiqué. In fact, when Rogers attempted to raise the subject of Taiwan, he was rebuffed by the Chinese, who told him that the matter was to be discussed by Kissinger and Chou privately.⁷³

Before formal negotiations started, the Chinese put on a “welcome banquet” for the American entourage (including the press corps) the evening Nixon landed. Notably, the banquet was televised and aired on all major US television networks, consistent with Nixon’s eagerness to publicize the visit. Seated together were Nixon, Kissinger, Chou, and CCP Chairman Mao Zedong, the *de facto* leader of the PRC.⁷⁴ Nixon soon turned from lighthearted welcomes to more pressing concerns for both nations, like Vietnam and the Soviet Union. When prompted about the future of geopolitics and US-Sino relations, Mao simply replied, “You want to withdraw some of your troops back on your soil; ours do not go abroad.”⁷⁵ Mao’s remark implied a tacit strategic understanding: if the United States reduced its military presence around Taiwan, China would avoid direct military intervention in Vietnam. Such an arrangement aligned with Nixon’s hopes that rapprochement could indirectly facilitate an American withdrawal from Southeast Asia. Mao’s sentiment aligned with that of Nixon that some sort of *quid pro quo* arrangement could be arrived at among themselves to alleviate the pressing concerns facing both nations. Nixon especially had hoped for such a deal to be reached over the course of his negotiations with the Chinese delegation. Reviewing his briefing notes, provided by National Security Council (NSA) staff, Nixon outlines his proposed deal to the Chinese in a note to himself:

1. Helps on Taiwan troop removal
2. Reduces the Soviet hand there
3. Reduces irritant in our relations
4. Gets us out [of Vietnam]⁷⁶

⁷¹ Richard Nixon Presidential Materials (NPM), White House Files, President’s Personal Files, Box 7, Folder “China Notes,” February 15, 1972, 23.

⁷² Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1070.

⁷³ Dwight L. Chapin interview, Presidential Campaign Committee Transcripts, Roll 47, p. 19.

⁷⁴ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, 678.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 681.

⁷⁶ Memorandum from Henry A. Kissinger to the President, “Indochina,” February 8, 1972, 4, *Briefing Papers for the China Trip*, Briefing Book 5, Richard Nixon Presidential Materials, National Security Council Files, For the President’s Files (Winston Lord), China/Vietnam Negotiations, Box 847.

Despite Mao and Nixon's exchanged pleasantries at the banquet, the intricacies of negotiations were to be handled primarily by Chou and Kissinger, in the absence of Mao, over the remaining seven days of the trip. The next morning, on February 22, Chou, Kissinger, and Nixon met from 2-6 PM, with Nixon beginning the negotiations, drawing attention to the momentous occasion they were all a part of: "more people than at any time in the history of the world heard our two speeches live."⁷⁷ Indeed, by this point, the Nixon trip was one of the most publicized events in diplomatic history, broadcast across all major television networks as part of the Nixon administration's efforts to garner popular support for the diplomatic shift. Quickly, an agreement regarding the Taiwan issue was articulated by Kissinger and Chou, who agreed that there was to be but one China with Taiwan a part of the mainland.⁷⁸ As proposed by Kissinger, however, there was agreement that Taiwan was part of the mainland, but no formal recognition of the PRC as mainland China's official government. Thus, *de facto*, Taiwan remained governed by its nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek. Consistent with their prior meetings, Kissinger promised that the US would not militarily support a Taiwanese attempt to reclaim the mainland, along with a withdrawal of a third of US troops from the Taiwan straits, a point of contention for Chou.⁷⁹ After reiterating his concession on Taiwan, Kissinger asked in return for a normalization of relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China.

In return for concessions on Taiwan, Nixon, like Kissinger, had tried to do in his preliminary meetings with Chou, attempted to solidify a *quid pro quo* settlement on the precarious Vietnam situation. Chou remained steadfast in his earlier position that the Chinese government had a moral obligation to support the Vietnamese, but would refrain from sending combat troops to the region, as had been done in the Korean War, much to Nixon's disgruntlement.⁸⁰ Instead, Chou encouraged Nixon to hasten his withdrawal from Vietnam as it would be beneficial for both parties, and prevent the US from being further entrenched in the situation.⁸¹ In reply, Nixon stressed the importance of Vietnam domestically and on the world stage, justifying his 'Peace with Honor' policy that he had held since the 1968 election:

"I realize there are views to the contrary, but when a nation is in a position the U.S. is in, where around the world, in Europe for instance, there are nations that depend on the U.S.A. for their defense, if the U.S. does not behave honorably—and I don't believe dying for honor is enough—if the U.S. does not behave honorably, the U.S. would cease to be a nation to have as a friend and which the people of the world could depend upon as an ally."⁸²

⁷⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969–1976, vol. 17, 695.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 696.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 712.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 714.

