

## Was There a Lost Opportunity?

In retrospect, one wonders whether the United States was in a position to start a dialogue with China perhaps a decade earlier than it did. Could the turmoil in China have become the starting point for a serious dialogue? In other words, were the 1960s a lost opportunity for Sino-American rapprochement? Could the opening to China have occurred earlier?

In truth, the fundamental obstacle to a more imaginative American foreign policy was Mao's concept of continuous revolution. Mao was determined at this stage to forestall any moment of calm. Attempts at reconciliation with the capitalist archenemy were not conceivable while the blood feud with Moscow revolved around Mao's adamant rejection of Khrushchev's commitment to peaceful coexistence.

There were some tentative gropings on the American side toward a more flexible perception of China. In October 1957, Senator John F. Kennedy published an article in *Foreign Affairs* remarking on "the fragmentation of authority within the Soviet orbit" and calling American policy in Asia "probably too rigid." He argued that the policy of not recognizing the People's Republic should be continued but that America should be prepared to revisit the "brittle conception of a shiftless totalitarian China" as circumstances developed. He counseled that "we must be very careful not to strait-jacket our policy as a result of ignorance and fail to detect a change in the objective situation when it comes."<sup>28</sup>

Kennedy's perception was subtle—but by the time he became President, the next change in Mao's dialectic was in the opposite direction: toward *more* hostility, not less; and toward the increasingly violent elimination of domestic opponents and countervailing institutional structures, not moderate reform.

In the years immediately following Kennedy's article, Mao launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, a second crisis in the Taiwan Strait in 1958 (which he described as an attempt to "teach the Americans a lesson"<sup>29</sup>), and the Great Leap Forward. When Kennedy became President, China undertook a military attack in its border conflict with India, a country that the Kennedy administration had conceived of as offering an Asian alternative to Communism. These were not the signs of conciliation and change for which Kennedy had advised Americans to stay attuned.

The Kennedy administration did offer a humanitarian gesture to alleviate China's precarious agricultural condition during the famine triggered by the Great Leap Forward. Described as an effort to secure "food for peace," the offer required, however, a specific Chinese request acknowledging a "serious desire" for assistance. Mao's commitment to self-reliance precluded any admission of dependence on foreign assistance. China, its representative at the Warsaw ambassadorial talks replied, was "overcoming its difficulties by its own efforts."<sup>30</sup>

In the last years of Lyndon Johnson's presidency, senior staff members and eventually the President himself began considering a move toward a less confrontational course. In 1966, the State Department instructed its negotiators to take a more forthcoming attitude at the Warsaw ambassadorial talks and authorized them to initiate informal social contacts on the sidelines of negotiations. In March 1966, the American representative at the talks offered an olive branch by stating that "the United States government was willing to develop further relations with the People's Republic of China"—the first time an American official had used the official post-1949 appellation for China in any formal capacity.

Finally, Johnson himself held out a peaceful option in a July 1966 speech on Asia policy. "Lasting peace," he observed, "can never come to Asia as long as the 700 million people of mainland China are isolated by their rulers from the outside world." While pledging to resist China's "policy of aggression by proxy" in Southeast Asia, he looked forward to an eventual era of "peaceful cooperation" and of "reconciliation between nations that now call themselves enemies."<sup>31</sup>

These views were put forward as abstract hopes geared to some undefined change in Chinese attitudes. No practical conclusion followed. Nor could it have. For these statements coincided almost exactly with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, when China swung back to a stance of defiant hostility.<sup>32</sup>

China's policies during this period did little to invite—and may have been designed to dissuade—a conciliatory approach from the United States. For its part, Washington exhibited considerable tactical skill in resisting military challenges, as in the two Taiwan Strait Crises, but showed much less imagination in shaping foreign policy in an evolving, fluid political framework.

An American National Intelligence Estimate of 1960 expressed, and perhaps helped shape, the underlying assessment:

A basic tenet of Communist China's foreign policy—to establish Chinese hegemony in the Far East—almost certainly will not change appreciably during the period of this estimate. The regime will continue to be violently anti-American and to strike at US interests wherever and whenever it can do so without paying a disproportionate price. . . . Its arrogant self-confidence, revolutionary fervor and distorted view of the world may lead Peiping to miscalculate risks.<sup>33</sup>

There was much evidence to support the prevailing view. But the analysis left open the question as to what extent China could possibly achieve such sweeping objectives. Wracked by the catastrophic consequences of the Great Leap Forward, the China of the 1960s was exhausted. By 1966, it was embarking on the Cultural Revolution, which spelled a de facto retreat from the world with most diplomats recalled to Beijing, many for reeducation. What were the implications for American foreign policy? How was it possible to speak of a unified Asian bloc? What about the basic premise of America's Indochina policy that the world was facing a conspiracy directed from Moscow and Beijing? The United States, preoccupied with Vietnam and its own domestic turmoil, found few occasions to address these issues.

Part of the reason for American single-mindedness was that, in the 1950s, many of the leading China experts had left the State Department during the various investigations into who "lost" China. As a result, a truly extraordinary group of Soviet experts—including George Kennan, Charles "Chip" Bohlen, Llewellyn Thompson, and Foy Kohler—dominated State Department thinking without counterpoise, and they were convinced that any rapprochement with China risked war with the Soviet Union.

But even had the right questions been asked, there would have been no opportunity to test the answers. Some Chinese policymakers urged Mao to adapt his policies to new conditions. In February 1962, Wang Jiaxiang, head of the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, addressed a memorandum to Zhou urging that a peaceful international environment would more effectively assist China to build a stronger socialist state and a more rapidly growing economy than the prevailing posture of confrontation in all directions.<sup>34</sup>

Mao would not hear of it, declaring:

In our Party there are some who advocate the "three moderations and one reduction." They say we should be more moderate toward the

imperialist, more moderate toward the reactionaries, and more moderate toward the revisionists, while toward the struggle of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin-America, we should reduce assistance. This is a revisionist line.<sup>35</sup>

Mao insisted on the policy of challenging all potential adversaries simultaneously. He countered that "China should struggle against the imperialists, the revisionists, and the reactionaries of all countries," and that "more assistance should be given to anti-imperialist, revolutionary, and Marxist-Leninist political parties and factions."<sup>36</sup>

In the end, as the 1960s progressed, even Mao began to recognize that potential perils to China were multiplying. Along its vast borders, China faced a potential enemy in the Soviet Union; a humiliated adversary in India; a massive American deployment and an escalating war in Vietnam; self-proclaimed governments-in-exile in Taipei and the Tibetan enclave of northern India; a historic opponent in Japan; and, across the Pacific, an America that viewed China as an implacable adversary. Only the rivalries between these countries had prevented a common challenge so far. But no prudent statesman could gamble forever that this self-restraint would last—especially as the Soviet Union seemed to be preparing to put an end to the mounting challenges from Beijing. The Chairman would soon be obliged to prove that he knew how to be prudent as well as daring.

## CHAPTER 8

### The Road to Reconciliation

**BY THE TIME** the improbable pair of Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong decided to move toward each other, both of their countries were in the midst of upheaval. China was nearly consumed by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution; America's political consensus was strained by the growing protest movement against the Vietnam War. China faced the prospect of war on all its frontiers—especially its northern border, where actual clashes between Soviet and Chinese forces were taking place. Nixon inherited a war in Vietnam and a domestic imperative to end it, and entered the White House at the end of a decade marked by assassinations and racial conflict.

