

Grand Strategy, Power Politics, and China's Policy toward the United States in the 1960s

The 1960s marked a critical juncture in the history of the Cold War, and the history of international politics in general. The rise of Communist China as a nuclear power, the Sino-Soviet split, and the beginning of Sino-American rapprochement in late 1969 led to a significant re-configuration of global strategic and geopolitical landscapes, resulting in the gradual dissolution of bipolarity and the emergence of triangular politics. The balance of power theory predicts that China, as a weak power, would have sought American assistance in countering the threat from Moscow as the relationship between the two communist powers deteriorated. In contrast to what realist theory suggests, however, Beijing refused to seek rapprochement with Washington and pursued an antagonistic policy toward the United States throughout the 1960s. Why did China refuse reconciliation with the United States? How is China's anti-U.S. strategy to be understood?

Despite its importance, China's policy toward the United States in the 1960s has not been well studied.¹ Most of the scholarship focuses on the Sino-American rapprochement that took place after 1969. One of the most widely accepted explanations of the Sino-American rapprochement holds that Beijing and Washington came together to balance against the common threat from the Soviet Union.² However, the balance-of-power and balance-of-threat arguments

1. There are a few important works that examine China's foreign policy in the 1960s and its policy toward the United States specifically, see Li Jie, "Changes in China's Domestic Situation in the 1960s and Sino-U.S. Relations," in *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954-1973*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 288-320; Jian Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001); Yafeng Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks during the Cold War, 1949-1972* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), esp. chaps. 5-6; Yang Kuisong, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jiangguoshi yanjiu* [Studies of the History of the Founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC)], vol. 2 (Nanchang, Jiangxi, 2009); Lorenz Lüthi, "Chinese Foreign Policy, 1960-1979," in *The Cold War in East Asia, 1945-1991*, ed. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (Washington, DC, 2011), 152-79.

2. For a balance-of-power explanation for the Sino-American rapprochement, see Harry Harding, *A Fragile Relationship* (Washington, DC, 1992), 35-40; Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969-1989* (Stanford, CA, 1995), 1-54; William Bundy, *A Tangled Web: The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York, 1998); Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China* (New York, 1999), 45-180. For a view that disputes the rationalist story of the Sino-American rapprochement, see Kuisong Yang and Yafeng Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao's Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969-1976," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 2 (April 2010): 395-423.

fail to explain why there was no rapprochement prior to Richard Nixon's visit to China despite the fact that the Cold War world was similar both before and after 1972.³ If one looks at the distribution of power in the international system throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the United States and the Soviet Union remained the dominant superpowers and the system was predominantly bipolar. If bipolarity and the Soviet threat led to Sino-American rapprochement, why did these factors not push China and the United States in this direction in the 1960s?

Other scholars use ideological conflict to explain why China and the United States were at odds prior to 1972.⁴ For instance, Chen Jian's influential *Mao's China and the Cold War* highlights the importance of ideology in shaping China's foreign policy during the Cold War. China's anti-U.S. strategy, according to Chen Jian, should be understood as a reflection of the Chinese supreme leader Mao Zedong's "continuous revolution."⁵

Still other scholars point to "domestic politics" to explain Chinese intransigence. They argue that domestic radicalization beginning in the early 1960s sidelined moderate voices within the leadership, stiffened China's anti-U.S. posture, and generally radicalized China's foreign policy.⁶

These theories provide a partial explanation of why China took an anti-U.S. stance in the 1960s, but they also miss an important piece of the story, that is, power politics. Utilizing newly available primary sources in China—including recently declassified documents housed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (MFAA) and several provincial and municipal archives—this article presents a new understanding of China's policy toward the United States in the 1960s. In a departure from the conventional view that holds China's foreign policy was highly ideological, intransigent, and aggressive, this article argues that Chinese leaders were shrewd strategic players. Beijing was able to compromise with Washington when needed. However, fundamentally, Chinese leaders saw rapprochement with the United States as detrimental to China's goal of pursuing great power status. The Chinese documentary evidence also shows that there was more continuity than change in China's foreign policy, and that domestic radicalization alone cannot fully explain China's foreign policy behavior. Actively courting leftist forces and non-aligned countries, Beijing saw that its anti-U.S. strategy

3. For critiques of the balance-of-power interpretation, see Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversary: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), Introduction, esp. 3–5; Evelyn Goh, *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1961–1974: From "Red Menace" and "Tacit Ally"* (New York, 2005), Introduction, esp. 1–7.