Chou, unwilling to shift his position despite Nixon's pleas, recognized that they simply did not see "eye to eye" on the issue and urged Nixon to move on to deliberations over the Soviet Union.⁸³ The exchange revealed a fundamental miscalculation at the heart of Nixon's strategy. While rapprochement was intended to generate leverage over Hanoi, Beijing ultimately proved unwilling to translate improved relations into meaningful pressure on North Vietnam. The core strategy underpinning Nixon's China visit lay in Kissinger's optimism when first contacted by Chou, "Mr. President, I have not said this before, but I think if we get this thing working, we will end Vietnam this year."⁸⁴ *Ab initio*, Nixon and his closest staff hoped that reopening to the Chinese would provide them with leverage in negotiations with Hanoi, which, to this point, had offered negligible progress.⁸⁵ The Nixon administration hoped that rapprochement would help alleviate the Vietnam issue, but this strategy was undermined by Chou's unwillingness to come to any significant concessions on the issue other than to confirm that Chinese troops would not be deployed. Although Vietnam was the initial driver for negotiations, the Nixon administration had dual imperatives: the first and most pertinent, to secure American withdrawal from Indochina, and second, to leverage the Sino-Soviet split and gain a strategic advantage in the Cold War.

Consequently, gaining no progress on the Vietnam front, Nixon turned to his second imperative of the trip—to geopolitically isolate the Soviet Union from its allies in Asia. In this, both parties were in relative agreement as the PRC routinely viewed the Soviets and Japanese as imperialist threats to its territorial sovereignty. An alignment of interests between the two was promising as Nixon drew attention to their shared enmity with the Soviet Union based upon the Soviets' alarming rate of increase in nuclear stockpile (threatening the Americans) and their military buildup along the northern Chinese border; thus, feeding into preexisting fears of Soviet expansionism among the CCP leadership.⁸⁶ Further, the Soviet nuclear threat was pertinent not only to the US but also to China, as it threatened the balance of power in Asia, as a Soviet-Indian alliance threatened Chinese interests in the region.⁸⁷

Both parties, at this point, viewed a convergence of relations with one another as a tool to counter the increased threat posed by Soviet militarism. Despite the Nixon administration making more gains on the Soviet front rather than on the more pertinent Vietnam quagmire throughout the trip, Vietnam remained the central driver of the trip itself. An eagerness to isolate the Soviet Union was a secondary motive that gained spotlight merely because the Chinese were unwilling to place pressure on Hanoi on behalf of the United States, a product of Chou's supposed noninterventionist stance. At the end of the eight-day trip, the United States and China released a joint statement—the Shanghai Communiqué—as the culmination of their deliberations.

⁸³ Ibid., 711.

⁸⁴ "Telecommunications Between the President and Mr. Kissinger," National Security Archive, Electronic Briefing Book No. 145, Document 7, 3.

⁸⁵ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969–1976, vol. 42.

⁸⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1969–1976, vol. 17, doc. 196, 701.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 702.

VI. THE SHANGHAI COMMUNIQUÉ OF 1972

By the time President Nixon departed from China on February 28, 1972, nearly three years of negotiations between American and Chinese diplomatic counterparts and varying interests were synthesized into the Shanghai Communiqué, a joint statement released by both governments that signalled the beginnings of a new relationship.⁸⁸ The document, crafted primarily by Kissinger and Chou, adopted a language of strategic ambiguity to reconcile the varying interests of China and the US, respectively. Notably, the statement omitted any Chinese concessions on Vietnam, to the dismay of the Nixon administration, but proved useful in gaining symbolic leverage over the Soviets. The absence of progress on the Vietnam front ran contrary to the exigency of rapprochement as envisioned by Kissinger and Nixon. Thus, the Nixon administration's primary goal of securing the withdrawal of American troops from the Vietnamese conflict failed to come to fruition. Nevertheless, a strengthened relationship with China still served some utility to the United States by way of isolating the Soviet Union from its allies.