Mao tried to address China's peril by returning to a classical Chinese stratagem: pitting the barbarians against each other, and enlisting faraway enemies against those nearby. Nixon, true to the values of his society, invoked Wilsonian principles in proposing to invite China to reenter the community of nations: "We simply cannot afford," he wrote in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in October 1967, "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."<sup>1</sup>

Nixon went beyond a call for a diplomatic adjustment to an appeal for a reconciliation. He likened the diplomatic challenge to the problem of social reform in American inner cities: "In each case dialogues have to be opened; in each case aggression has to be restrained while education proceeds; and, not least, in neither case can we afford to let those now self-exiled from society stay exiled forever."<sup>2</sup>

Necessity may provide the impetus for policy; it does not, however, automatically define the means. And both Mao and Nixon faced huge obstacles in initiating a dialogue, not to speak of a reconciliation between the United States and China. Their countries had, for twenty years, considered each other implacable enemies. China had classified America as a "capitalist-imperialist" country—in Marxist terms, the ultimate form of capitalism, which, it was theorized, would be able to overcome its "contradictions" only by war. Conflict with the United States was unavoidable; war was probable.

America's perception was the mirror image of China's. A decade of military conflicts and near conflicts seemed to bear out the national assessment that China, acting as the fount of world revolution, was determined to expel the United States from the Western Pacific. To Americans, Mao seemed even more implacable than the Soviet leaders.

For all these reasons, Mao and Nixon had to move cautiously. First steps were likely to offend basic domestic constituencies and unnerve allies. This was a particular challenge for Mao in the midst of the Cultural Revolution.

## The Chinese Strategy

Though few observers noticed it at the time, starting in 1965, Mao began slightly altering his tone toward America—and given his nearly divine status, even a nuance had vast implications. One of Mao's favorite vehicles for conveying his thinking to the United States was through interviews with the American journalist Edgar Snow. The two had met in the Communist base area of Yan'an in the 1930s. Snow had distilled his experience in a book called *Red Star over China*, which presented Mao as a kind of romantic agrarian guerrilla.

In 1965, during the preliminaries of the Cultural Revolution, Mao invited Snow to Beijing and made some startling comments—or they would have been startling had anyone in Washington paid attention to them. As Mao told Snow: "Naturally I personally regret that forces of history have divided and separated the American and Chinese peoples from virtually all communication during the past 15 years. Today the gulf seems broader than ever. However, I myself do not believe it will end in war and one of history's major tragedies."<sup>3</sup>

This from the leader who, for a decade and a half, had proclaimed his readiness for nuclear war with the United States in so graphic a manner that he scared both the Soviet Union and its European allies into dissociation from China. But with the Soviet Union in a menacing posture, Mao was more ready than anyone realized at the time to consider applying the maxim of moving closer to his distant adversary, the United States.

At the time of the Snow interview an American army was being built up on China's borders in Vietnam. Though the challenge was comparable to the one Mao had faced in Korea a decade and a half earlier, this time he opted for restraint. Limiting itself to noncombat support, China supplied matériel, strong moral encouragement, and some 100,000 Chinese logistical troops to work on communications and infrastructure in North Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> To Snow, Mao was explicit that China would fight the United States only in China, not in Vietnam: "We are not going to start the war from our side; only when the United States attacks shall we fight back. . . . As I've already said, please rest assured that we won't attack the United States."<sup>5</sup>

Lest the Americans miss the point, Mao reiterated that, as far as China was concerned, the Vietnamese had to cope with "their situation" by their own efforts: "The Chinese were very busy with their internal affairs. Fighting beyond one's own borders was criminal. Why should the Chinese do that? The Vietnamese could cope with their situation."<sup>6</sup>

Mao went on to speculate on various possible outcomes of the Vietnam War in the manner of a scientist analyzing some natural event, not as a leader dealing with military conflict along his borders. The contrast with Mao's reflections during the Korean War—when he consistently linked Korean and Chinese security concerns—could not have been more marked. Among the possible outcomes seemingly acceptable to the Chairman was that a "conference might be held, but United States troops might stay around Saigon, as in the case of South Korea"—in other words, a continuation of two Vietnam states.<sup>7</sup> Every American President dealing with the Vietnam War would have been willing to settle for such an outcome.

There is no evidence that the interview with Snow was ever the subject of high-level policy discussions in the Johnson administration, or that the historical tensions between China and Vietnam were considered relevant in any of the administrations (including Nixon's) that pursued the Vietnam War. Washington continued to describe China as a threat even greater than the Soviet Union. In 1965, McGeorge Bundy, who was President Johnson's National Security Advisor, made a statement typical of American views of China in the 1960s: "Communist China is quite a different problem [from the Soviet Union], and both her nuclear explosion [a reference to China's first nuclear test in October 1964] and her aggressive attitudes toward her neighbors make her a major problem for all peaceful people."<sup>8</sup>

On April 7, 1965, Johnson justified American intervention in Vietnam primarily on the grounds of resisting a combined design of Beijing and Hanoi: "Over this war—and all Asia—is another reality: the deepening shadow of Communist China. The rulers in Hanoi are urged on by Peking. . . . The contest in Viet-Nam is part of a wider pattern of aggressive purposes."<sup>9</sup> Secretary of State Dean Rusk repeated the same theme before the House Foreign Relations Committee a year later.<sup>10</sup>

What Mao had described to Snow was a kind of resignation from the traditional Communist doctrine of world revolution: "Wherever there is revolution, we will issue statements and hold meetings to support it. This is exactly what imperialists resent. We like to say empty words and fire empty cannons, but we will not send in troops."<sup>11</sup>

When reviewing Mao's statements in retrospect, one wonders whether taking them seriously might have affected the Johnson administration strategy on Vietnam. On the other hand, Mao never translated them into formal official policy partly because to do so would have required reversing a decade and a half of ideological indoctrination at a moment when ideological purity was his domestic battle cry and the conflict with the Soviet Union was based on a rejection of Khrushchev's policy of peaceful coexistence. Mao's words to Snow were almost certainly a tentative reconnaissance. But Snow was not an ideal vehicle for such a sortie. He was trusted in Beijing—at least as far as any American could be. But in Washington, Snow was considered a propagandist for Beijing. The normal Washington instinct would have been—as it was again five years later—to wait for some more concrete evidence of a Chinese shift in policy.

By any sober strategic calculations, Mao had maneuvered China into great peril. If either the United States or the Soviet Union attacked China, the other might stand aside. Logistics favored India in the two countries' border dispute, since the Himalayas were far from China's centers of strength. The United States was establishing a military presence in Vietnam. Japan, with all its historical baggage, was unfriendly and economically resurgent.

It was one of the few periods in which Mao seemed uncertain about his options on foreign policy issues. In a November 1968 meeting with the Australian Communist leader E. F. Hill, he displayed perplexity rather than his customary assurance in the guise of homilies. (Since Mao's maneuvers were always complex, it is also possible that one of his targets was the rest of the leadership who would read the transcript and that he wanted to convey to them that he was exploring new options.) Mao seemed concerned that since a longer period had passed since the end of the Second World War than in the interwar period between the first two world wars, some global catastrophe might be imminent: "All in all, now there is neither war nor revolution. Such a situation will not last long."<sup>12</sup> He posed a question: "Do you know what the imperialists will do? I mean, are they going to start a world war? Or maybe they will not start the war at this moment, but will start it after a while? According to your experience in your own country and in other countries, what do you feel?"<sup>13</sup> In other words, does China have to choose now, or is waiting on developments the wiser course?

Above all, what is the significance, Mao wanted to know, of what he later called "turmoil under the heavens"?

