

The China Challenge

By HENRY KISSINGER



Societies and nations tend to think of themselves as eternal. They also cherish a tale of their origin. A special feature of Chinese civilization is that it seems to have no beginning. It appears in history less as a conventional nation-state than as a permanent natural phenomenon. In the tale of the Yellow Emperor, revered by many Chinese as the legendary founding ruler, China seems already to exist.

Dr. Henry A. Kissinger, special assistant to President Nixon is toasted by Chinese Premier Chou En-lai Monday night, February 21, 1972 as the Nixon party were guests at a state dinner in Peking.

The Yellow Emperor has gone down in history as a founding hero; yet in the founding myth, he is re-establishing, not creating, an empire. China predated him; it strides into the historical consciousness as an established state requiring only restoration, not creation.

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In general, Chinese statesmanship exhibits a tendency to view the entire strategic landscape as part of a single whole: good and evil, near and far, strength and weakness, past and future all interrelated. In contrast to the Western approach of treating history as a process of modernity achieving a series of absolute victories over evil and backwardness, the traditional Chinese view of history emphasized a cyclical process of decay and rectification, in which nature and the world could be understood but not completely mastered.

For China's classical sages, the world could never be conquered; wise rulers could hope only to harmonize with its trends. There was no New World to populate, no redemption awaiting mankind on distant shores. The promised-land was China, and the Chinese were already there. The blessings of the Middle Kingdom's culture might theoretically be extended, by China's superior example, to the foreigners on the empire's periphery. But there was no glory to be found in venturing across the seas to convert "heathens" to Chinese ways; the customs of the Celestial Dynasty were plainly beyond the attainment of the far barbarians.

The most dramatic event of the Nixon presidency occurred in near obscurity. Nixon had decided that for a diplomatic mission to Beijing to succeed, it would have to take place in secrecy. A public mission would have set off a complicated internal clearance project within the U.S. government and insistent demands for consultations from around the world, including Taiwan (still recognized as the government of China). This would have mortgaged our prospects with Beijing, whose attitudes we were being sent to discover. Transparency is an essential objective, but historic opportunities for building a more peaceful international order have imperatives as well.

So my team set off to Beijing via Saigon, Bangkok, New Delhi and Rawalpindi on an announced fact-finding journey on behalf of the president. My party included a broader set of American officials, as well as a core group destined for Beijing—myself, as national security

adviser, three aides and two Secret Service agents. The dramatic denouement required us to go through tiring stops at each city designed to be so boringly matter-of-fact that the media would stop tracking our movements. In Rawalpindi, we disappeared for 48 hours for an ostensible rest (I had feigned illness) in a Pakistani hill station in the foothills of the Himalayas—but our real destination was Beijing. In Washington, only the president and Col. (later Gen.) Alexander Haig, my top aide, knew our actual mission.

When the American delegation arrived in Beijing on July 9, 1971, we had experienced the subtlety of Chinese communication but not the way Beijing conducted actual negotiations, still less the Chinese style of receiving visitors. American experience with Communist diplomacy was based on contacts with Soviet leaders, principally Andrei Gromyko, who had a tendency to turn diplomacy into a test of bureaucratic will; he was impeccably correct in negotiation but implacable on substance—sometimes, one sensed, straining his self-discipline.

Strain was nowhere apparent in the Chinese reception of the secret visit or during the dialogue that followed. In all the preliminary maneuvers, we had been sometimes puzzled by the erratic pauses between their messages, which we assumed had something to do with the Cultural Revolution. Nothing now seemed to disturb the serene aplomb of our hosts, who acted as if welcoming the special emissary of the American president for the first time in the history of the People's Republic of China was the most natural occurrence.

After being welcomed by the vice chairman of the military commission in Beijing, we soon discovered that our Chinese hosts had designed an almost improbably leisurely schedule—as if to signal that after surviving more than two decades of isolation, they were in no particular hurry to conclude a substantive agreement now. If one allowed for 16 hours for two nights' rest, there would be less than 24 hours left for the first dialogue between countries that had been at war, near war, and without significant

diplomatic contact for 20 years. In fact only two formal negotiating sessions were available: seven hours on the day of my arrival, from 4:30 p.m. to 11:20 p.m.; and six hours on the next, from noon until about 6:30 p.m.

It could be argued that the apparent Chinese nonchalance was a form of psychological pressure. To be sure, had we left without progress, it would have been a major embarrassment to Nixon. But if the calculations of two years of China diplomacy were correct, the exigencies that had induced Mao Zedong to extend the invitation might turn unmanageable by a rebuff of an American mission to Beijing.

Confrontation made no sense for either side; that is why we were in Beijing. Nixon was eager to raise American sights beyond Vietnam. Mao's decision had been for a move that might force the Soviets to hesitate before taking on China militarily. Neither side could afford failure. Each side knew the stakes.