4. For representative views, see Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*; Chen Jie, *Ideology in U.S. Foreign Policy: Case Studies in U.S. China Policy* (Westport, CT, 1992); Harding, *A Fragile Relationship*; Yang and Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente."

5. Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 7.

6. See Li, "Changes in China's Domestic Situation in the 1960s and Sino-U.S. Relations," 288–320; Niu Jun, "1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy" (*Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 48*, 2005); Lüthi, "Chinese Foreign Policy, 1960–1979," 152–79.

was paying off. China's acquisition of nuclear weapons marked its achievement of great power status, politically and symbolically, and further boosted China's self-confidence and optimism in pursuing a strategy of "striking the enemies with two fists." The fact that there were limits to the Sino-Soviet split made China feel secure taking an anti-U.S. stance. It was not until the outbreak of the Zhenbao Island conflict in 1969 that the Soviet threat to China's security came to the forefront of Chinese leaders' minds. The prominence of the perceived Soviet threat then motivated Chinese leaders to seek rapprochement with the United States.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY? THE RADICALIZATION OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

The election of John F. Kennedy raised China's hope for a possible shift in the United States' antagonistic policy toward China. However, because of Washington's continuous efforts to block Beijing's bid for United Nations (UN) membership as well as its staunch support of Jiang Jieshi's Nationalist regime in Taiwan, Beijing had no illusion that a shift in U.S. policy would come any time soon. Indeed, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs predicted in an annual report prepared for the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCP CC) in January 1961 that the Kennedy administration would continue to pursue the "two Chinas" plot and would "not give up sowing dissension in Sino-Soviet relations."⁷ The Chinese leadership, therefore, strongly believed that the U.S. "global strategy" was to "completely annihilate socialism" and the United States' purpose in stationing troops in Taiwan, South Vietnam, and Thailand was "essentially to oppose China."⁸ Such a belief, however, did not prevent Beijing from compromising with Washington, as shown by China's active participation in the 1961-1962 Geneva Conference on Laos.

At the turn of 1960, the raging civil war in Laos, which involved the Western-supported General Phoumi Nosavan, the neutralist Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the Communist-backed Pathet Lao forces, had increasingly drawn major powers to the edge of confrontation. In May 1961, fourteen nations, including the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China, gathered in Geneva in an effort to work out a solution.⁹ In a startlingly realist assessment, Chinese Vice Premier and Foreign Minister Chen Yi, who headed the Chinese delegation, explained why the Laotian problem should be resolved through negotiations: "If we push the civil war further to fight a complete war, the United States will be forced

7. All translations from the Chinese archival sources are the author's own. "The Foreign Ministry's Summary of 1960 and Plan for 1961," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, January 23, 1961, Series number: 142 long, Catalogue number: 1, Collection number: 102 (hereafter 142-1-102), Beijing Municipal Archives (hereafter BMA), Beijing, China, 19.

8. "Marshal Chen's Report Concerning the Situation about the Expanded Geneva Conference (Recorded Copy)," August 1962, Series number: 147, Collection number: 3124 long, Collection Name: Provincial Foreign Affairs Office (hereafter PFAO) (hereafter 147-3124-PFAO), Jiangsu Provincial Archives (hereafter JPA), Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, China.

9. Zhai Qiang, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 92, 96.

to enter the war, which means the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization will then be forced to enter the war also, and eventually Vietnam, the Soviet Union and we all will be forced to enter the war.” The Laotian civil war would then become a war between the two blocs. This is “unprofitable to our construction,” Chen Yi noted. “There is no need to fight a world war for a tiny little kingdom,” he added, saying that even “if negotiations cannot resolve the problem and the civil war resumes, let the three parties in Laos do the fighting. The five big powers should not get involved.”¹⁰

After an unexpected encounter—with hand-shaking and an exchange of compliments—with Averell Harriman, U.S. Delegate and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, at a reception in Geneva, Chen Yi insisted that China and the United States, as “two great powers,” would not engage in “silent diplomacy.” China could not give up its “leadership” in the national liberation movement in order to “cotton up to” the Americans.¹¹