[W]e must take people's consciousness into our consideration. When the United States stopped bombing North Vietnam, American soldiers in Vietnam were very glad, and they even cheered. This indicates that their morale is not high. Is the morale of American soldiers high? Is the morale of Soviet soldiers high? Is the morale of the French, British, German, and Japanese soldiers high? The student strike is a new phenomenon in European history. Students in the capitalist countries usually do not strike. But now, all under the heaven is great chaos.<sup>14</sup>

What, in short, was the balance of forces between China and its potential adversaries? Did the queries about the morale of American and European soldiers imply doubts about their capacities to perform the role assigned to them in Chinese strategy—paradoxically very similar to their role in American strategy—to contain Soviet expansionism? But if American troops were demoralized and student strikes a symptom of a general political collapse of will, the Soviet Union might emerge as the dominant world power. Some in the Chinese leadership were already arguing for an accommodation with Moscow.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the outcome of the Cold War, perhaps the low morale in the West proved that revolutionary ideology was at last prevailing. Should China rely on a revolutionary wave to overthrow capitalism, or should it concentrate on manipulating the rivalry of the capitalists?

It was highly unusual for Mao to ask questions that did not imply either that he was testing his interlocutor or that he knew the answer but had chosen not to reveal it yet. After some more general talk, he concluded the meeting with the query that was haunting him:

Let me put forward a question, I will try to answer it, and you will try to answer it. I will consider it, and I ask you also to consider it. This is an issue with worldwide significance. This is the issue about war. The issue about war and peace. Will we see a war, or will we see a revolution? Will the war give rise to revolution, or will revolution prevent war?<sup>16</sup>

If war was imminent, Mao needed to take a position—indeed he might be its first target. But if revolution would sweep the world, Mao had to implement his life's convictions, which was revolution. Until the end of his life, Mao never fully resolved his choice.

A few months later, Mao had chosen his course for the immediate future. His doctor reported a conversation from 1969: "Mao presented me with a riddle. 'Think about this,' he said to me one day. 'We have the Soviet Union to the north and the west, India to the south, and Japan to the east. If all our enemies were to unite, attacking us from the north, south, east, and west, what do you think we should do?'" When Mao's interlocutor responded with perplexity, the Chairman continued: "Think again. . . . Beyond Japan is the United States. Didn't our ancestors counsel negotiating with faraway countries while fighting with those that are near?"<sup>17</sup>

Mao tiptoed into the reversal of two decades of Communist governance by two acts: one symbolic, the other practical. He used Nixon's inaugural address on January 20, 1969, as an opportunity to hint to the Chinese public that new thinking about America was taking place. On that occasion, Nixon had made a subtle reference to an opening to China, paraphrasing the language of his earlier *Foreign Affairs* article: "Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open. We seek an open world—open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people—a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation."<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese response hinted that Beijing was interested in ending its isolation but was in no hurry to abandon its anger. Chinese newspapers reprinted Nixon's speech; since the Communist takeover, no speech of an American President had received such attention. That did not soften the invective. An article in the *People's Daily* of January 27 mocked the American President: "Although at the end of his rope, Nixon had the cheek to speak about the future. . . . A man with one foot in the grave tries to console himself by dreaming of paradise. This is the delusion and writhing of a dying class."<sup>19</sup>

Mao had noted Nixon's offer and taken it sufficiently seriously to put it before his public. He was not open to contact by exhortation, however. Something more substantive would be needed—especially since a Chinese move toward America might escalate the weekly military clashes along the Sino-Soviet border into something far more menacing.

Almost at the same time, Mao started to explore the practical implications of his general decision by recalling four PLA marshals—Chen Yi, Nie Rongzhen, Xu Xiangqian, and Ye Jianying—who had been purged during the Cultural Revolution and assigned to "investigation and study" at factories in the provinces, a euphemism for manual labor.<sup>20</sup> Mao asked the marshals to undertake an analysis of China's strategic options.

It required reassurance from Zhou Enlai to convince the marshals that this was not a maneuver to make them indict themselves as part of the self-rectification campaign of the Cultural Revolution. After a month, they demonstrated how much China had lost by depriving itself of their talents. They produced a thoughtful assessment of the international situation. Reviewing the capabilities and intentions of key countries, they summed up China's strategic challenge as follows:

For the U.S. imperialists and the Soviet revisionists, the real threat is the one existing between themselves. For all other countries, the real threat comes from U.S. imperialists and Soviet revisionists. Covered by the banner of opposing China, U.S. imperialists and Soviet revisionists collaborate with each other while at the same time fighting against each other. The contradictions between them, however, are not reduced because of the collaboration between them; rather, their hostilities toward each other are more fierce than ever before.<sup>21</sup>

This might mean an affirmation of existing policy: Mao would be able to continue to challenge both superpowers simultaneously. The marshals argued that the Soviet Union would not dare to invade because of the difficulties it would face: lack of popular support for a war, long supply lines, insecure rear areas, and doubts about the attitude of the United States. The marshals summed up the American attitude in a Chinese proverb of "sitting on top of the mountain to watch a fight between two tigers."<sup>22</sup>

But a few months later, in September, they modified this judgment to one reached nearly simultaneously by Nixon. In the marshals' new view, the United States, in the event of a Soviet invasion, would not be able to confine its role to that of a spectator. It would have to take a stand: "The last thing the U.S. imperialists are willing to see is a victory by the Soviet revisionists in a Sino-Soviet war, as this would [allow the Soviets] to build up a big empire more powerful than the American empire in resources and manpower."<sup>23</sup> In other words, contact with the United States, however much assailed in Chinese media at the moment, was needed for the defense of the country.

The astute analysis ended with what reads like a rather cautious conclusion in substance—though it was daring in terms of its challenge to the basic premises of Chinese foreign policy during the Cultural Revolution. The marshals urged, in March 1969, that China should end its isolation and that it should discourage Soviet or American adventurism by "adopt[ing] a military strategy of active defense and a political strategy of active offense"; "actively carry[ing] out diplomatic activities"; and "expand[ing] the international united front of anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism."<sup>24</sup>

These general suggestions that Mao allow China to reenter international diplomacy proved insufficient for his larger vision. In May 1969, Mao sent the marshals back to the drawing board for further analysis and recommendations. By now, clashes along the Sino-Soviet border had multiplied. How was China to respond to the growing peril? A later account by Xiong Xianghui, a veteran intelligence operative and diplomat assigned by Mao to serve as the marshals' private secretary, recorded that the group deliberated the question of "whether, from a strategic

perspective, China should play the American card in case of a large-scale Soviet attack on China.<sup>25</sup> Searching for precedents for such an unorthodox move, Chen Yi suggested that the group study the modern example of Stalin's nonaggression pact with Hitler.

Ye Jianying proposed a far older precedent from China's own Three Kingdoms period, when, following the collapse of the Han Dynasty, the empire split into three states striving for dominance. The states' contests were recounted in a fourteenth-century epic novel, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, then banned in China. Ye cited the strategy pursued by one of its central characters as a template: "We can consult the example of Zhuge Liang's strategic guiding principle, when the three states of Wei, Shu, and Wu confronted each other: 'Ally with Wu in the east to oppose Wei in the north.'<sup>26</sup> After decades of vilifying China's past, Mao was invited by the purged marshals to look to China's "ancestors" for strategic inspiration by means of a strategy amounting to a reversal of alliances.