In a rare symbiosis of analyses, both sides decided to spend most of the time on trying to explore each other's perception of the international order. Since the ultimate purpose of the visit was to start the process of determining whether the previously antagonistic foreign policies of the two countries could be aligned, a conceptual discussion—at some points sounding more like a conversation between two professors of international relations than a working diplomatic dialogue—was, in fact, the ultimate form of practical diplomacy.

When Premier Zhou Enlai arrived later that day, our handshake was a symbolic gesture—at least until Nixon could arrive in China for a public repetition—since Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had refused to shake hands

with Zhou at the Geneva Conference in 1954, a slight that rankled, despite the frequent Chinese protestations that it made no difference. We then repaired to a conference room in the guesthouse and faced each other across a green baize table. Here the American delegation had its first personal experience with the singular figure who had worked by Mao's side through nearly a half-century of revolution, war, upheaval and diplomatic maneuver.

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Seven months later, on Feb. 21, 1972, President Nixon arrived in Beijing on a raw winter day. It was a triumphant moment for the president, the inveterate anti-Communist who had seen a geopolitical opportunity and seized it boldly.

As a symbol of the fortitude with which he had navigated to this day and of the new era he was inaugurating, he wanted to descend alone from Air Force One to meet Zhou, who was standing on the windy tarmac in his immaculate Mao jacket as a Chinese military band played "The Star-Spangled Banner." The symbolic handshake that erased Dulles's snub duly took place. But for a historic occasion, it was strangely muted. When Nixon's motorcade drove into Beijing, the streets had been cleared of onlookers. And his arrival was played as the last item on the evening news.

As revolutionary as the opening itself had been, the final communiqué had not yet been fully agreed upon—especially in the key paragraph on Taiwan. A public celebration would have been premature and perhaps weakened the Chinese negotiating position of studied equanimity.

Our hosts made up for the missing demonstrations

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by inviting Nixon to a meeting with Mao within hours of our arrival. “Inviting” is not the precise word for how meetings with Mao occurred. Appointments were never scheduled; they came about as if events of nature. They were echoes of emperors granting audiences.

The first indication of Mao’s invitation to Nixon occurred when, shortly after our arrival, I received word that Zhou needed to see me in a reception room. He informed me that “Chairman Mao would like to see the President.” To avoid the impression that Nixon was being summoned, I raised some technical issues about the order of events at the evening banquet. Uncharacteristically impatient, Zhou responded: “Since the Chairman is inviting him, he wants to see him fairly soon.” In welcoming Nixon at the very outset of his visit, Mao was signaling his authoritative endorsement to domestic and international audiences before talks had even begun. Accompanied by Zhou, we set off for Mao’s residence in Chinese cars.

Mao’s residence was approached through a wide gate on the east–west axis carved from where the ancient city walls stood before the Communist revolution. Inside the Imperial City, the road hugged a lake, on the other side of which stood a series of residences for high officials. All had been built in the days of Sino-Soviet friendship and reflected the heavy Stalinist style of the period. Mao’s residence appeared no different, though it stood slightly apart from the others. There were no visible guards or other appurtenances of power. A small anteroom was almost completely dominated by a Ping-Pong table.

It did not matter because we were taken directly to Mao’s study, a room of modest size with bookshelves lining three walls filled with manuscripts in a state of considerable disarray. Books covered the tables and were piled up on the floor. A simple wooden bed stood in a corner. The all-powerful ruler of the world’s most populous nation wished to be perceived as a philosopher-king who had no need to buttress his authority with traditional symbols of majesty.

Mao rose from an armchair in the middle of a semicircle of armchairs with an attendant close by to steady him if necessary. We learned later that he had suffered a debilitating series of heart and lung ailments in the weeks before and that he had difficulty moving. Overcoming his handicaps, Mao exuded an extraordinary willpower and determination. He took Nixon’s hands in both of his and showered his most benevolent smile on him. The picture appeared in all the Chinese newspapers.

Nixon’s visit to China is one of the few occasions where a state visit brought about a seminal change in international affairs. The re-entry of China into the global diplomatic game, and the increased strategic options for the U.S., gave a new vitality and flexibility to the international system. Nixon’s visit was followed by comparable visits by the leaders of other Western democracies and Japan. Consultation between China and the United States reached a level of intensity rare even among formal allies.

Would the interests of the two sides ever be truly congruent? Could they ever separate them from prevalent ideologies sufficiently to avoid tumults of conflicting emotions? Nixon’s visit to China had opened the door to dealing with these challenges; they are with us still.

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In recent years, China’s encounter with the modern, Western-designed international system has evoked in the Chinese elites a special tendency in which they debate—with exceptional thoroughness and analytical ability—their national destiny and overarching strategy for achieving it.

The world is witnessing, in effect, a new stage in a national dialogue about the nature of Chinese power, influence and aspirations that has gone on fitfully since the West first pried open China’s doors.