Within the first few paragraphs of the released statement, the United States immediately attempted to address the Vietnam situation amidst growing domestic discontent over the issue. On the topic of Vietnam, or the broader 'Indochina' as referenced by the Communiqué, the United States expressed its goal of achieving peace in the region. Further, the Nixon administration stressed that "the people of Indochina should be allowed to determine their destiny free of foreign intervention."⁸⁹ The irony was apparent. The United States had, for the past ten years, engulfed itself in armed conflict in the region—even instituting a widely unpopular draft—in an effort to prevent the spread of communism, yet had declared that foreign intervention in the conduct of sovereign nations was unjust.⁹⁰ By condemning all foreign intervention, Nixon hoped to extricate himself from the precarious situation that the Johnson and Kennedy administrations had put the nation in by entering the war.

In an effort to appease discontent and widespread protests at home, the administration affirmed that its "constant primary objective had been a negotiated solution", in line with Nixon's peace with honor doctrine.⁹¹ This "negotiated solution" sought after by the administration was one that would attempt to preserve the anti-communist government in Saigon, outright refused by the North Vietnamese due to the US's lack of leverage.⁹² Nevertheless, it was important for Nixon that America's intent to end the war be known abroad and at home, where resentment over the war effort was growing by the day, as evidenced in

⁸⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Joint Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and the United States of America,"

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367541.html.

⁸⁹ "Joint Statement Following Discussions With Leaders of the People's Republic of China (Shanghai Communiqué)," February 28, 1972, Richard Nixon Foundation,

<https://blog.nixonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Shanghai-Communique.pdf>

⁹⁰ Donald P. Green, Tiffany C. Davenport, and Kolby Hanson, "Are There Long-Term Effects of the Vietnam Draft on Political Attitudes or Behavior? Apparently Not," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 6, no. 2 (2019): 71–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2018.18>.

⁹¹ "Shanghai Communiqué," February 28, 1972.

⁹² "Memorandum of Conversation," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 42, 137–41.

Gallup Poll data (from 1972) referenced earlier.⁹³ Making further concessions on the issue, the American side of the communiqué promised a full “withdrawal of all US forces in the region” even in the absence of a negotiated solution.⁹⁴ The repeated failure of negotiations with Hanoi, along with Chou’s reluctance to pressure the North Vietnamese into a resolution, made Nixon’s hope for “peace with honor” seem out of reach; if they had to, the US would abandon their South Vietnamese allies in Saigon. Such a withdrawal without a solution that would protect South Vietnamese sovereignty from Hanoi’s control doomed Saigon to certain defeat. In fact, just two years after American withdrawal in 1973, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese communist forces in 1975.⁹⁵

The vague language that would later come to characterize the communiqué was, most notably, put into use regarding Taiwan, as there was a wealthy and powerful pro-Taiwan lobby within the US government at the time, which the Nixon administration hoped to circumvent through purposefully vague language.⁹⁶ In negotiations during Nixon’s 1972 visit and Kissinger’s meeting with Chou in 1971, the United States had articulated a pro-PRC stance, in the hopes that it would bring forward some concessions over Vietnam. The communiqué reflected this ambiguity, with the official language stating that the United States “acknowledges that all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China.”⁹⁷ At first glance, this passage can be misconstrued as a US endorsement of mainland Chinese control over the island of Taiwan. However, rather than endorsing communist hegemony over both the mainland and Taiwan straits, the excerpt simply recognizes the PRC’s claim to Taiwan and advocates for an eventual reunification between the two, giving no mention as to which form of government this reunification shall occur under.

The one China policy articulated by the communiqué was, paradoxically, a point of agreement between both the PRC and Taiwanese government; both governments maintained that they solely held claim to the regions either side of the Taiwan strait. Rather than explicitly endorsing Beijing’s claim, the US adopted deliberately cautious phrasing, allowing it to preserve informal relations with Taiwan while simultaneously signalling a willingness to establish closer relations with the PRC. This policy, described by historian Chen Jian as “strategic ambiguity,” exemplified the broader character of the communiqué itself: a document written to balance the interests of often adversarial nations, but signal the beginnings of a new relationship.⁹⁸

While Taiwan and Vietnam, chief concerns to either nation, were mentioned more explicitly in the communiqué, tacit references were also made in opposition to the Soviet Union’s growing expansionism; fear over Soviet expansionism was mutual. The references, in line with the linguistic ambiguity utilized

⁹³ Saad, “Hawks vs. Doves on Vietnam.”

⁹⁴ “Shanghai Communiqué,” February 28, 1972.