The marshals went on to describe potential relations with the United States as a strategic asset: "To a large extent, the Soviet revisionists' decision to launch a war of aggression against China depends on the attitude of the U.S. imperialists."<sup>27</sup> In a move that was intellectually brave and politically risky, the marshals recommended the resumption of the deadlocked ambassadorial talks with the United States. Though they made a bow to established doctrine, which treated both superpowers as equal threats to peace, the marshals' recommendation left little doubt that they considered the Soviet Union the principal danger. Marshal Chen Yi submitted an addendum to the views of his colleagues. He pointed out that while the United States had in the past rejected Chinese overtures, the new President, Richard Nixon, seemed eager "to win over China." He proposed what he called "'wild' ideas"<sup>28</sup>: to move the U.S.-China ambassadorial dialogue to a higher level—at least ministerial and perhaps higher. Most revolutionary was the proposal to drop the precondition that the return of Taiwan had to be settled first:

First, when the meetings in Warsaw [the ambassadorial talks] are resumed, we may take the initiative in proposing to hold Sino-American talks at the ministerial or even higher levels, so that basic and related problems in Sino-American relations can be solved. . . . Second, a Sino-American meeting at higher levels holds strategic significance. We should not raise any prerequisite. . . . The Taiwan question can be gradually solved by talks at higher levels. Furthermore, we may discuss with the Americans other questions of strategic significance.<sup>29</sup>

Soviet pressure supplied a growing impetus. In the face of increasing Soviet troop concentrations and a major battle at the border of Xinjiang, on August 28 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party ordered a mobilization of all Chinese military units along all of China's borders. Resumption of contact with the United States had become a strategic necessity.

## The American Strategy

When Richard Nixon took his oath of office, China's anxieties presented him with an extraordinary strategic opportunity, though this was not at first obvious to an administration divided over Vietnam. Many of the policy elites who had made the decision to defend Indochina against what they had conceived as a concerted assault from Moscow and Beijing had had second thoughts. A significant segment of the Establishment—significant enough to complicate an effective policy—had come to the view that the Vietnam War was not only unwinnable, but that it reflected a congenital moral failure of the American political system.

Nixon did not believe that one could end a war into which his predecessors had sent 500,000 American soldiers halfway across the world by pulling out unconditionally—as many of his critics demanded. And he took seriously the commitments of his predecessors from both parties, whose decisions had led to the dilemmas he now faced. Nixon knew that whatever the agony of its involvement in Vietnam, the United States remained the strongest country in an alliance against Communist aggression around the world, and American credibility was critical. The Nixon administration—in which I served as National Security Advisor and later as Secretary of State—therefore sought a staged withdrawal from Indochina to give the people of the region an opportunity to shape their own future and to sustain the world's faith in America's role.

Nixon's critics equated a new approach to foreign policy with a single issue: in effect, the unconditional withdrawal from the Vietnam War, ignoring the millions of Indochinese who had engaged themselves in reliance on America's word and the scores of countries who had joined the effort at America's behest. Nixon was committed to ending the war, but equally strongly to giving America a dynamic role in reshaping the international order just emerging piece by piece. Nixon intended to free American policy from the oscillations between extremes of commitment and withdrawal and ground it in a concept of the national interest that could be sustained as administrations succeeded each other.

In this design, China played a key role. The leaders of the two countries viewed their common goals from different perspectives. Mao treated the rapprochement as a strategic imperative, Nixon as an opportunity to redefine the American approach to foreign policy and international leadership. He sought to use the opening to China to demonstrate to the American public that, even in the midst of a debilitating war, the United States was in a position to bring about a design for long-term peace. He and his associates strove to reestablish contact with one-fifth of the world's population to place in context and ease the pain of an inevitably imperfect withdrawal from a corner of Southeast Asia.

This is where the paths of Mao, the advocate of continuous revolution, and Nixon, the pessimistic strategist, converged. Mao was convinced that vision and willpower would overcome all obstacles. Nixon was committed to careful planning, though ridden by the fear that even the best-laid plans would go awry as a result of fate intervening in an unforeseen and unforeseeable manner. But he carried out his plans anyway. Mao and Nixon shared one overriding trait: a willingness to follow the global logic of their reflections and instincts to ultimate conclusions. Nixon tended to be the more pragmatic. One of his frequently expressed maxims was "You pay the same price for doing something halfway as for doing it completely. So you might as well do it completely." What Mao carried out with elemental vitality, Nixon pursued as a resigned recognition of the workings and obligations of fate. But once launched on a course, he followed it with comparable determination.

That China and the United States would find a way to come together was inevitable given the necessities of the time. It would have happened sooner or later whatever the leadership in either country. That it took place with such decisiveness and proceeded with so few detours is a tribute to the leadership that brought it about. Leaders cannot create the context in which they operate. Their distinctive contribution consists in operating at the limit of what the given situation permits. If they exceed these limits, they crash; if they fall short of what is necessary, their policies stagnate. If they build soundly, they may create a new set of relationships that sustains itself over a historical period because all parties consider it in their own interest.

## First Steps—Clashes at the Ussuri River

Though reconciliation was the eventual result, it was not easy for the United States and China to find their way to a strategic dialogue. Nixon's article in *Foreign Affairs* and the study by the four marshals for Mao had produced parallel conclusions, but the actual movement of the two sides was inhibited by domestic complexities, historical experience, and cultural perceptions. The publics on both sides had been exposed to two decades of hostility and suspicion; they had to be prepared for a diplomatic revolution.

Nixon's tactical problem was more complicated than Mao's. Once Mao had made a decision, he was in a position to implement it ruthlessly. And opponents would remember the fate of Mao's previous critics. But Nixon had to overcome a legacy of twenty years of American foreign policy based on the assumption that China would use every opportunity to weaken the United States and to expel it from Asia. By the time he entered the White House, this view had congealed into established doctrine.

Nixon therefore had to tread carefully lest China's diplomatic overtures turn out to be propaganda with no serious change of approach in Beijing. That was a distinct possibility given that the only point of contact Americans had had with the Chinese in twenty years had been the ambassadorial talks in Warsaw, whose 136 meetings were distinctive only for their monotonously sterile rhythm. Two dozen members of Congress had to be briefed on every step, and new approaches were bound to be lost in the conflicting pressures of briefings of some fifteen countries, which were being kept informed about the Warsaw talks and included Taiwan—still recognized by most of them, and especially the United States, as the legitimate government of China.

Nixon's general design was turned into an opportunity as a result of a clash between Soviet and Chinese forces on Zhenbao (or Damansky) Island in the Ussuri River, where Siberia abuts the Chinese frontier. The clash might not have attracted the White House's attention so quickly had the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, not come to my office repeatedly to brief me on the Soviet version of what had happened. It was unheard of in that cold period of the Cold War for the Soviet Union to brief us on an event so remote from our usual dialogue—or on any event for that matter. We drew the conclusion that the Soviet Union was the probable aggressor and that the briefing, less than a year after the occupation of Czechoslovakia, hid a larger design. This suspicion was confirmed by a study on the border clashes by Allen Whiting of the RAND Corporation. Whiting concluded that because the incidents took place close to Soviet supply bases and far from Chinese ones, the Soviets were the probable aggressors, and that the next step might well be an attack on China's nuclear facilities. If a Sino-Soviet war was imminent, some American governmental position needed to be developed. In my capacity as National Security Advisor, I ordered an interdepartmental review.

