

**BUILDING THE ROAD TO BEIJING,
1969–1976**
**The Influence of Domestic Political Factors
on the American Foreign Policy during
the Nixon and Ford Administrations**

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Abstract

In general, this study focuses on the American foreign policy-making process during the Nixon and Ford Administrations. More specifically, it seeks to identify and analyze the major domestic concerns and influences that had an impact on the decisions made in the sphere of foreign policy and international relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Using the Sino-American rapprochement, one of the key elements of the newly formulated détente doctrine, as an example, the author aims at explaining what role did the political parties, various lobbies and pressure groups, as well as the media and public opinion play in Nixon's and Kissinger's implementation of their "new world order".

It is beyond any doubt that the rapprochement process with China PRC as well as the more pragmatic approach to the Soviet Union had been facilitated by such events as the Sino-Soviet split, which were neither set in motion nor controlled by the United States. On the other hand, Nixon and Kissinger, after reforming the American foreign policy-making establishment to better suit their purpose, skillfully made use of these events as well as of the changes in the mindset of the American public, to which they often appealed for support and understanding. The fact that the pro-Taiwanese lobby was gradually losing its influence and clout and that many Congressmen and Senators began openly to call for the revision of American policy towards China significantly contributed to the establishment of relations with Beijing.

As the author further argues, however, as soon as it became apparent that détente was not bringing the results Nixon and Kissinger promised it would bring, it began rapidly to lose its popularity among the American people. Already during the Watergate scandal and even more apparently during the subsequent Ford Presidency, the administration found it extremely difficult to further pursue and develop some of the détente initiatives in the face

of growing opposition from the conservatives, the resurgent pro-Taiwanese pressure groups and ever more skeptical American public. While it is not possible to say that the ultimate success or failure of détente and the Sino-American rapprochement as its “flagship” depended solely on the support of the American lawmakers and people, it seems to be evident that without this support the détente was eventually doomed to decline.

Keywords: *détente*, Sino-American rapprochement, American foreign policymaking process, pressure groups, public opinion, domestic consensus on foreign policy, new world order

Introduction

The Nixon Presidency (1969–1974) is often seen as one of the worst administrations ever in the history of the United States. The Watergate scandal and the events that followed have forever tarnished Nixon’s political reputation and morale profile and have cast a dark shadow over his presidency as a whole. When matters related to foreign policy are discussed, however, most people would likely agree that in this field, Nixon, together with his National Security Adviser and later also Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, managed to achieve a number of spectacular, although somewhat short-lived, successes.

One of the landmarks of the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy was, beyond any doubt, the opening to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which was accompanied by a major reassessment of the American policy and the American alliance system in Asia. Even after more than thirty years have passed, it is difficult to say with certainty what the main factors were which made such a foreign policy achievement possible. It is often noted that in the 1960s the world situation changed dramatically and that even China, previously a sworn enemy of the United States, was more open to the American overtures than it would had been, for example, during the Kennedy or Johnson Presidencies. On such a basis, it would indeed be possible to argue that the rapprochement with Beijing was mainly facilitated by the events outside of the United States, in particular by the Sino-Soviet split as well as the situation in Indochina. Thus, it would seem, Nixon and Kissinger merely made use of the changing situation in international relations, which was favorable to their foreign policy vision, while their predecessors had to deal with much more hostile Soviet Union and China and thus were unable to do the same.

While these assertions are true to a certain degree, we must not forget that any American president has to deal, to an extent, with domestic

political situation in the United States and with the public opinion whenever he wishes to carry out a major shift in the direction of the American foreign policy. It was especially true for Nixon who became president at a time when the Americans were growing weary of the war in Vietnam, the country was torn by internal strife and the American prestige abroad was very low. The new president and his aides had to take all these factors into account. For this reason, it is necessary and even crucial to look at the steps Nixon and Kissinger took to ensure that their new foreign policy doctrine, which featured the rapprochement process with the PRC as one of its main objectives, would receive a favorable reception in the United States. These steps included, for example, a major overhaul of the American foreign policy-making establishment, which assigned new roles to the traditional actors in this field, such as the Department of State, the Pentagon and the National Security Council. Nixon also frequently made appeals to the American people, to the “silent majority”¹ or “little men” as he used to call them. These appeals sometimes indirectly implied major policy changes, sought to prepare ground for them and tried to ensure that they would be supported by the public². In other cases, the president used these appeals to present and justify some actions he had already taken. Nixon and Kissinger also had to deal with the Congress as well as with various political groups and influential lobbies, which could threaten or at least hinder the implementation of *détente*. It is only when these factors are assessed and analyzed that the initial success and the ultimate failure of *détente* as well as of its individual components can be comprehensively and properly understood.

Before proceeding to the article itself, it would perhaps be useful to briefly mention various sources which deal with this particular topic. Today, almost forty years after Nixon was elected president, the previously confidential materials related to his administration are largely available. These include such invaluable documents as reports from secret

¹ The term “silent majority” was used, for example, in Nixon’s speech on the situation in Vietnam, which was given exactly one year after he was elected into office. *Nixon’s Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam*. 3 November 1969, 5 January 2008, available at <http://watergate.info/nixon/silent-majority-speech-1969.shtml>.