The Geneva Conference on Laos strengthened China’s confidence in its growing power and influence. Chen Yi believed that “China’s prestige still keeps growing” and that the Geneva Conference on Laos demonstrated that “the world’s problems cannot be resolved without China’s participation.”¹² Citing Harriman’s personal request at the Geneva Conference to visit China as one of many examples that the United States had no choice but to come to terms with a rising China, Chen argued that China’s anti-U.S. policy had paid off.¹³

Chinese leaders well understood that recognition of China’s great power status would come only after China increased its economic and military power. “The reason that there are still some out there who do not recognize us is that our strength is still not great enough,” Chen Yi told Foreign Ministry officials in March 1961. The Chinese foreign minister went on to add that “Some have begun to recognize our status as a world great power” due to Beijing’s “achievements” since 1949 and asserted that more countries would follow suit after China’s development in the years to come.¹⁴

China’s intransigence was not defined by ideological commitment. Rather, it was based on realistic calculations. Although Chinese leaders were willing to compromise over issues that were not essential to China’s strategic and security interests, such as the Laotian war, they still saw China’s anti-U.S. posture, particularly in Southeast Asia, as central to its grand strategy.

The United States’ refusal to recognize China diplomatically only rendered China more determined to pursue great power status through challenging the status quo in

10. “Comrade Chen Yi’s Report at the Meeting of Graduating Students from Institutions of Higher Learning in Beijing,” August 10, 1961, 598-1-22, BMA.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. “How are World Problems to be Resolved? (Outline)—Record of Vice Premier Chen Yi’s Report to All the Cadres of the Foreign Ministry,” March 9, 1961, 142-1-102, BMA, 45-46.

the international system. Beijing believed that it could achieve great power status by doing two things: accumulating economic and military strength domestically and consolidating China's leadership in the socialist camp as well as in the decolonization and national liberation struggles. These fundamental calculations determined China's strategic choice. China was willing to reach an accommodation with Washington over Laos to avoid direct confrontation. Yet, China would not compromise its fundamental strategic goals and refused a rapprochement with the United States.

"We should be prepared to not forge any relations with the United States for ten or even fifteen years," Chen Yi argued in August 1961. "We should only allow the Geneva approach in which we can shake hands and invite them to attend receptions, but nothing shall go beyond that."¹⁵ China did not want to have its hands tied. To pursue rapprochement with the United States, Chinese leaders believed, would "cost our leadership status" in the national liberation movement.¹⁶

Yet, China's refusal of rapprochement does not simply indicate "intransigence." New research of Chinese sources allows us to see the subtlety in Chinese strategic thinking. The Chinese were willing to take an anti-U.S. posture, but not without limits. They were able to think in tactical terms. They would not recklessly enter into a major war with the United States for Southeast Asia, be it Laos or even Vietnam. Nor would they flatly turn down American overtures should Washington be willing to make significant compromises over issues of crucial strategic interest to China, such as Taiwan. Chen Yi told Foreign Ministry cadres in March 1961, "If the United States is really going to make compromises on its China policy, we cannot completely object to resolving problems." "However," Chen complained, "the United States refuses to do so."¹⁷

Between February and March 1962, Wang Jiaxiang, a senior revolutionary veteran and head of the International Liaison Department (ILD) of the CCP CC, proposed a moderate foreign policy in a letter and report to China's top leaders.¹⁸ On Indochina, Wang advised China to avoid the outbreak of a "Korean-style war" and to prevent the United States from pursuing a "spearhead offensive" against China. Wang insisted that China should try to prevent the Sino-Soviet conflict from taking the path of "straight-line sharpening."¹⁹ Wang criticized Chinese

15. "Comrade Chen Yi's Report at the Meeting of Graduating Students from Institutions of Higher Learning in Beijing," BMA, 8-9.

16. Ibid.

17. "How are World Problems to be Resolved? (Outline)—Record of Vice Premier Chen Yi's Report to All the Cadres of the Foreign Ministry," BMA, 59-60.

18. For accounts of Wang Jiaxiang written in English, see Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution: The Coming of the Cataclysm, 1961-1966*, vol. 3 (New York, 1997), 269-74; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 114-15; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 220-21; Yafeng Xia, "Wang Jiaxiang: New China's First Ambassador and the First Director of the International Liaison Department of the CCP," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 16 (October 2009): 501-19.