As it turned out, the analysis of the immediate causes of the clashes was mistaken, at least regarding the Zhenbao incident. It was a case of mistaken analysis leading to a correct judgment. Recent historical studies have revealed that the Zhenbao incident had in fact been initiated by the Chinese as Dobrynin claimed; they had laid a trap in which a Soviet border patrol suffered heavy casualties.<sup>30</sup> But the Chinese purpose was defensive, in keeping with the Chinese concept of deterrence described in the previous chapter. The Chinese planned the particular incident to shock the Soviet leadership into putting an end to a series of clashes along the border, probably initiated by the Soviets, and which in Beijing were treated as Soviet harassment. The offensive deterrence concept involves the use of a preemptive strategy not so much to defeat the adversary militarily as to deal him a psychological blow to cause him to desist.

The Chinese action in fact had the opposite effect. The Soviets stepped up harassment all along the frontier, resulting in the wiping out of a Chinese battalion at the Xinjiang border. In this atmosphere, beginning in the summer of 1969, the United States and China began to exchange deniable signals. The United States eased some minor trade restrictions with China. Zhou Enlai released two American yachtsmen who had been detained since straying into Chinese waters.

During the summer of 1969, the signals of a possible war between China and the Soviet Union multiplied. Soviet troops along the Chinese border grew to some forty-two divisions—over a million men. Middle-level Soviet officials began to inquire of acquaintances at comparable levels around the world how their governments would react to a Soviet preemptive attack on Chinese nuclear installations.

These developments caused the United States government to speed up its consideration of a potential large-scale Soviet attack on China. The very query ran counter to the experience of those who had conducted Cold War foreign policy. For a generation, China had been viewed as the more bellicose of the two Communist giants. That the United States might take sides in a war between them had never been considered; the fact that Chinese policymakers compulsively studied America's likely attitudes demonstrated the extent to which long isolation had dulled their understanding of the American decision-making process.

But Nixon was determined to define policy by geopolitical considerations, and in these terms, any fundamental change in the balance of power had to evoke at least an American attitude, and, if significant, a policy. Even if we decided to stay aloof, it should be by conscious decision, not by default. At a National Security Council meeting in August 1969, Nixon chose an attitude, if not yet a policy. He put forward the then shocking thesis that, in the existing circumstances, the Soviet Union was the more dangerous party and that it would be against American interests if China were "smashed" in a China-Soviet war.<sup>31</sup> What this meant practically was not discussed then. What it should have implied for anyone familiar with Nixon's thinking was that, on the issue of China, geopolitics trumped other considerations. In pursuit of this policy, I issued a directive that in case of conflict between the Soviet Union and China the United States would adopt a posture of neutrality but within that framework tilt to the greatest extent possible toward China.<sup>32</sup>

It was a revolutionary moment in U.S. foreign policy: an American President declared that we had a strategic interest in the survival of a major Communist country with which we had had no meaningful contact for twenty years and against which we had fought a war and engaged in two military confrontations. How to communicate this decision? The Warsaw ambassadorial talks had not been convened for months and would have been too low-level to present a view of such magnitude. The administration therefore decided to go to the other extreme and go public with the American decision to view a conflict between the two Communist giants as a matter affecting the American national interest.

Amidst a drumbeat of bellicose Soviet statements in various forums threatening war, American officials were instructed to convey that the United States was not indifferent and would not be passive. Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms was asked to give a background briefing in which he disclosed that Soviet officials seemed to be sounding out other Communist leaders about their attitude toward a preemptive attack on Chinese nuclear installations. On September 5, 1969, Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson became explicit in a speech to the American Political Science Association: "Ideological differences between the two Communist giants are not our affair. We could not fail to be deeply concerned, however, with an escalation of this quarrel into a massive breach of international peace and security."<sup>33</sup> In the code of the Cold War,



Richardson's statement warned that, whatever course the United States adopted, it would not be indifference; that it would act according to its strategic interests.

When these measures were being designed, the principal goal was to create a psychological framework for an opening to China. Having since seen many documents published by the main parties, I now lean toward the view that the Soviet Union was much closer to a preemptive attack than we realized and that uncertainty about American reactions proved to be a principal reason for postponing that project. It is now clear for example that in October 1969 Mao thought an attack so imminent that he ordered all leaders (except Zhou, needed to run the government) to disperse across the country and to alert China's nuclear forces, tiny as they were then.

Whether as a result of American warnings or of the Communist world's own inner dynamics, the tensions between the two Communist giants eased over the course of the year, and the immediate threat of war diminished. Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin, who had flown to Hanoi for Ho Chi Minh's funeral in September via India rather than China—a much longer route—suddenly altered his return trip while en route and turned his plane toward Beijing, the kind of dramatic action countries take when they want either to issue an ultimatum or to usher in a new phase. Neither happened or, depending on one's perspective, both did. Kosygin and Zhou met for three hours at the Beijing airport—hardly a warm welcome for the prime minister of a country that was still technically an ally. Zhou Enlai produced a draft understanding providing for mutual withdrawals at contested positions on the northern frontier and other measures to ease tensions. The document was supposed to be co-signed on Kosygin's return to Moscow. It did not happen. Tensions reached a high point in October when Mao ordered China's top leadership to evacuate Beijing and Defense Minister Lin Biao placed the military on "first-degree combat readiness" alert.<sup>34</sup>

Space was thereby created for the unfolding of Sino-American contacts. Each side leaned over backward to avoid being perceived as having made the first public move—the United States because it had no forum to translate the presidential strategy into a formal position, China because it did not want to show weakness in the face of threats. The result was a minuet so intricate that both sides could always claim that they were not in contact, so stylized that neither country needed to bear the onus of an initiative that might be rejected, and so elliptical that existing political relations could be continued without the need for consultation on a script that had yet to be written. Between November 1969 and February 1970, there were at least ten occasions when American and Chinese diplomats in various capitals around the world had exchanged words—an event remarkable primarily because, before then, the diplomats had always avoided each other. The deadlock was broken when we ordered Walter Stoessel, the U.S. ambassador in Warsaw, to approach Chinese diplomats at the next social function and express the desire for a dialogue.

The setting for this encounter was a Yugoslav fashion show in the Polish capital. The Chinese diplomats in attendance, who were without instructions, fled the scene. The Chinese attaché's account of the incident shows how constrained relations had become. Interviewed years later, he recalled seeing two Americans talking and pointing at the Chinese contingent from across the room; this prompted the Chinese to stand up and leave, lest they be drawn into conversation. The Americans, determined to carry out their instructions, followed the Chinese. When the desperate Chinese diplomats speeded up, the Americans started running after them, shouting in Polish (the only mutually intelligible language available), "We are from American embassy. We want to meet your ambassador. . . . President Nixon said he wanted to resume his talk with Chinese."<sup>35</sup>

Two weeks later, the Chinese ambassador in Warsaw invited Stoessel to a meeting at the Chinese Embassy, to prepare for a resumption of the Warsaw talks. Reopening the forum inevitably raised the fundamental issues. What were the two sides going to talk about? And to what end?

This brought into the open the differences in negotiating tactics and style between the Chinese and American leadership—at least with the American diplomatic establishment that had supervised the Warsaw talks through over a hundred abortive meetings. The differences had been obscured so long as both sides believed deadlock served their purposes: the Chinese would demand the return of Taiwan to Chinese sovereignty; the Americans would propose a renunciation of force over what was presented as a dispute between two Chinese parties.

Now that both sides sought progress, the difference in negotiating style became important. Chinese negotiators use diplomacy to weave together political, military, and psychological elements into an overall strategic design. Diplomacy to them is the elaboration of a strategic principle. They ascribe no particular significance to the process of negotiation as such; nor do they consider the opening of a particular negotiation a transformational event. They do not think that personal relations can affect their judgments, though they may invoke personal ties to facilitate their own efforts. They have no emotional difficulty with deadlocks; they consider them the inevitable mechanism of diplomacy. They prize gestures of goodwill only if they serve a definable objective or tactic. And they patiently take the long view against impatient interlocutors, making time their ally.