The previous stages of the national-destiny debate asked whether China should reach outward for knowledge to rectify its weakness or turn inward, away from an impure if technologically stronger world. The current stage

of the debate is based on the recognition that the great project of self-strengthening has succeeded and China is catching up with the West. It seeks to define the terms on which China should interact with a world that—in the view of even many of China’s contemporary liberal internationalists—gravely wronged China and from whose depredations China is now recovering.

An example of the “triumphalist” line of thinking is in Col. Liu Mingfu’s 2010 book “China Dream.” In Liu’s view, no matter how much China commits itself to a “peaceful rise,” conflict is inherent in U.S.-China relations. The relationship between China and the U.S. will be a “marathon contest” and the “duel of the century.” Moreover, the competition is essentially zero-sum; the only alternative to total success is humiliating failure.

Neither the more triumphalist Chinese analyses nor the American version—that a successful Chinese “rise” is incompatible with America’s position in the Pacific, and the world—have been endorsed by either government, but they provide a subtext of much current thought. If the assumptions of these views were applied by either side—and it would take only one side to make it unavoidable—China and the U.S. could easily fall into an escalating tension.

China would try to push American power as far away from its borders as it could, circumscribe the scope of American naval power, and reduce America’s weight in international diplomacy. The U.S. would try to organize China’s many neighbors into a counterweight to

Chinese dominance. Both sides would emphasize their ideological differences. The interaction would be even more complicated because the notions of deterrence and preemption are not symmetrical between these two sides. The U.S. is more focused on overwhelming military power, China on decisive psychological impact. Sooner or later, one side or the other would miscalculate.

The question ultimately comes down to what the U.S. and China can realistically ask of each other. An explicit American project to organize Asia on the basis of containing China or creating a bloc of democratic states for an ideological crusade is unlikely to succeed—in part because China is an indispensable trading partner for most of its neighbors. By the same token, a Chinese attempt to exclude America from Asian economic and security affairs will similarly meet serious resistance from almost all other Asian states, which fear the consequences of a region dominated by a single power.

The appropriate label for the Sino-American relationship is less partnership than “co-evolution.” It means that both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests.

The issue of human rights will find its place in the total range of interaction. The U.S. cannot be true to itself without affirming its commitment to basic principles of human dignity and popular participation in government. Given



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the nature of modern technology, these principles will not be confined by national borders. But experience has shown that to seek to impose them by confrontation is likely to be self-defeating—especially in a country with such a historical vision of itself as China. A succession of American administrations, including the first two years of President Barack Obama’s, has substantially balanced long-term moral convictions with case-to-case adaptations to requirements of national security. The basic approach remains valid; how to achieve the necessary balance is the challenge for each new generation of leaders on both sides.

When China and the U.S. first restored relations 40 years ago, the most significant contribution of the leaders of the time was their willingness to raise their sights beyond the immediate issues of the day. In a way, they were fortunate in that their long isolation from each other meant that there were no short-term day-to-day issues between them. This enabled the leaders of a generation ago to deal with their future, not their immediate pressures, and to lay the basis for a world unimaginable then but unachievable without Sino-American cooperation.

In pursuit of understanding the nature of peace, I have studied the construction and operation of international orders ever since I was a graduate student well over half a century ago. I am aware that the cultural, historic and strategic gaps in perception will pose formidable challenges for even the best-intentioned and most far-sighted leadership on both sides. On the other hand, were history confined to the mechanical repetition of the past, no transformation would ever have occurred. Every great achievement was a vision before it became a reality.

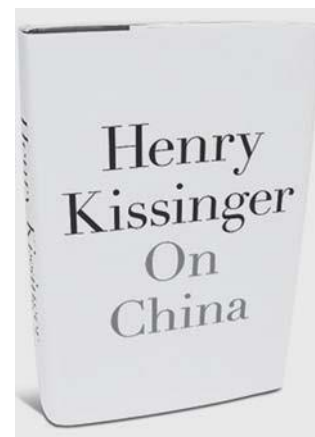
In his essay “Perpetual Peace,” the philosopher Immanuel Kant argued that perpetual peace would eventually come to the world in one of two ways: by human insight or by conflicts and catastrophes of a magnitude that left humanity no other choice. We are at such a juncture.

When Premier Zhou Enlai and I agreed on the communiqué that announced the secret

visit, he said: “This will shake the world.” What a culmination if, 40 years later, the U.S. and China could merge their efforts not to shake the world, but to build it.

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Henry Kissinger came to the United States from Germany in 1938. He served in the Army and was educated at Harvard University, where he then served on the faculty from 1954-71. In the Nixon administration, Kissinger served as the president’s National Security Advisor and then Secretary of State. Kissinger was the go-between in the secret negotiations that eventually opened relations between the U.S. and China. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1973 for his role in arranging a ceasefire in North Vietnam. As Kissinger continued to write, lecture and appear on TV as a foreign affairs expert.



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