² For example, already prior to becoming president, Nixon wrote that it is “no longer possible [for the United States – JB] to ignore China” and thus to “leave its vast population in angry isolation”. Nixon, R. M., Asia After Vietnam, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. XLVI, 1967, No. 1, pp. 111–125. In this article, Nixon was clearly hinting at a major change in the American approach to the PRC which could be expected should he be elected president.

negotiations with the Soviet and the Chinese³, internal memoranda and directives of the National Security Council, or the papers of the Nixon White House. Such documents are important in that they show what factors were taken into account by Nixon and Kissinger when implementing their foreign policy, how did their strategy develop over time and also what were the differences in opinion between both men and between their aides and other government officials. Newspaper articles from this time period are also an indispensable source, because they often show the reactions of the public to the rapprochement process and other *détente* initiatives. Finally, also belonging to the category of primary sources, it is possible to mention the memoirs, especially those of President Nixon⁴ and Henry Kissinger⁵. While this particular type of resource is inevitably subjective, in varying degrees, comparing and confronting Nixon's and Kissinger's accounts could prove useful in determining their own view of the events that transpired and in better understanding the inner workings of the Nixon Administration. For this reason, it might be also interesting to consult other memoirs of people directly involved in the events described, for example the long-time Soviet Ambassador to Washington Anatoly Fyodorovich Dobrynin⁶ or the first American liaison officer in the People's Republic of China and the future American president, George H. W. Bush.⁷

In addition to the primary sources, there exist a vast number of publications dealing with *détente*, the Nixon Presidency or the American policy towards the PRC as such. For the sake of brevity, it is not possible to mention specific monographs in this introduction (the reader will find quotations from some of them in the article below). However, when dealing with these secondary sources, it is important to keep in mind that, as with all historical topics which are somewhat controversial, such as the opening to China beyond any doubt was, the ultimate judgment as to its success or failure often depends on the personal views and sympathies of the author. This is the case of many of the publications about *détente*,

³ Some of these materials are available in electronic form at the website of the National Security Archive, George Washington University (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>).

⁴ Nixon, R., *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. (New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1978).

⁵ Kissinger, H., *Roky v Bílém domě*. (Praha, BB/art, 2006).

⁶ Dobrynin, A. F., *In Confidence: Moscow's Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents*. (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2001).

⁷ Bush, G., and V. Gould. *Looking Forward*. (New York, Doubleday, 1987).

which were written shortly after Nixon's resignation, in the wake of Watergate, and which tend to view his foreign policies in an overwhelmingly negative light. The other factor which has to be noted is that especially the authors of the earlier monographs did not have the chance to work with many of the still confidential primary documents, and some of their conclusions have thus already become obsolete. Yet, even today, with the primary sources already available, and with the vast selection of publications to consult and confront, some answers to the questions about the rapprochement process and the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy will almost inevitably remain conjectural or even speculative.

The Home Front: Domestic Factors and Their Influence on the Implementation of the Nixon-Kissinger Foreign Policy

The presidential elections of 1968 were deeply influenced by several disturbing events on the international scene as well as the overall situation in the world. Since the Tet offensive was launched by the Communist forces in Vietnam in January 1968, American position in Indochina began to appear more vulnerable. While during the offensive itself the forces of National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) had suffered enormous losses, the psychological effect on the American public was also enormous. The feeling that America was losing, rather than winning the war, was becoming more and more pervasive. For this reason, President Johnson, and Hubert H. Humphrey, who secured the Democratic presidential nomination after Johnson decided not to run for re-election⁸, tried to end the American engagement in Indochina as soon as possible. These efforts, however, proved to be futile in the end,⁹ and

⁸ The Tet offensive was beyond any doubt one of the reasons that contributed to Johnson's growing unpopularity and which caused him to renounce his re-election bid. In a Gallup Poll, taken in March 1968, Johnson's approval rating dropped to an all-time low of 36%. *Job Performance Ratings for President Johnson*, 10 January 2008, available at http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/cgi-bin/hsrun.exe/Roperweb/PresJob/PresJob.htm?start=HS_fullresults?pr=Johnson.

⁹ The final failure of those attempts came after the South Vietnamese leader, Nguyen Van Thieu, refused to participate in the negotiations with the NLF and North Vietnam. His refusal was at least partially based on the information he received from Anna Chennault, a widow of American general Claire Lee Chennault and a Republican activist, that in case of Nixon's

alienated Humphrey from some of the American allies abroad, like Taiwanese leader Chiang Kai-shek or Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam, to the point that these foreign leaders openly supported Nixon in the elections.¹⁰ It was left to the new president, then, to find a solution to the Vietnamese crisis which would be acceptable to all the parties involved. It is likely that already at this time an idea entered Nixon's mind that "playing the Chinese card" could help with achieving peace in Vietnam.