The attitude of the American diplomat varies substantially. The prevalent view within the American body politic sees military force and diplomacy as distinct, in essence separate, phases of action. Military action is viewed as occasionally creating the conditions for negotiations, but once negotiations begin, they are seen as being propelled by their own internal logic. This is why, at the start of negotiations, the United States reduced military operations in Korea and agreed to a bombing halt in Vietnam, in each case substituting reassurance for pressure and reducing material incentives on behalf of intangible ones. American diplomacy generally prefers the specific over the general, the practical over the abstract. It is urged to be "flexible"; it feels an obligation to break deadlocks with new proposals—unintentionally inviting new deadlocks to elicit new proposals. These tactics often can be used by determined adversaries in the service of a strategy of procrastination.

In the case of the Warsaw talks, American proclivities had the opposite effect. China had returned to the Warsaw talks because Mao had made a strategic decision to follow the four marshals' recommendations to seek a high-level dialogue with the United States. But American diplomats (in contrast to their President) did not envisage—or even imagine—such a breakthrough; or rather, they defined a breakthrough as breathing life into a process they had been nursing through 134 meetings to date. On that journey, they had developed an agenda reflecting the pragmatic issues that had accumulated between the two countries: settlement of financial claims the two sides had against each other; prisoners held in each other's jails; trade; arms control; cultural exchanges. The negotiators' idea of a breakthrough was China's readiness to discuss this agenda.

A dialogue of the deaf developed at the two meetings of the resumed Warsaw talks on February 20 and March 20, 1970. As National Security Advisor in the White House, I had urged the negotiating team to repeat what our envoys had tried to say to the fleeing Chinese diplomats, that the United States "would be prepared to consider sending a representative to Peking for direct discussions with your officials, or receiving a representative from your government to Washington." Chinese negotiators formally repeated the standard position on Taiwan albeit in a mild form. But wrapped inside the formulaic response on Taiwan was an unprecedented move: China was willing to consider talks outside the Warsaw channels at the ambassadorial level or through other channels "to reduce tensions between China and the US and fundamentally improve relations."<sup>36</sup> It did not make such talks conditional on the settlement of the Taiwan issue.

The American negotiators in Warsaw sought to avoid this broader approach. The first time it was made, they did not respond at all. Afterward they developed talking points to deflect the Chinese proposition of an overall review of relationships into an opportunity to address the American agenda developed over two decades of desultory conversations.<sup>37</sup>

Nixon was no less impatient with this approach than Mao must have been. "They will kill this baby before it is born," Nixon said when confronted with a plan put forward by the negotiating team. But he was reluctant to order them to engage in a geopolitical dialogue for fear that the briefing system would produce a firestorm and a need for multiple reassurances, all before the Chinese attitude was clear. Mao's attitude was more ambivalent. On the one hand, he wanted to explore rapprochement with the United States. But these exchanges were taking place in early 1970,

when the Nixon administration faced massive demonstrations protesting the decision to send forces into Cambodia to disrupt the bases and supply chains supporting Hanoi's offensives into South Vietnam. The question for Mao was whether the demonstrations marked the beginning of the genuine world revolution so long expected by the Marxists and as often disappointed. If China moved closer to the United States, would it be doing it just when the world revolutionary agenda was being fulfilled? To wait out these prospects consumed much of Mao's planning in 1970.<sup>38</sup> He used the American military incursion into Cambodia as a pretext to cancel the next session of Warsaw talks scheduled for May 20, 1970. They were never resumed.

Nixon was looking for a forum less bureaucratically constraining and more under his direct control. Mao sought for a way to break through to the highest levels of the United States government whenever he had made a firm decision. Both had to move carefully lest a premature disclosure trigger a Soviet onslaught or a rejection by the other side thwart the entire initiative. When the Warsaw talks foundered, the operating level of the U.S. government seemed relieved to be freed of the perplexities and domestic risks of a negotiation with Beijing. During the year that Nixon and Mao were searching for venues for a high-level dialogue, lower levels of the American diplomatic establishment never raised the question at the White House of what had happened to the Warsaw talks or suggested reconvening them.

For nearly a year after the Chinese cancellation of the proposed May 20 meeting, both the American and Chinese leaders agreed on the objective but found themselves thwarted by the gulf of twenty years of isolation. The problem was no longer simply the cultural differences between the Chinese and the American approaches to negotiations. It was that Nixon's approach differed more from that of his own diplomats than from Mao's. He and I wanted to explore the strategic situation produced by the triangular relationship between the Soviet Union, China, and the United States. We strove for an occasion not so much to remove irritants as to conduct a geopolitical dialogue.

As the two sides were circling each other, their choice of intermediaries conveyed a great deal about their perceptions of the task at hand. Nixon used the occasion of an around-the-world trip in July 1970 to tell his hosts in Pakistan and Romania that he sought high-level exchanges with Chinese leaders and that they were free to communicate this to Beijing. As National Security Advisor, I mentioned the same point to Jean Sainteny, the former French ambassador in Hanoi, a friend of many years who was acquainted with the Chinese ambassador in Paris, Huang Zhen. In other words, the White House chose a nonaligned friend of China (Pakistan), a member of the Warsaw Pact known for its quest for independence from Moscow (Romania), and a member of NATO distinguished by its commitment to strategic independence (France—on the assumption that Sainteny was bound to pass our message to the French government). Beijing passed hints to us via its embassy in Oslo, Norway (a NATO ally), and, strangely enough, in Kabul, Afghanistan (perhaps on the theory that the venue was so improbable as to be sure to gain our attention). We ignored Oslo because our embassy was not equipped for the necessary staff support; Kabul, of course, was even more remote. And we did not want to conduct the dialogue once again through embassies.

China ignored the direct approach via Paris but eventually responded to the overtures via Romania and Pakistan. Before that, however, Mao communicated with us but so subtly and indirectly that we missed the point. In October 1970 Mao granted another interview to Edgar Snow, considered by the Nixon White House to be a Mao sympathizer. To demonstrate the importance Mao attached to the occasion, he placed Snow next to him on the reviewing stand during the parade celebrating the Communist victory in the civil war on October 8, 1970. The mere presence of an American standing next to the Chairman symbolized—or was intended to symbolize to the Chinese people—that contact with America was not only permissible but a high priority.

The interview proceeded in a complex manner. Snow was given a transcript of the interview with the restriction that he could use only indirect quotations. He was also instructed to delay any publication for three months. The Chinese reasoning must have been that Snow would submit the actual text to the U.S. government and that the published summary would then reinforce a process already in train.

It did not work out that way for the same reason that the 1965 interview failed to influence the U.S. government. Snow was a friend of the PRC of long standing; that very fact caused him to be written off in the American foreign policy establishment as a Beijing propagandist. No transcript of his interview reached high levels of government, still less the White House, and by the time the article appeared months later, it had been overtaken by other communications.

It was a pity the transcript did not reach us, because the Chairman had made some revolutionary pronouncements. For nearly a decade, China had cut itself off from the outside world. Now Mao announced that he would soon start inviting Americans of all political persuasions to visit China. Nixon would be welcome "either as a tourist or as President" because the Chairman had concluded that "the problems between China and the U.S.A. would have to be solved with Nixon"—because of the upcoming presidential election within two years.<sup>39</sup>

Mao had moved from vilifying the United States to inviting a dialogue with the American President. And he added a startling comment about the Chinese domestic situation, which hinted that the dialogue would take place with a new China.