19. Zhang Tuosheng, "Praiseworthy Expeditions and Precious Endeavors: On Wang Jiaxiang's Contributions to the Party's International Strategic Thoughts," in Zhang Tuosheng ed., *Huanqiu tongci liangre: yidai lingxiu men de guoji zhanlue sixiang* [The Same Temperature around the Globe: The International Strategic Thoughts of a Generation of Leaders] (Beijing, 1993),

policymakers' tendency to overestimate the danger of another world war and to overlook the possibility of China's peaceful co-existence with imperialism.²⁰ Calling attention to China's economic difficulties and limited resources in the wake of the Great Leap Forward (GLF)—a radical economic and social campaign that aimed at transforming China through rapid industrialization and collectivization, Wang argued that China should avoid “over-speaking,” “overdoing,” or “arbitrarily writing checks to support [other countries]” and should “act according to its own ability” in its support for revolutionary nationalist movements in the Third World.²¹

Wang Jiaxiang's proposals were quickly criticized and later even labeled as “three reconciliations and one reduction” (*sanbe yishao*), meaning reconciliation with imperialists, revisionists, and international reactionaries, and reduction of support for nationalist liberation war and revolution.²² The criticism of Wang Jiaxiang's proposal was widely interpreted by historians as a missed opportunity, symbolizing the radicalization of Chinese foreign policy and the re-assertion of militancy in China's external policy.²³ This perspective is not without merit, but a closer examination of Chinese primary sources is necessary before scholars could conclude that the rejection of *sanbe yishao* marked a fundamental shift in China's foreign policy.

First, new Chinese evidence suggests that the criticism of *sanbe yishao* brought far fewer changes to China's foreign policy than popularly believed. While it is true that Wang Jiaxiang's proposals were criticized, they were not denounced as “line error” (*luxian cuowu*), a much more serious political sin. Mao declared that Wang's ideas had a “tendency toward rightist deviation” at the Beidaihe Conference in late July 1962. Chen Yi explained later in November 1962 that *sanbe yishao* was “erroneous” but was merely “a matter of understanding.”²⁴

Not until May 1963, when the Sino-Soviet split further widened, did Mao become increasingly worried that his revisionist enemies in Moscow might have

176–78; Xu Zehao, *Wang Jiaxiang nianpu, 1906–1974* [The Chronology of Wang Jiaxiang, 1906–1974] (hereafter *WJN*) (Beijing, 2001), 486–88; Xiao Donglian, *Qiusuo Zhongguo: wenge qian shimian shi* [In Search of China: History of the Decade Prior to the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing, 1999), 927–29.

20. *WJN*, 486–87; Zhang Tuosheng, “Praiseworthy Expeditions and Precious Endeavors,” 173–75.

21. *WJN*, 489; *Wang Jiaxiang xuanji* [Selected Works of Wang Jiaxiang] (Beijing, 1989), 444–58.

22. Revisionism in the socialist ideological discourse refers to the deviation from the orthodox Marxist-Leninist theory. As the Sino-Soviet schism widened, the Soviet Union was increasingly accused by China as practicing a revisionist line that betrayed the interests of the world proletarian revolution.

23. For the argument, see MacFarquhar, *The Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, 277, 279–81; Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 115; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 211; Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ, 2007), 243; Niu, “1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy.”

24. Pang Xianzhi and Jin Chongji eds., *Mao Zedong zhuan, 1949–1976* [The Biography of Mao Zedong, 1949–1976] (hereafter *MZZ*) (Beijing, 2004), 1235; “Comrade Chen Yi's Report Concerning the Issue of the Current Situation,” November 13–14, 1962, 145/2-3124-PFAO, JPA, 19.

sympathizers in Beijing. Mao's suspicions about the "Khrushchevs who sleep by our side" would grow, eventually leading him to launch the tumultuous Cultural Revolution in 1966.²⁵

Second, Mao did not completely reject Wang's ideas. Under Mao's instruction, Foreign Minister Chen Yi gave a speech at the concluding session of the Beidaihe Conference on August 24, 1962 that partially affirmed Wang's view on international relations. The draft of Chen's speech, which was approved by Mao, had been worked out by the Foreign Ministry and the State Council's Foreign Affairs Office, with assistance from the ILD and the Foreign Trade Ministry.²⁶

In his speech, Chen argued, as Wang did, that China should "act according to its own ability" and "leave some leeway" in carrying out its foreign aid task. While suggesting that China should not "carelessly bear responsibility" on matters that went beyond China's capability, Chen nevertheless insisted that China should not break outstanding promises. The foreign minister stressed that China must prioritize its aid to countries such as Albania, Cuba, Algeria, and Laos and must "help them hold out."²⁷