Apart from Indochina, situation elsewhere in the world did not look quite as bright and positive for the United States as well. In Latin America, the United States still had to deal with the strongly anti-American communist Cuban regime of Fidel Castro. Besides, there was a danger that communism will spread to other Latin American countries as well¹¹, thus further weakening the American influence in the region and damaging the prestige of the United States. In Africa, where the decolonization process was going on, the situation appeared similarly threatening. And last, but definitely not least, the August 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia demonstrated the American unwillingness, or perhaps inability, to confront the Soviet Union even in cases of blatant aggression like the crushing of the "Prague spring". It seemed as if the United States was no longer able to keep in check the communist insurgency all over the globe. The old foreign policy consensus, which formed around the post-war policy of *containment*, began slowly to fall apart.¹²

There were, however, certain positive developments which could be taken into account when setting out the foreign policy direction of the new administration. The most notable of these, at least in the eyes of Nixon, was the split inside the once monolithic communist block. The tension between the two communist superpowers, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, was already apparent since Stalin's death.

victory, South Vietnam would not be forced to take part in these negotiations. As a result, Thieu openly endorsed Nixon and Johnson's plan to bring closer the end of the war failed. Nixon later denied any involvement in this plot, although it seems very likely that at the very least he was informed about it.

¹⁰ Bundy, W. A., *Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*. (New York, Hill and Wang, 1998), pp. 46–47.

¹¹ There were communist guerillas operating in countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru or Guatemala. These guerillas were often directly supported by Cuba, and less directly, by the Soviet Union.

¹² Melanson, R. A., *Reconstructing Consensus: American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1991), p. 59.

By the time Nixon became president, this tension escalated into an open conflict. In March 1969, the Chinese and Soviet forces clashed in a fierce battle on the Ussuri River, which formed the border between both countries. In reaction to these events, the Soviets began to deploy more and more armed forces on their southern border,¹³ while Mao Zedong called for a mobilization of all the Chinese people against the “northern enemy”. This open split between Moscow and Beijing was received with enthusiasm and expectation in Washington. Nixon hoped that he will be able to utilize this development in redefining the American relations with both the Soviets and the Chinese.

It was at this particular period of time, in 1969, that Richard M. Nixon, together with Henry Kissinger, set out to reform the existing system of international relations with the goal of restoring the global position of the United States as the number one superpower. Their new approach to foreign policy, which can be summarily called *détente*¹⁴, was based on the assumption that the principal adversaries of the United States, the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, can be co-opted into the *new world order*. The president believed that both China and the Soviet Union had a vested interest in solidifying their position and achieving stability and were thus willing to abandon their expansionist policy and maintain the *status quo*.¹⁵ Besides, Nixon and Kissinger, who were both proponents of *geopolitics* and of *power diplomacy*, hoped to force the Soviets and Chinese to accept their new role by utilizing the obvious split between the two communist countries and by playing them against each other.¹⁶ Thus,

¹³ The Soviet forces in the Far East amounted in 1969 to 45 mechanized and tank divisions, 1,200 combat aircraft and at least 100 intermediate range nuclear missiles. Nálevka, V., *Světová politika ve 20. století II*. (Praha, Aleš Skřivan ml., 2000), p. 71.

¹⁴ *Détente* means “relaxing” or “easing” in French. The term is used for the American approach toward the Communist block mainly in the period from the end of 1960s to the beginning of 1980s. Nixon and Kissinger, who first came with this foreign policy doctrine, sought to engage the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China in constructive talks, which should have eased mutual tension and created a more stable international environment. On the other hand, however, they sought to secure American interests abroad by negotiating with the Communists from the “position of strength”.

¹⁵ Nixon’s *new world order*, which should have guaranteed the maintaining of the *status quo*, was counting with the cooperation, or at least the mutual understanding, of the United States, the USSR, the PRC, Europe and Japan. Thornton, R. C., *The Nixon – Kissinger Years. Reshaping America’s Foreign Policy* (New York, Paragon House, 1989), p. 10.

¹⁶ The engagement of both the Soviet Union and the PRC at the same time was referred to as *triangular diplomacy*. In Nixon’s and Kissinger’s view, the United States had a considerable advantage because it was part of the *military power triangle* (United States, the PRC and

from this point of view, the relationship with China, which had yet to be established¹⁷, was crucial to the success of *détente*, even more crucial, at least in the eyes of the president and his advisor, than the old alliances in Asia and Europe. Many American politicians, especially conservatives, as well as many State Department employees and career diplomats did not, however, share this view.

In order to open the door to Beijing and to put their *new world order* vision into practice, Nixon and Kissinger felt they first of all needed to create a new foreign policy-making establishment, or in president's words, to "clean the house"¹⁸. Both men shared a deep mistrust for the "bureaucracy" that pervaded and controlled the Department of State. From their point of view, this institution had become far too rigid, conservative and perhaps "elitist" to understand the need to adopt a new bold foreign policy and to implement it. The new Nixon-Kissinger system thus relied on the National Security Council¹⁹, a much smaller unit, which was far easier to manage and control and which was seen as a much more effective means for conducting foreign policy. This change of system facilitated the decision-making power concentration in the hands of the president and his national security adviser. Nixon and Kissinger, along with a very small number of their trusted aides, were usually the only people who actually knew what was really going on behind the façade of the official diplomacy. The foreign policy became almost completely hidden from the public scrutiny and even from the Congressional oversight. The president justified this secrecy, with which he was obsessed, and the habit

the USSR) and *economic power triangle* (United States, Europe, Japan). America could thus assume the role of an arbiter or mediator and play the other countries against each other as it saw fit. For more on this subject, see: Ito, G., *Alliance in Anxiety: Détente and the Sino-American-Japanese Triangle* (New York, Routledge, 2003).