Mao told Snow that he was ending the Cultural Revolution. What he had intended as a moral and intellectual renovation had turned into coercion, he said. "When foreigners reported that China was in great chaos, they were not telling lies. It had been true. Fighting [between Chinese] was going on . . . first with spears, then rifles, then mortars."<sup>40</sup> Mao, as Snow reported, now deplored the cult of personality built around his person: "It was hard, the chairman said, for people to overcome the habits of 3,000 years of emperor-worshipping tradition." The titles ascribed to him such as "Great Helmsman . . . would all be eliminated sooner or later." The sole title he wished to retain was "teacher."<sup>41</sup>

These were extraordinary assertions. After having convulsed his country with upheavals that destroyed even the Communist Party so that only a cult of personality was left for cohesion, Mao now pronounced the end of the Cultural Revolution. It had been proclaimed so that the Chairman could govern without doctrinal or bureaucratic inhibitions. It had been sustained by shredding existing structures and by what Mao now described as "maltreatment of 'captives'—party members and others removed from power and subjected to reeducation."<sup>42</sup>

Where did all this leave Chinese governance? Or was it being told to a foreign journalist in Mao's characteristic elliptically wandering way, in pursuit of its principal purpose, to encourage a new phase in the relationship between China and the United States and the world by conveying an altered governance? As Snow recorded, Mao announced that "between Chinese and Americans there need be no prejudices. There could be mutual respect and equality. He said he placed high hopes on the peoples of the two countries."<sup>43</sup>

Nixon, in a break with American foreign policy tradition, had urged a relaxation of tensions on the basis of geopolitical considerations in order to return China to the international system. But to the China-centered Mao, the principal vision was not the international system so much as the future of China. To achieve its security, he was willing to shift the center of gravity of Chinese policy and bring about a reversal of the alliances—not, however, in the name of a theory of international relations but rather of a new direction for Chinese society in which China could even learn from the United States:

China should learn from the way America developed, by decentralizing and spreading responsibility and wealth among the 50 states. A central government could not do everything. China must depend upon regional and local initiatives. It would not do [*spreading his hands*] to leave everything up to him [Mao].<sup>44</sup>

Mao, in short, reaffirmed classic principles of Chinese governance cast in Confucian principles of moral rectitude. He devoted a part of his interview to castigating the habit of lying, which he blamed not on the Americans but on the recently disempowered Red Guards. "If one did not speak the truth, Mao concluded, how could he gain the confidence of others? Who would trust one?"<sup>45</sup> Snow recorded. The fire-breathing, radical ideologist of yesterday now appeared in the garb of a Confucian sage. His concluding sentence seemed to express a sense of resignation to new circumstance if not without, as always, taunting double meanings: "He was, he said, only a lone monk walking the world with a leaky umbrella."<sup>46</sup>

There was more to the last line than Mao's habitual mockery in presenting the creator of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution as returning to his original philosophic vocation as a lonely teacher. For as several Chinese commentators later noted, the quotation in Snow's English text was but the first line of a familiar Chinese couplet.<sup>47</sup> If completed, the couplet is not so much mocking as ominous. Left unspoken, or at least untranslated, was the second line of the couplet: "*wu fa wu tian*." As written, the Chinese characters mean "without hair, without sky"—that is, the monk is bald, and because he holds an umbrella, he does not see the sky above him. But in the tonal Chinese language, the line is a pun. Pronounced slightly differently, the line takes on a new meaning: "without law, without heaven"—or, less literally: "defying laws both human and divine"; "neither God-fearing nor law-abiding"; "trampling law underfoot without batting an eyelid."<sup>48</sup>

Mao's closing salvo was, in other words, even further reaching and more subtle than initially apparent. Mao cast himself as a wandering classical sage but also as a law unto himself. Was Mao toying with his English-speaking interviewer? Could he possibly think Snow would understand the pun, which is, for a Western ear, almost impossibly obscure? (Mao did sometimes overestimate Western subtlety even as the West sometimes exaggerated his.) Given the context, the probability is that Mao's pun was directed to his domestic audience, particularly those leaders who might oppose rapprochement with the heretofore hated United States and whose opposition later culminated in the crisis—and alleged coup—of Lin Biao shortly after the U.S. opening to China. Mao was effectively announcing that he was about to turn the world upside down again. In that mission, he would not be bound by "laws human or divine," not even the laws of his own ideology. It warned doubters to get out of the way.

The text of Mao's interview was surely circulated in high levels of Beijing even as it was being ignored in Washington. Snow had been asked to delay publication so that China could develop an official initiative. Mao decided to cut through the minuet of third-party communications by addressing the American administration directly at the highest level. On December 8, 1970, a message was delivered to my office in the White House from Zhou Enlai. Reviving a diplomatic practice of previous centuries, the Pakistani ambassador brought it from Islamabad, where it had been delivered as a handwritten communication. Beijing's missive formally acknowledged the messages received through intermediaries. It noted a comment made by Nixon to President Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan of Pakistan, when Yahya called at the White House a few weeks earlier, to the effect that America, in its negotiations with the Soviet Union, would not participate in a "condominium against China" and would be prepared to send an emissary to a mutually convenient place to arrange high-level contacts with China.<sup>49</sup>

Zhou Enlai replied as he had not to previous messages because, he said, this was the first time a message had "come from a Head, through a Head, to a Head."<sup>50</sup> Emphasizing that his reply had been approved by Mao and Lin Biao, then Mao's designated heir, Zhou invited a special emissary to Beijing to discuss "the vacation [*sic*] of Chinese territories called Taiwan" which "have now been occupied by foreign troops of the United States for the last fifteen years."<sup>51</sup>

It was an artful document. For what exactly was Zhou Enlai proposing to discuss? The reversion of Taiwan to China or the presence of American troops on the island? There was no reference to the treaty of mutual assistance. Whatever it meant, it was the mildest formulation on Taiwan that had been received from Beijing for twenty years. Did it apply only to American forces stationed in Taiwan, most of whom were support forces for Vietnam? Or did it imply a more sweeping demand? In any event, to invite the representative of the reviled "monopoly capitalists"<sup>52</sup> to Beijing had to reflect some deeper imperative than the desire to discuss Taiwan, for which a forum already existed; it had to involve the security of China.

The White House opted to leave the answer open for actual direct contacts. Our reply accepted the principle of an emissary but defined his mission as "the broad range of issues which lie between the People's Republic of China and the U.S."—in other words, the U.S. emissary would not agree to confine the agenda to Taiwan.<sup>53</sup>

Leaving nothing to the chance that the Pakistan channel might not work efficiently, Zhou Enlai sent a parallel message via Romania, which, for some never explained reason, arrived a month after the Pakistani message, in January. This message, too, we were told, had been "reviewed by Chairman Mao and Lin Piao [Lin Biao]."<sup>54</sup> It described Taiwan as the one outstanding issue between China and the United States and added an entirely new element: since President Nixon had already visited Belgrade and Bucharest—capitals of Communist countries—he would also be welcome in Beijing. In light of the military clashes of the past decade and a half, it was significant that Taiwan was listed as the *only* issue between China and the United States; in other words, Vietnam clearly was not an obstacle to reconciliation.

We replied through the Romanian channel, accepting the principle of an emissary but ignoring the invitation to the President. At this early stage of contacts, accepting a presidential visit seemed too importuning, not to mention too risky. We conveyed our definition of an appropriate agenda phrased, to avoid confusion, identically with the message via Pakistan, to the effect that the United States was prepared to discuss all issues of concern to both sides, including Taiwan.