Characterizing the U.S.-China relationship as a "Cold War stalemate with negotiations" (*lengzhan jiangchi tanpan*), Chen suggested that China's foreign policy should be guided by the principle of using "the stalemate status to strive for relative reconciliation" to address pressing concerns in terms of domestic economic readjustment and recovery. Believing that the fundamental differences between China and the United States could not be resolved because neither side was willing to compromise, Chen held that the "status quo" of "stalemate" would continue to exist between Beijing and Washington. Instead of retreat, China should play a "tit-for-tat" strategy against the United States. "Only if we are not afraid of tension, can we achieve reconciliation," Chen noted.²⁸ Meanwhile, Chen balanced his argument by suggesting that China should "maintain certain contacts" with the United States to avoid miscommunications and should put a wedge between the United States and its Western allies such as Britain and France by exploiting the "internal contradictions" within the Western camp.²⁹

It is tempting to suggest that the criticism of Wang Jiaxiang's *sanbe yishao* represented a missed opportunity for China to change the direction of its foreign policy and improve its relations with the United States. New Chinese evidence, however, shows that there was more continuity than change in

25. Cong Jin, *Quzhe fazhan de suiye* [The Years of Tortuous Development] (Zhenzhou, Henan, 1989), 576-80.

26. Wang Li, *Xianchang lisbi: wenhua dageming jishi* [On-the-Spot-History: A Record of the Cultural Revolution] (Hong Kong, 1993), 23; MZZ, 1250; "Comrade Chen Yi's Report Concerning the Issue of the Current Situation," JPA, 1. For a hand-written copy of Chen Yi's August 24 speech, see "Twenty Articles Concerning the Issue of International Situation (Recorded Copy)," 145/2-3 124-PFAO, JPA.

27. "Twenty Articles Concerning the Issue of International Situation (Recorded Copy)," JPA, 1.

28. *Ibid.*, 10-11.

29. *Ibid.*, 11.

China's foreign policy. In fact, it was not until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 that extreme leftist thinking in foreign policy became prevalent in China.³⁰ The rejection of *sanbe yishao* did not necessarily entail a radicalization of Chinese foreign policy. After all, the top Chinese leadership actually endorsed some of the suggestions originating in *sanbe yishao*. However, it is also true that Mao and his colleagues believed that *sanbe yishao* as a whole ran counter to China's key strategic goals of competing for leadership in the socialist camp and the Third World and, above all, of bidding for great power status on the world scene.

SHIFT IN CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY: THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT,
NUCLEAR WEAPONS, AND THE VIETNAM WAR

Understanding that a Sino-Soviet split would impair China's strategic and security interests and would benefit Washington, Chinese leaders, up until early 1961, ardently attempted to avoid a rupture with Moscow.³¹ The events in 1962, however, quickly convinced Chinese leaders that Sino-Soviet relations had undergone a fundamental change. The so-called Yili-Tacheng Incident—the exodus of over 60,000 Chinese Muslims residing in Yili Prefecture and Tacheng, Xinjiang to the Soviet Union in the spring of 1962, apparently with Soviet encouragement and support—only heightened the perceived Soviet threat to China's security.³² Beijing decided to use the incident to uproot Soviet political and economic influence in Xinjiang, vowing to make the minority-concentrated province the “People's Republic of China's Xinjiang, no longer other people's Xinjiang.”³³

After the Yili-Tacheng Incident, Sino-Soviet relations increasingly soured, characterized by the virulent polemics launched by the two communist

30. Niu Jun, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo duiwai guanxi shi gailun, 1949–2000* [Introduction to the History of Foreign Relations of the PRC, 1949–2000], (Beijing, 2010), 200.

31. For a reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet split, see Dong Wang, “The Quarreling Brothers: New Chinese Archives and a Reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet Relations, 1959–1962” (*Cold War International History Project* Working Paper no. 49, 2005).