¹⁷ There were no official relations between Washington and Beijing since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. The United States officially recognized the Nationalist government of General Chang Kaishek, which was set up on Taiwan following the Communist takeover of the mainland China. Unofficial contacts between the representatives of the United States and the PRC were also rather rare prior to the time when Nixon became president.

¹⁸ Litwak, R. S., *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine. American Foreign Policy and the Pursuit of Stability, 1969 – 1976* (Boston, Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 64.

¹⁹ The National Security Council (NSC) was originally established in 1947 by the *National Security Act* with the objective of "helping the president with the coordination of foreign policy". Its role and the number of staff it employed were greatly expanded when Kissinger took over. Hook, S. W., and J. Spanier, *American Foreign Policy Since World War II* (Washington, CQ Press, 2004), p. 54.

of informing the public, the Congress and even the Department of State²⁰, at the very last minute, by citing fears of possible conservative opposition to such major shifts in foreign policy as the opening to Beijing. He also repeatedly stressed the need to keep the Soviets and even the American allies, such as Japan, in the dark about the administration's plans.

Another salient characteristic of the foreign policy-making process during the Nixon Presidency, closely connected with the above-mentioned developments, was an excessive reliance on unofficial diplomatic channels and backstage deals. Virtually all the negotiations conducted by Nixon and Kissinger with the Chinese were built on verbal pledges and informal agreements; the official proclamations and documents were usually as vague and ambiguous as possible in order not to "give away" the true intentions of the administration and also to avoid committing the United States to any specific obligation.²¹

Nixon and Kissinger aimed at creating a new domestic consensus on foreign policy, since the old post World War II consensus was shattered by lengthy and costly involvement of the United States in Vietnam and by the general decline of American prestige abroad. The new foreign policy, which the president presented to the nation, was a mixture of pragmatism, *power diplomacy* and Bismarck-style *realpolitik* and was supposedly detached from ideological premises. This new approach, its creators hoped, would transcend the old, Cold War boundaries of thinking, focusing only on securing American national interests and strategic concerns. In other words, Nixon and Kissinger, and perhaps Kissinger more than Nixon, were seeking to rid the foreign policy of the

²⁰ For example, William Rogers, Nixon's first Secretary of State, was only informed about the negotiations with China after Kissinger already departed for his first secret trip to Beijing. Hanhimaki, J., *Flawed Architect: Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 135.

²¹ For example, the *Shanghai Communiqué*, an official document released at the end of Nixon's trip to Beijing in February 1972, was a very carefully worded compromise, which both sides spent long hours preparing. On this particular occasion, Nixon seems to have taken sides with William Rogers, then his secretary of state, rather than with Henry Kissinger, who advocated a more pro-PRC version of the text. Thus, the final draft of the communiqué included nothing which could be used to interfere that the rapprochement in any way negated or abrogated the mutual defense treaty between the United States and the Republic of China (Taiwan). Nixon was clearly aware of the fact that the American public, while being supportive of the rapprochement, was not ready to "throw Taiwan overboard". *The Shanghai Communiqué*, 27 February 1972, 8 December 2007, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/15/documents/us.china/>.

“isms”, such as idealism or anti-communism.²² The president, although he often proclaimed that he would not listen to the public opinion too much when making decisions, was a very skilled politician and in most cases was able to correctly ascertain and interpret the popular mood. His hope was that the “silent majority”, the conservative middle-class America to which he was appealing most of the time, would accept such moves as the rapprochement with China, if only because the president, with his conservative and anti-Communist past, could be trusted in that he would not make compromises or sacrifices detrimental to the United States’ prestige and moral standing. Nixon felt strongly that his reputation would be of great advantage when announcing the opening to Beijing – a step which he knew many Americans, except for the ultra-conservatives, saw as long overdue, but which his more “liberal” predecessors supposedly did not dare to undertake because of their fear of being condemned as “soft” on Communism. In other words, as some of the president’s contemporaries later put it, “only Nixon could go to China”²³. Nixon’s anticommunist and conservative aura indeed seemed to be working at first and *détente* garnered widespread support among the American people despite the often tacit, but deeply ingrained opposition from the most conservative circles of the American political establishment and society. The public support, however, was not to last forever.

Nixon’s and Kissinger’s strategy, while initially successful, gradually ran into serious problems. There surely was more than one reason for this development. It is not possible to establish with certainty which of these reasons was the most important one or when exactly did *détente* enter the long period of stagnation. It is, however, reasonable to believe that even if there had been no Watergate with its immense impact on American politics, society and particularly on the position of the president within the American political system, the initiatives associated with the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy would have ultimately lost the support of the public. In this respect, there are few important moments that are worth mentioning.

Backchannel diplomacy and secret negotiations, such as the meetings with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai in Beijing, were perhaps effective from

²² Mann, J., *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 55.

