



Evelyn Goh, “Nixon, Kissinger, and the ‘Soviet Card’ in the U.S. Opening to China, 1971-1974”, *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, Issue 3 (June 2005): 475-502.

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Evelyn Goh, a professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, describes how and asks why Henry Kissinger increasingly emphasized the Soviet military threat to China’s security in his negotiations with Beijing between 1971 and 1973. Drawing from the archival record and the literature on U.S. relations with the People’s Republic of China during the Nixon presidency, she traces Kissinger’s evolving policy through three phases: parallel détente with a tilt toward China (1971 to early 1972); “formal symmetry” but “tacit alliance” (mid 1972 to early 1973); and strategic shifts, attempted secret alliance, and stymied normalization (mid 1973 to 1974). Her purpose is to “understand and assess the nature and value of the Soviet card to the Nixon administration in the development of Sino- American relations” (477), because, she asserts, histories of triangular diplomacy have given more attention to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s playing of the China card vis-à-vis the Soviet Union than of the Soviet card vis-à-vis China.

Goh argues that in pursuing rapprochement Nixon and Kissinger “sought to manage . . . Chinese expectations” about improved Sino-American relations and dissuade Beijing from thinking that the U.S. aim was really that of playing “the China card in order to persuade the Soviet Union to negotiate détente with the United States” (479, 489). From 1969 on, she suggests, the “immediate aim” of Nixon and Kissinger’s “opening to China ... had been to boost the momentum of détente with the Soviet Union; that is, it was conceived as leverage to improve relations with and seek cooperation from Moscow, not to form a quasi-alliance to contain it” (499). Kissinger’s deployment of the “Soviet card” was not designed to win concessions from Beijing but had the purpose of keeping the China card in play in order to win concessions from Moscow.

The Chinese were skeptical throughout. Although accepting the reality of a Soviet threat, they differed with Kissinger’s assessment of its immediacy and dangers, disagreed with American policies to cope with it, and questioned Nixon-administration intentions. They accepted Kissinger’s offer of American intelligence but rejected Kissinger’s proffers of a tacit then secret semi- formal alliance. In the end, Kissinger’s tactics vis-à-vis the PRC failed. Beijing would have preferred more U.S. concessions on Taiwan, swifter movement toward normalization of relations, and a turn away from U.S. efforts to bring about détente with the Soviet Union. Détente, meanwhile, ran aground on the shoals of the U.S.-USSR rivalry, Moscow’s disgruntlement with détente’s putative benefits, and domestic pressures upon both governments.

Concluding that Kissinger was “injudicious” and somewhat reckless in proposing an alliance with China, Goh therefore asks why Kissinger hazarded this ploy. She proposes that he miscalculated Beijing’s need for reassurance regarding the Soviet threat and then fell into a

“discursive” trap; that is, because he “over- perceived Beijing’s need for reassurance,” he either decided that a tilt toward China was in order or he engaged in “cheap talk”—or both (501).

Perhaps she is correct. But one can also speculate that Kissinger fell into a mind-set trap; that is, his diplomatic world-view was one rooted in nineteenth- century Metternichian-Bismarckian notions of Realpolitik mixed with Nixonian notions of threat and bluff that were in reality naive—in part because Beijing and Moscow understood triangular diplomacy and bluff very well. (Regarding Nixon’s contributions, White House tapes reveal that Nixon’s instructions to Kissinger before his initial visit to Beijing were to emphasize irrational toughness and to play the Soviet and Japanese cards against Zhou Enlai in order, mainly, to garner Chinese support in pressuring Hanoi to negotiate an end to the U.S.-Vietnam War on terms acceptable to the United States.)

It may also be the case that, as Raymond Garthoff has written in *Détente and Confrontation* (1994), there was no dichotomy in the Nixon-Kissinger version of détente between improved relations with and containment of the Soviet Union. In other words, détente was a carrot-and-stick “strategy to contain and harness Soviet use of its increasing power” by ensnaring the Soviet Union in “a web of relationships with . . . the United States, a web that he [Nixon] would weave” (32-37). In this way Nixon and Kissinger may have hoped that détente would serve to stabilize the arms race, channel the U.S.-Soviet rivalry, and prevent crises, or at least make them manageable. At the same time, détente was a means by which they thought they could encourage and coerce Soviet acceptance of the existing world order, offering incentives for cooperation and penalties for noncooperation on terms favoring the U.S. In this sense, Kissinger’s increasing emphasis on the Soviet threat was more or less consistent with his and Nixon’s original purpose for détente, especially during the period 1973-1974, when it became more difficult to manage crises in the Soviet-American rivalry. In other words, the sticks of détente became more appealing than its carrots. Maybe it also shows the bankruptcy of triangular, Realpolitik diplomacy.

I wonder, too, whether historians and others who write about Nixon and Kissinger’s diplomacy tend to over-intellectualize it — while also over- relying on Nixon and Kissinger’s claims about their diplomacy. They treat Nixon-Kissinger diplomacy regarding détente and rapprochement — and particularly Kissinger’s diplomacy — as though it had been a grand strategy or blueprint worked out sometime in 1969, if not before, when in reality it was more likely one option of several half-baked options whose implementation Nixon and Kissinger improvised in the context of material circumstances and others’ aims and countermeasures.

In any case, Goh’s article is a valuable overview of many of the issues concerning triangular diplomacy, détente, and rapprochement.