32. See Constantine Pleshakov, “Nikita Khrushchev and Sino-Soviet Relations,” in *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (Washington, DC, 1998), 239; Li Danhui, “A Historical Examination of the Origins of the 1962 Yili-Tacheng Incident in Xinjiang—Archival Materials from Xinjiang, China,” *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao* [Research Materials of the CCP Party History], nos. 4–5, 1999. Top leaders including Mao clearly perceived a Soviet hand behind the incident. See The Literature Research Office (hereafter LRO) of the CCP CC ed., *Mao Zedong nianpu* [The Chronology of Mao Zedong, 1949–1976] (hereafter MZN) (Beijing, 2013), vol. 5, 124; “Report by the Party Committee of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Concerning the Counter-revolutionary Riot in Yining City,” Telegram from the Xinjiang Autonomous Region to the CCP CC, top secret, 118-01121-03, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (MFAA), Beijing, China, 63–75.

33. “The State Council Foreign Affairs Office: Comrade Zhang Hanfu's First Talk (Recorded Copy),” November 7, 1962, 145/1-3124-PFAO, JPA.

powers.³⁴ As Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, the focus of China's diplomacy shifted from the Socialist bloc to the "intermediate zones"—a term first coined by Mao in 1946 that referred to the vast group of countries between the Soviet Union and the United States.³⁵ By the 1960s, the growth of the non-aligned movement and the increasing power struggles between Washington and Moscow gave rise to new changes in the global configuration of power. Recognizing these changes in the international strategic landscape, Mao expanded the concept and proposed the new theory of "two intermediate zones" in September 1963, with one intermediate zone being "oppressed nations" in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, another being capitalist countries in Europe and elsewhere.³⁶ Mao advocated building an "international united front" against American imperialism and Soviet revisionism with countries in the "two intermediate zones." His theory became an important guide for China's diplomacy.³⁷ Following the "two intermediate zones" theory, China emphasized continuing to support national liberation movements and expanding relations with Western Europe—the latter goal was also partly driven by China's need for technological and industrial transfers, which were cut off from both the United States and the Soviet Union.³⁸ Between 1960 and 1964, China established diplomatic relations with fifteen "intermediate zone" countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and one in Western Europe (France).³⁹

China's establishment of diplomatic relations with France in February 1964 came as a major diplomatic breakthrough for Beijing.⁴⁰ As a CCP CC report noted, "Now many countries, under the pressure of the United States, do not dare establish diplomatic relations with us," and China's establishment of diplomatic relations with France would be "bound to have a great impact on Western Europe" because "France is a nuclear power and its status is much higher than states such as Belgium." The Chinese leadership expected that a diplomatic breakthrough with France would help China reap the French African votes needed to "enter the U.N."⁴¹

Encouraged by the diplomatic breakthrough, Beijing decided to take another major diplomatic initiative. Between December 1963 and March 1964, Chinese

34. For an account of the Sino-Soviet polemics, see Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, chap. 9; Cui Qi, *Wo suo qinli de Zhong Su da lunzhan* [The Great Polemics between China and the Soviet Union that I Personally Experienced] (Beijing, 2009), 125–258.

35. "Conversation with U.S. Journalist Anna Louis Strong," August 6, 1946, in Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong xuanji* [Selected Works of Mao Zedong], vol. 4, (Beijing, 1991), 1193–94.

36. "Chairman Mao Zedong's Conversations Concerning the Intermediate Zone," 102-00110-01, MFAA, 34–35, 46. See also The MFA and the LRO CCP CC eds., *Mao Zedong waijiao wenxuan* [Selected Diplomatic Papers of Mao Zedong] (hereafter MZWW) (Beijing, 1994), 506–09.

37. Niu, *Zhonghua renmin gongbeguo duiwai guanxisi gailun*, 177.

38. Xiao Donglian, *Liushi nian guoshi jiyao: waijiao juan* [A Record of Sixty Years of State Affairs: the Volume of Diplomatic Affairs] (Changsha, Hunan, 2009), 191, 198.

39. Niu, *Zhonghua renmin gongbeguo duiwai guanxisi gailun*, 177–78.

40. "The Record of Meeting of Premier Zhou and Vice Premier Chen Yi with the Former French Prime Minister Faure—Regarding the Plan of Establishing Diplomatic Relations Through a Phased-Manner," top secret, October 31, 1963, 110-01982-13, MFAA, 88–97.

41. "The Center: 'On the Current Situation,'" 177-3124-PFAO, JPA.