²³ This phrase appeared in many newspapers and journals following Nixon’s trip to Beijing in February 1972.

the short-term point of view, but were not suitable as a long-term policy-making approach.²⁴ Regardless of Watergate, it seems likely that the Congress and the general public would have eventually grown tired of being perpetually kept in the dark. While a certain degree of secrecy is unavoidable in foreign policy-making process of any administration, Nixon and Kissinger clearly went too far in this respect. Their ruthless and sometimes totally unjustified actions aimed at preventing the potential “leaks” from the White House and the National Security Council were just one example of this obsession with secrecy.²⁵ Nixon later turned even against Kissinger, whom he suspected of leaking information to the press and the relationship between both men began subsequently to grow cold.²⁶ For these reasons, it is even argued by some that Nixon was ill-suited to be an American president because “he was too often tired of the long process of negotiation and consultation, which is inherent to the American democracy”²⁷. While this clearly is an overstatement and Nixon can by no means be called a dictator or even an enemy of democracy, it describes perfectly the president’s view of foreign policy, which he saw entirely as his own domain, where no one else had the right to interfere.

The disillusionment with the secretiveness of the administration, however, would just by itself not have been enough to cause a widespread rejection of the rapprochement with China or *détente* as such by the American public. There was another, far more important problem: by 1973, or by 1974 at the latest, it became apparent that the new strategy was not

²⁴ According to some foreign policy experts, Nixon’s and Kissinger’s approach to foreign policy as such was only capable of dealing with immediate crises, but was not suitable for long-term policy planning and implementation. Bundy, W., *A Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*, p. 512.

²⁵ Nixon, in an attempt to prevent any leaks of information from within his administration, ordered that the phone lines of all NSC and White House employees should be tapped. The calls they made were sometimes recorded. Even then, the president did not stop a former NSC staffer Daniel Ellsberg from publishing the so-called *Pentagon Papers*, which revealed how President Johnson lied about the American involvement in Vietnam. Although these documents did not reveal anything negative or even anything pertaining to the Nixon Administration, Attorney General John Mitchell claimed their publication would cause “irreparable injury to the safety of the United States”. *The Time*, 28 June 1971.

²⁶ Thornton, R. C., *The Nixon – Kissinger Years. Reshaping America’s Foreign Policy*, pp. 150–151. It is clear that Kissinger must have been aware at least of some of the practices used by Nixon and that he also knew President did not trust him and his staffers fully. Kissinger, H., *Roky v Bílém domě* (Praha, BB/art, 2006), p. 32.

²⁷ Bundy, W., *A Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency*, p. 521.

bringing the results expected by the Americans. Nixon promised a “full generation of peace”²⁸ and consequently, *détente* was presented first of all as a way for the United States to scale down its global involvement while at the same preserving the *status quo* and fulfilling its obligations to the allies. With respect to the opening to China, the president made it clear that one of the main benefits of the new relationship was peace and stability in East and Southeast Asia. More specifically, the rapprochement should have helped the United States to leave Vietnam after concluding the war through “peace with honor”. In the end, however, these objectives either failed to materialize or they proved to be rather bittersweet victories for the United States, as was the case of Vietnam.

Opening to China is well known even today due to Kissinger’s famous secret get-away from Pakistan to China in July 1971 and Nixon’s historical trip to Beijing in February 1972. President’s meeting with the top Chinese leadership bore enormous symbolic significance and Nixon, together with Henry Kissinger, were rightfully credited for it. Yet, apart from the symbolism, there was little in terms of tangible, concrete results that the Sino-American rapprochement could offer to the American people. Chinese assistance in finding a solution to the Vietnam conflict was, for various reasons²⁹, extremely limited. Old problems between the United States and the PRC, such as the issue of the status of Taiwan, still remained unsolved. And the usefulness of the new relationship in exerting pressure on the Soviets soon began to fade as the Soviets adapted to the new state of affairs.³⁰ The American allies like Taiwan and Japan were shocked and

²⁸ Melanson, R. A., *Reconstructing Consensus: American Foreign Policy since the Vietnam War*, p. 66.

²⁹ The Chinese did not have the influence over the leadership in Hanoi that Nixon and Kissinger thought they had, if only because of the strong historic animosity between the two countries. Besides, Mao and Zhou were aware of the fact that they risked losing their standing as the “number one revolutionary power” if they were too aggressive in prompting the North Vietnamese government to compromise with the United States. They saw the danger of North Vietnam becoming a Soviet satellite and they were not ready to sacrifice their remaining influence in Hanoi for the sake of their fledgling relationship with the United States.

³⁰ The Soviets, while not knowing exactly what to expect from this sudden shift in the American foreign policy, did not seriously contemplate the possibility of a Sino-American military alliance, directed against Moscow. They reacted to the rapprochement by trying to keep *détente* going while at the same time improving their own relationship with the PRC. For more on the Soviet strategic thinking regarding the Sino-American rapprochement, see: Garrison, J., *Making China Policy: From Nixon to G. W. Bush* (Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), Chapters 1 and 2.

disappointed by this unexpected shift in American foreign policy and openly talked about “betrayal of trust”³¹. It is hardly surprising then that gradually many people began to ask, like some journalists already did in 1971³², what the rapprochement really brought to the United States. In other words, why did the Chinese suddenly decide to cooperate with America, their arch enemy – was it not because the rapprochement was mainly advantageous for “them” rather than for “us”? This was a question which Nixon and Kissinger found harder and harder to answer.