⁹⁵ “Vietnam War: The Fall of South Vietnam,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War/The-fall-of-South-Vietnam>.

⁹⁶ Denny Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁹⁷ “Shanghai Communiqué,” February 28, 1972.

⁹⁸ Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*.

over Taiwan, were purposefully vague so as not to overtly provoke further Soviet aggression. Alluding to the Soviets, the communiqué declares that no country “shall seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region.”⁹⁹ The Soviet Union is not named in the joint statement, but the allusion is clear within the context of pertinent Chinese fears and ongoing border disputes between them and the Soviet Union. This underscores the second, although less vital than Vietnam, imperative of Nixon’s opening to China: to contain Soviet dominance in Asia. The failure of Vietnam did not mean the failure of the communiqué and relationship as a whole, as the US remained able to exploit the preexisting Sino-Soviet tensions through rapprochement.

Taken together, the outcomes of the Shanghai Communiqué reveal a fundamental divergence and disparity between the Nixon administration’s immediate objectives and achievements. While rapprochement was initially conceived in an effort to secure leverage over Hanoi, thereby facilitating an honorable withdrawal from the region, it failed to produce meaningful concessions from the PRC on that front, other than ensuring that Chinese troops would not be deployed to the conflict. Simultaneously, however, the Shanghai Communiqué and general opening of relations between the US and PRC altered the landscape of the Cold War by deepening the division between the Sino-Soviet led communist bloc. In this sense, the outcomes of the Shanghai Communiqué were paradoxical: peace in Vietnam was not achieved, but the United States remained successful in cementing division within the communist bloc.

VII. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the Shanghai Communiqué is a testament to 20th-century Cold War statecraft, described by historian David Jones as “the understanding and choosing of what is to be sought or avoided both in private and public.”¹⁰⁰ Nixon and Kissinger embodied this view towards diplomacy, carefully curating their moves in rapprochement towards China with domestic and international audiences in mind, simultaneously balancing their own interests. For the United States, initially, the purpose of opening relations was to place additional diplomatic pressure on Hanoi to negotiate a settlement. Later, when the Chinese had proven unwilling to oblige, Nixon and Kissinger moved to utilize their newfound relationship with China to counter Soviet expansionism.

Further, the duty of leaders, as embodied by Kissinger’s *realpolitik* attitude towards foreign policy, is articulated by the Renaissance political thinker Justus Lipsius to “mix the honourable with the useful.”¹⁰¹ Kissinger’s pragmatic approach to international relations during his tenure is most evident with China, with lasting impacts to the present. While formal diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing were only established in 1979 under President Jimmy Carter, the communiqué signed under Nixon in 1972 laid the foundation for China’s eventual integration into the global system—an outcome whose

⁹⁹ “Shanghai Communiqué,” February 28, 1972.

¹⁰⁰ David Martin Jones, “Politics, Statecraft and the Art of War,” *Infinity Journal* 4, no. 1 (2014): 20, <https://doi.org/10.64148/msm.v4i1.4>.

¹⁰¹ Natasha Constantinidou, “Public and Private, Divine and Temporal in Justus Lipsius’ *De Constantia* and *Politica*,” *Renaissance Studies* 26, no. 3 (June 2012): 351, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24420070>.

implications remain contested in the present day.¹⁰² Nixon, who viewed himself as an expert in foreign policy, similarly recognized China as the highlight of his presidential tenure, even in his final years:

“I will be known historically for two things. Watergate and the opening to China. I don’t mean to be pessimistic, but Watergate, that silly, silly thing, is going to rank up there historically with what I did here.”¹⁰³

Yet, Nixon’s own ambivalence reveals a deep historical irony. While Watergate ultimately consumed his presidency, it was the strategic vision embodied through the Shanghai Communiqué that left a long-lasting legacy on modern global balance of power, defined by Ford as a “new Cold War.”¹⁰⁴ In this sense, the opening to China was not merely a diplomatic maneuver, but a defining act of Cold War diplomacy—one whose consequences continue to reverberate throughout the twenty-first century.

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¹⁰² “A Momentous Occasion: A Look Back at President Carter’s 1979 Decision to Normalize Relations with China,” The Carter Center, <https://www.cartercenter.org/stories/40-anniversary-china-relations/>.

¹⁰³ Monica Crowley, *Nixon in Winter* (New York: Random House, 1998), 159.

¹⁰⁴ Ford, “The New Cold War.”

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