Premier Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi made high-profile tours of fourteen countries in Asia and Africa that aimed at breaking up the West's diplomatic encirclement, beefing up support among non-aligned countries, particularly in Africa, and building a "united front" against "imperialism, reactionary nationalism, and modern revisionism."⁴² Zhou explained to his associates, "We must break the high wall the two superpowers attempt to erect around us. We must go out, and be seen and let our voices be heard."⁴³

In March 1965, Beijing publicly broke with Moscow, declaring that the Socialist bloc ceased to exist. Again in June 1965, Beijing publicly declared that "to oppose imperialism we must oppose revisionism," marking the strategy of so-called "striking enemies with two fists (*liangge quantou daren*)," meaning dealing with U.S. imperialism and Soviet revisionism at the same time.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, despite the political and ideological break with Moscow, Beijing did not cut off diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and indeed tried to limit the Sino-Soviet split. During a meeting with the visiting Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin in February 1965, Mao noted that Beijing and Moscow had not had a "complete break-up," and insisted that the two communist states should limit their debate to "warfare of pen and ink" (*bimo zhang*). Mao apparently was keenly aware of the American threat when he stated, "As soon as imperialism begins moving swords and guns (*dong daoqi*), either against you or us, we shall unite together."⁴⁵ Although Beijing and Moscow could not agree on the terms of reconciliation, both were eager to limit their political and ideological split. In fact, Kosygin was given a "friendly" reception in Beijing.⁴⁶ During Kosygin's stop-over in Beijing, Zhou Enlai, along with Chen Yi, held extensive discussions with the Soviet leader regarding measures to resume high-level visits, restore bilateral trade, and continue student and cultural exchanges. Kosygin revealed Moscow's willingness to continue to sell arms, including Soviet tanks and IL-18 transport planes, to China.⁴⁷ In a way, the fact that there was a limit to the Sino-Soviet split provided

42. "Summary of Work for Accompanying Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice Premier Chen Yi to Visit Fourteen Countries in Asia and Africa," February 5, 1964, 203-00316-02, MFAA, 1-17; "The Summary of Work for the First Phase and the Assignment of Work for the Next Phase for the Delegation," Telegram from the Delegation to the MFA, top secret, January 7, 1964, 203-00316-01, MFAA, 60-63.

43. Chen Dunde, *Zhou Enlai fei wang Feizhou* [Zhou Enlai Flying Unto Africa] (Beijing, 2005), 156.

44. "Editorial: On Moscow's March Conference," *Renmin ribao* [*The People's Daily*], March 23, 1965; "The Editing Office: Carrying out the Struggle against the Khrushchev Revisionism to the Uttermost," *Renmin ribao*, June 14, 1965; Niu, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo duiwai guanxishi gailun*, 199-200.

45. "The Record of Conversation between Chairman Mao Zedong, President Liu Shaoqi, etc., and the Soviet Premier Kosygin Who is Making a Transit Trip through Our Territory," February 12, 1965, 109-03957-07, MFAA, 183; For the view that Mao wanted the split and intended to put the blame on the Soviets, see Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 293-95.

46. "The Record of Conversation and Related Situation of the Second Encounter between Premier Zhou, Vice Premier Chen Yi and Kosygin and His Entourage," top secret, February 5, 1965, 109-03957-02, MFAA, 30-32.

47. "Record of Conversation of the Eighth Encounter between Premier Zhou, Vice Premier Chen Yi and Kosygin," top secret, February 11, 1965, 109-03957-08, MFAA, 162-72.

China the strategic space and security needed to maintain an anti-U.S. stance. It was not until the outbreak of the Zhenbao Island conflict in 1969 that the Soviet threat to China's security came to the front and center of Chinese leaders' minds.

As early as 1956, Zhou Enlai argued that nuclear weapons would "consolidate" China's defense, increase China's prestige and influence in the socialist camp, and elevate China's position in the world.⁴⁸ Mao expressed these sentiments in blunt terms three months later: "In today's world, if we do not want to be bullied by others, we cannot afford not to have that stuff [atomic bomb]."⁴⁹ Mao told a French parliament delegation in early 1964, "We too shall have our own bomb. It is a means of power." Mao continued, "But there are two large countries that intend to lead the world without consulting anyone else. Have they consulted General de Gaulle?" He went on to chastise the Test Ban Treaty as "a fraud," claiming, in his typical fashion, "no big power in the world is allowed to shit and pee on our heads." "That may shock you," Mao told his stunned guests, "but it's the truth."⁵⁰