The Watergate affair brought a sudden dramatic twist to the way the overall performance of the Nixon Administration and the president himself were evaluated by the American general public. It would be tempting to say that it was this scandal that caused the Americans to question and ultimately reject *détente*. It would seem logical to argue that the decline of the “Imperial Presidency”, which followed in the wake of Watergate, made it impossible for many of the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy initiatives to be further developed and expanded. The newly exercised Congressional oversight over the foreign policy-making process as well as various legislative means, adopted to curb the presidential power³³, made it more difficult for Nixon and Kissinger to carry out the foreign policy in the “old”, pre-Watergate way. It is reasonable to believe that the general dissatisfaction and even disgust, which many Americans began to feel towards the administration as more and more of Watergate-related issues were disclosed by the investigators, translated into weaker public support for *détente* and thus for the rapprochement with China as well. At the same time, conservative groups, such as the pro-Taiwanese “China Lobby”, which were too stunned by the overwhelmingly positive response to the initial phases of the opening to China to mount a serious

³¹ The Japanese used the term “Nixon shokku” for the sudden announcement of Kissinger’s trip to Beijing in July 1971. The fact that Japan was not informed beforehand gave rise to a feeling of disillusionment with the United States and even panic in Tokyo. The Japanese leaders felt “uneasy” and “irritated”. The ultimate result was that Japan decided to “follow suit” and normalize its relations with PRC. The relationship between Washington and Tokyo, however, never quite returned to the pre-1971 level. Ito, G., *Alliance in Anxiety: Détente and the Sino-American-Japanese Triangle*, p. 54.

³² *New York Times*, 19 July 1971.

³³ For example, the *War Powers Resolution*, passed by Congress in 1973, stated that the president was obliged to consult the Congress before committing troops overseas, report to the legislators on the need to continue their mission and terminate this mission within sixty days unless the Congress agreed to extend it. *The War Powers Resolution*, 7 November 1973, 9 December 2007, available at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/warpower.htm>.

challenge, began to raise their heads and voices again, taking advantage of the growing anti-Nixon mood in the American society. Yet, it has to be reemphasized that it was not just Watergate that had caused the Americans to reject *détente*. After all, Henry Kissinger, who was often seen, somewhat incorrectly, by foreign policy experts and public alike as the main architect of the new American foreign policy, was still very popular.³⁴ Besides, it is likely that Watergate led the Americans to question the *means*, by which the foreign policy was conducted, rather than its *goals* and *general objectives*. While the secret deals and one-on-one meetings with the communist leaders were now subject to more criticism, it was not necessarily a reason to call for the rapprochement to be stopped. The disillusionment with *détente*, which definitely began to grow during the last two years of the Nixon Administration, was thus not primarily caused by Watergate; it was more a result of the fact that *détente*, of which the opening to China was an important part, did not bring the results the Americans expected in terms of improvement of American standing abroad or greater international security and peace. It still remains a question, of course, whether *détente* was based on incorrect and flawed premises and thus could not succeed, or whether the expectations about its ultimate outcome and benefits were simply too high. Regardless of the answer, the American public was awaiting concrete results from the negotiations with the Soviets and the Chinese, which were ultimately not achieved.

The fact that *détente* in the end did not fulfill the expectations and that promises such as the “full generation of peace” failed to materialize led some authors to argue that the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy, with the Sino-American rapprochement as its “flagship”, was a complete failure.³⁵ However, even with the present knowledge of facts, such conclusion about the *détente* initiatives and policies is far too simplistic and inaccurate. When

³⁴ It was even suggested by some that the Constitution should be amended so that Henry Kissinger would be able to run for president. In a speech made before the Republican National Committee in April 1974, Rosemary Ginn claimed that Kissinger “heads the list of men that Americans admire the most” and that he should not be “denied the right to seek presidency because of the accident of his birth”. These feelings were shared by many ordinary Americans. *A Report by Rosemary Ginn on the Constitutional Amendment*, April 26, 1974, pp. 1–2. Meetings of the Republican National Committee, 1911–1980, Papers of the Republican Party 1911–1980, Part 1, Series B, Reel 11 (The Archives of the Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburgh, Netherlands).

³⁵ For a scathing criticism of the Nixon – Kissinger foreign policy, see for example: Hitchens, C., *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (London and New York, Verso, 2003).

considering such defeats of the Nixon-Kissinger duo as Vietnam or the South Asian crisis³⁶, it is certainly not possible to agree wholeheartedly with the resolution of the Republican National Convention, which commended President Nixon for “his magnificent record on diplomacy in bringing an end ... to the cold war”³⁷. On the other hand, the president and Henry Kissinger still have to be credited for trying to re-formulate the American approach to international relations which was clearly dysfunctional when the new administration assumed power. Despite the fact that the opening to China perhaps did not bring the results intended, the photographs of Nixon with Mao and Zhou still bear testimony to one of the most important shifts in the American foreign policy after the Second World War. If Nixon and Kissinger had not given the Americans the real change they were looking for, they at least gave them hope that things could change.

Appeasing America, Appeasing China: The Paradoxes of the Foreign Policy of the Ford Administration

In the field of foreign policy-making, the Ford Administration (1974–1977) is often seen as a mere continuation of the Nixon Administration. This view is strengthened by the fact that in both administrations, Henry Kissinger was the key figure in drafting and determining the American approach to foreign policy and international affairs.³⁸ There are, however, certain differences between the two periods, which deserve our attention.