Zhou Enlai had seen Yahya in October and the Romanian Vice Premier in November. Mao had received Snow in early October. That all these messages emerged within a few weeks of each other reflected the fact that diplomacy had gone beyond the tactical and was being orchestrated for a major denouement.

But to our surprise—and no little uneasiness—there was no response for three months. Probably it was because of the South Vietnamese offensive, backed by U.S. airpower, on the Ho Chi Minh Trail through southern Laos, the principal supply route for North Vietnamese forces in the South. Mao also seems to have had second thoughts about the prospects of an American revolution based on the anti-Vietnam War demonstrations.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps it was because Beijing prefers to move at a pace that demonstrates its imperviousness to mere tactical considerations and precludes any demonstration of Chinese eagerness, much less of weakness. Most likely, Mao needed time to align his own domestic constituencies.

It was not until the beginning of April that we heard from China again. It chose none of the channels we had established but a method of its own, which forced into the open the issue of the Chinese desire to achieve a better relationship with America and was less dependent on actions of the United States government.

This is the background to the episode that has entered folklore as Ping-Pong diplomacy. A Chinese Ping-Pong team participated in an international tournament in Japan, the first time a Chinese sports team had competed outside China since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. In recent years, it has emerged that the impending encounter between the Chinese and American teams caused considerable internal debate in the Chinese leadership. The Chinese Foreign Ministry initially recommended avoiding the tournament entirely, or at least remaining aloof from the American team. Zhou forwarded the matter for reconsideration by Mao, who deliberated for two days. Late one night, after one of his periodic bouts of insomnia, Mao lay "slumped over the table" in a sleeping-pill-induced haze. Suddenly he croaked to his nurse, telling her to phone the

Foreign Ministry—"to invite the American team to visit China." The nurse recalled asking him, "Does your word count after taking sleeping pills?" Mao replied, "Yes, it counts, every word counts. Act promptly, or it will be too late!"<sup>56</sup>

This order from Mao in hand, the Chinese players used the occasion to invite the American team to visit China. On April 14, 1971, the amazed young Americans found themselves at the Great Hall of the People in the presence of Zhou Enlai, which was more than had ever been achieved by the vast majority of the foreign ambassadors stationed in Beijing.

"You have opened a new chapter in the relations of the American and Chinese people," affirmed the Chinese Premier. "I am confident that the beginning of our friendship will certainly find support with the majority of our peoples." The athletes, stunned by the fact that they were being propelled into high-level diplomacy, did not respond, causing Zhou Enlai to end with a sentence we later came to recognize as characteristic: "Don't you think so?"—evoking a round of applause.<sup>57</sup>

As usual with Chinese diplomacy, Mao and Zhou were operating on many levels. On one level, the Ping-Pong diplomacy constituted an answer to the American messages of January. It committed China publicly to the course heretofore confined to the most secret diplomatic channels. In that sense, it was reassurance. But it was also a warning of what course China could pursue were the secret communications thwarted. Beijing could then undertake a public campaign—what would today be called "people-to-people diplomacy"—much as Hanoi was doing in pressing its objectives on Vietnam, and appeal to the growing protest movement in American society on the basis of another "lost chance for peace."

Zhou soon conveyed that the diplomatic channel remained his preferred option. On April 29, the Pakistani ambassador brought another handwritten message from Beijing dated April 21. It explained the long silence by "the situation of the time"<sup>58</sup> without explaining whether this referred to domestic or international conditions but reiterating the willingness to receive a special envoy. Zhou was specific about the emissary Beijing had in mind, naming me or Secretary of State William Rogers or "even the President of the U.S. himself."<sup>59</sup> As a condition of restoration of the relations, Zhou mentioned only the withdrawal of American armed forces from Taiwan and the Taiwan Strait—by far the least contentious issue—and omitted the reversion of Taiwan.

At that point, the secrecy with which the diplomacy had been conducted nearly derailed the enterprise and would have in any previous period of dealing with Beijing. Nixon had decided that the channel to Beijing should be confined to the White House. No other agency had been told of the two communications from Zhou Enlai in December and January. Thus in a public briefing on April 28, a State Department spokesman declared as the American position that sovereignty over Taiwan was "an unsettled question subject to future international resolution." And when the Secretary of State, attending a diplomatic meeting in London, appeared on television the next day, he commented on the Snow interview and dismissed the invitation to Nixon as "fairly casually made" and not "serious." He described Chinese foreign policy as "expansionist" and "rather paranoid." Progress in negotiations—and a possible Nixon trip to China—would be possible only if China decided to join the international community in some unspecified way and complied "with the rules of international law."<sup>60</sup>

It was a measure of China's strategic imperatives that progress toward resumption of the dialogue continued. The reference to Taiwan as an unsettled question was denounced as "fraudulent" and a "brazen intervention in the affairs of the Chinese people" by the governmental spokesman. But the invective was coupled with a reaffirmation that the visit of the table tennis team was a new development in the friendship between the Chinese and American peoples.

On May 10, we accepted Zhou's invitation to Nixon but reiterated our insistence on a broad agenda. Our communication read: "At such a meeting each side would be free to raise the issue of principal concern to it."<sup>61</sup> To prepare for the summit, the President proposed that as his assistant for national security I should represent him at a preliminary secret meeting with Zhou. We indicated a specific date. The reason for the date was not high policy. During the late spring and early summer, the Cabinet and White House had planned a series of travels, and it was the first time a high-level plane became available.

On June 2, we received the Chinese reply. Zhou informed us that he had reported Nixon's acceptance of the Chinese invitation to Mao "with much pleasure"<sup>62</sup> and that he would welcome me to Beijing for preliminary conversations on the proposed date. We paid little attention to the fact that Lin Biao's name was dropped from this communication.

Within a year, Sino-American diplomacy had moved from irreconcilable conflict to a visit to Beijing by a presidential emissary to prepare a visit by the President himself. It did so by sidestepping the rhetoric of two decades and staying focused on the fundamental strategic objective of a geopolitical dialogue leading to a recasting of the Cold War international order. Had Nixon followed professional advice, he would have used the Chinese invitation to return to the traditional agenda and speed up its consideration as a condition for higher-level talks. Not only might this have been treated as a rejection, the whole process of intensified Sino-U.S. contact would almost certainly have been overwhelmed by domestic and international pressures in both countries. Nixon's contribution to the emerging Sino-American understanding was not so much that he understood its desirability but that he was able to give it a conceptual foundation to which Chinese thinking could relate. To Nixon, the opening to China was part of an overall strategic design, not a shopping list of mutual irritations.

Chinese leaders pursued a parallel approach. Invocations of returning to an existing international order were meaningless to them, if only because they did not consider the existing international system, which they had no hand in forming, as relevant to them. They had never conceived their security to reside in the legal arrangement of a community of sovereign states. Americans to this day often treat the opening to China as ushering in a static condition of friendship. But the Chinese leaders were brought up on the concept of *shi*—the art of understanding matters in flux.

When Zhou wrote about reestablishing friendship between the Chinese and American peoples, he described an attitude needed to foster a new international equilibrium, not a final state of the relationship between peoples. In Chinese writings, the hallowed words of the American vocabulary of a legal international order are rarely to be found. What was sought, rather, was a world in which China could find security and progress through a kind of combative coexistence, in which readiness to fight was given equal pride of place to the concept of coexistence. Into this world, the United States entered with its first diplomatic mission to Communist China.