³⁶ During the revolt in East Pakistan and subsequent war between Pakistan and India in 1971, Nixon unflinchingly supported the Pakistani leader Yahia Khan, even though the Pakistani army repeatedly committed atrocities against civilians and even though the world public opinion was clearly supporting the rebels. Nixon’s support for Khan can be explained by personal friendship between both men but also by the fact that while Pakistan was allied with the PRC, a new American ally, India had close links to the Soviet Union. In the end, Pakistan lost the war and its former eastern territories became a new independent state, Bangladesh.

³⁷ *Resolution Commending President Nixon for His Foreign Policy Record*, 10 August 1973, p. 2. Meetings of the Republican National Committee, 1911–1980, Papers of the Republican Party 1911–1980, Part 1, Series B, Reel 11 (The Archives of the Roosevelt Study Center Library, Middelburg, Netherlands).

³⁸ In the second Nixon Administration, Kissinger was both the national security adviser and the secretary of state. When Ford became president, he kept Kissinger as his secretary of

From the very beginning, President Ford was facing a daunting task of having to convince the American public that his presidency would be essentially different than that of his predecessor. Ford tried as hard as he could to restore public confidence in politics and in the Republican Party, although some controversial steps he took, such as his pardon of Richard Nixon, dealt his further political ambitions a harsh blow.³⁹ His decision to seek re-election, or better to say election, in 1976, severely limited his options in pursuing a bold and innovative foreign policy. In order to bolster the support within his own party, where Ford was under constant attack from the conservative wing, especially Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater, the president was forced to make public statements and declarations, which created the impression that he was in fact abandoning *détente* and especially the rapprochement with China.⁴⁰

At the same time, however, Ford personally believed that *détente* was essentially beneficial for the United States and so he strived for continuity in dealing with Moscow and Beijing. His resolve to keep *détente* going was clearly manifested by his presence at the Vladivostok Summit in 1974 or by his visit of Beijing in 1975, steps which could have easily estranged him even further with the conservatives at home. This apparent discrepancy between the president's public declarations on one hand and his actual foreign policy moves on the other was not properly understood or accepted in Beijing and was one of the reasons why President Ford had such a low credit with the Chinese leadership⁴¹.

state, but replaced him in the role of national security adviser by Brent Scowcroft (1975). Kissinger's influence, however, still remained decisive.

³⁹ In an August 1974 Gallup Poll, taken one week after Ford became president, his approval rating was 71%. By mid-September, it had dropped down to 50%, with the disapproval rating climbing up from 3% to 28% during the same period. Ford's decision to pardon Nixon was one of the key factors behind this development. *Job Performance Ratings for President Ford*, 9 December 2007, available at http://137.99.31.42/CFIDE/roper/presidential/webroot/presidential_rating_detail.cfm?allRate=True&presidentName=Ford.

⁴⁰ For example, Ford was forced to declare his support for the independence of Taiwan and on the other hand, to reject the establishment of official diplomatic relations with the PRC. Mann, J., *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*, p. 72.

⁴¹ The situation was further complicated by the fact that by November 1974, Mao Zedong was seriously ill and Zhou Enlai was dying. The new Chinese leadership, represented by the pragmatic Deng Xiaoping, now demanded that the official diplomatic relations between both countries commence at once and that the United States abrogates the defense treaty with Taiwan, as Nixon promised earlier. These were demands that Ford could not meet, and thus the rapprochement entered a period of stagnation. Another reason for Ford's low

It was not the only paradox plaguing the foreign policy of the Ford Administration. There was also a certain kind of dichotomy or even schizophrenia which developed inside the policy-making process. It is beyond any doubt that the new president brought honesty, sincerity, and personal integrity back to the White House. He is rightfully credited for calming America down after the turmoil caused by Watergate and thus the words of Jimmy Carter, who praised Ford in his inaugural address for “for all he has done to heal our land”⁴², were indeed very appropriate and fitting. Yet, during Ford’s time in office the approach to foreign policy was in many respects similar to the old Nixon way. Decision-making was still largely under the control of a small group of people led by Henry Kissinger, and the reliance on secret, unofficial channels, was still heavy, if not predominant. The fact that Ford committed himself to a foreign policy-making style that was not compatible with his personality and that he probably did not fully approve of again showed his determination to continue the work his predecessor had begun. It is likely that the president believed that if the excesses and abuses of power, committed by Nixon, could be avoided, *détente* would still be a viable approach of the United States to the outside world.⁴³ The American public, however, remained distrustful and skeptical. The fact that the foreign policy-making still remained largely hidden from the eyes of the Congress and the public did little to improve this situation. Besides, even Kissinger’s popularity was slowly plunging and his image of a brilliant policy maker and strategist was gradually fading away. Under such circumstances, neither the Congress nor the American people were ready to support any significant enhancement of the relationship with China, not to mention any compromises that the United States would most likely be forced to make for the sake of strengthening Sino-American relations. Thus ultimately, the Ford Administration contributed little to the rapprochement process or to the American foreign policy in general. Even the establishment

prestige in Beijing was the fact that unlike his predecessor, he was seen as an inexperienced diplomat and statesman, who lacked the charisma and wit of his predecessor. Chinese disdain for Ford was demonstrated by the fact that, in spite of Ford’s and Kissinger’s wish, they invited Richard Nixon to Beijing in February 1976.

⁴² *The Inaugural Address of President Carter*, 20 January 1977, 16 November 2007, available at <http://www.seattleu.edu/artsci/history/us1945/docs/pres60.htm>.

⁴³ This view was still shared by other politicians, foreign policy experts and journalists, even though their number was slowly declining. For example, Thomas L. Hughes wrote in December 1973 that the *détente* policies can still be continued if the “excesses” and “over-reactions” of Nixon are removed. Hughes, T. L., Why Kissinger Must Choose Between Nixon and The Country, *The New York Times*, 30 December 1973, pp. 8–9, 27–28, 31.

of official diplomatic relations with the PRC, which still seemed not too distant before Nixon's resignation, was only achieved when Jimmy Carter became president.⁴⁴

Even in the light of these facts, however, it would not be fair to label the Ford Administration's foreign policy, or more specifically the development of the relations with China, as an utter failure. The president was facing unfavorable circumstances and obstacles which were beyond his power to overcome. The stagnation of *détente* was not primarily a result of Ford's incompetence but rather stemmed from events which he could not directly influence. For many people, the Ford era was and still is clearly a time of decline, very likely because there were no more spectacular events and sudden announcements, such as those that thrilled the nation in 1971 and 1972. Ford, however, should at least be given credit for trying, and in some cases succeeding, to maintain some of the achievements of *détente* in the face of growing public discontent and obstructions from the Congress. The talks with the Soviet Union continued, despite the criticism from conservatives and from some members of the military establishment. The rapprochement with China, perhaps the greatest foreign policy breakthrough of the Nixon Administration, also staggered on, not really moving too far ahead but not being completely abandoned either. Given the odds that Ford had to face and the legacy of his predecessor he had to battle while in office, this can be considered a success.

Conclusion

The opening to China and the *détente* foreign policy doctrine as such were based on profound changes, both in the international situation but also in the attitude of the American people and their view of the outside world. While such events as the Sino-Soviet split were important in preparing the stage for a major shift in the postwar American foreign policy, the impact of domestic factors should not be overlooked. In the initial phases of the rapprochement process, Nixon and Kissinger could reasonably hope to rely on the public and, to a certain extent, Congressional support. Using Nixon's anti-communist, conservative credentials as a guarantee for trustworthiness of their foreign policy and by

⁴⁴ The official diplomatic relations with the PRC were finally established on 1 January 1979.

presenting this policy as a way to regain prestige with both American allies and adversaries, the president and his advisor managed to obtain widespread acceptance for their moves and actions. Heavy reliance on secret negotiations and backstage deals was, at least in the beginning, justified by the successes of *détente*, such as the first trip of Henry Kissinger to Beijing in 1971 or the Nixon's visit of the Chinese capital less than a year later.

Détente, however, failed to secure the safety of South Vietnam as Nixon and Kissinger promised. It failed to stop the Soviet Union from supporting the communist guerillas in various countries of the Third World, for example Angola. It failed, ultimately, in making the world a much safer place and in creating a stable world order. Thus, gradually, the American public, the Congress, and even the Republican Party began to forget about *détente's* initial achievements and became rather weary and discontent with this policy approach as such. For Nixon, who relied on public support and who used it to defend and justify his actions when necessary, this development was a serious blow. While the Watergate affair clearly added a completely new dimension to the public disillusionment with the Nixon Presidency, his foreign policy would likely have encountered serious problems even without the scandal. As for the Ford Administration, it was not battling just the lack of trust the American public felt towards politics after Watergate in general, but also the weakening support for such bold steps as the opening to China. Even though Ford was convinced of the benefits *détente* brought and still could bring, faced with overwhelming and growing opposition within the ranks of his own party and within the society as a whole he found it impossible to expand or even continue some of Nixon's initiatives.

In conclusion, it can be said that the rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, as a part of *détente*, counted with and even relied on the support of the majority of the American people as well as of certain circles of the political establishment and society. When this support began to wane, the Sino-American rapprochement quickly lost its popularity and increasing number of Congressmen, Senators, foreign policy experts, and ordinary Americans were joining the ultra-conservative circles, which had opposed *détente* from the beginning. It is of course not possible to say that the opening to China or the talks with the Soviet Union were based purely on domestic political calculations and public opinion polls; it is also not possible to say that the ultimate stagnation and abandonment of *détente* were just a result of growing domestic opposition

to this line of policy. All these factors, however, played an important part in the formulation and implementation of the new American foreign policy during the Nixon and Ford presidencies and as such, should be taken into account. The rapprochement process with China is a perfect example of a foreign policy move which was made only after taking a profound deliberation of the possible reaction of the American public. It was a move which had broad and lasting implications not only abroad, but also in the United States. Based on the facts listed above, it is reasonable to conclude that in this particular case, the domestic politics had a far greater impact over the foreign policy sphere, which Nixon considered his personal domain, than even the president was ever willing to acknowledge.