China's successful detonation of its first atomic bomb on October 16, 1964 marked Beijing's entry into the nuclear club, greatly boosted China's prestige and influence, and increased the acceptance of China's great power status in the world. In fact, China's successful nuclear test, coupled with the unexpected downfall of the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, created a bandwagon effect among many non-aligned countries as well as leftist forces in the international communist movement.⁵¹ U.S. officials recognized, correctly, that a Chinese nuclear capability would cause many Asian nations to raise their estimates of China's "military power relative to that of their own countries and the [United States'] capabilities in the area," and "muster support for Chinese claims to great power status."⁵² However, Chinese leaders understood that China could not realistically rest its national security strategy on the basis of the limited nuclear capability it possessed. Keenly aware of the huge disparity between American and Chinese nuclear

48. "Excerpts of 'The Report Concerning the Issue of Intelligentsia' by Zhou Enlai," January 14, 1956, *Dang de wenxian* [Party Literature] 39, no. 3 (1994): 14.

49. *Mao Zedong wenji* [Collected Works of Mao Zedong], vol. 7 (Beijing, 2009), 27.

50. "Memorandum of Conversation on Chairman Mao Zedong's Reception of the French Parliament Members Delegation Headed by Bernard," January 30, 1964, 110-02005-02, MFAA, 2; "Mao's interview with the French delegation," January 30, 1964, Attachment A to a circular telegram from the State Department to U.S. Embassies, "Status of Program to Influence World Opinion with Respect to a Chinese Nuclear Detonation," July 19, 1963, Subject-Numeric Files, 1964-1966, DEF 12-1, Chicom [Communist China], Record Group 59 (hereafter RG), United States National Archive (hereafter USNA), College Park, Maryland, United States.

51. "Reactions to Our Nuclear Detonation and the Downfall of Khrushchev," Telegram from the Embassy in Cuba to the MFA, October 23, 1964, 113-00395-10B, MFAA, 95; "Various Countries Military Attaches' Reactions to Our Detonation of Atomic Bomb and the Downfall of the Bald," Telegram from the Section of Military Attaches at the Embassy in India to the Second Department of the General Staff, October 20, 1964, 13-00396-07A, MFAA, 46-47.

52. William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle': The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960-1964," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000-2001): 54-99; Memo from Rostow to Johnson, April 30, 1964, President's Evening Reading Reports, 1964-1967, Box 1, RG 59, USNA.

capabilities, Mao believed China's security could only be ensured by strong conventional capability rather than nuclear arsenals.⁵³ Mao told the heads of the State Planning Commission in May 1964, "When war occurs, we still have to place hope on foot soldiers." China's nuclear capability, Mao noted, would be limited and for deterrence purposes only.⁵⁴

The outbreak of the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the escalation of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam created deep anxiety among Chinese leaders that the United States might intend to drive the war into China.⁵⁵ On August 12, 1964, Mao ordered a report on China's vulnerabilities to a "surprise attack," prepared by the Operation Department of the General Staff to be "carefully studied and progressively implemented."⁵⁶ The report's dire assessment of China's lack of preparation for war shocked Mao and prompted the chairman to push for a drastic re-orientation of China's economic planning. He urged policy planners to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the First, Second, and Third Lines (the First Line refers to coastal provinces, the Second Line central China, and the Third Line southwest and northeast provinces) and to prepare for an invasion by U.S. forces.⁵⁷

As the Johnson administration escalated the war and increased airstrikes on North Vietnam, China raced to put its economy on war footing and embarked on the massive relocation of industries and assets to the Third Line. On April 12, 1965, an enlarged Politburo passed "The CCP CC Instructions Concerning the Strengthening of the Work of War Preparations," and officially mobilized the nation for war.⁵⁸ Particularly, Chinese leaders were worried that the escalation of the Vietnam War might eventually involve China. At a politburo meeting, General Secretary of the CCP CC Deng Xiaoping painted a gloomy picture of how China might be swept into the escalating war in Vietnam and urged Beijing to make war preparations based on the "gravest situation" of an all-out war against the United States.⁵⁹ Not surprisingly, Chinese leaders took the prospect of an American nuclear attack seriously should the war escalate. Premier Zhou Enlai

53. "Mao's Conversation with British Marshal Montgomery," September 24, 1961, MZWW, 475-476; MZN, vol. 5, 27-28.

54. "Mao Zedong's Remarks at the Briefing of Proposal for the Third Five Year Plan by the Leading Group of the State Planning Commission," *Dang de wenxian*, no. 3 (1996); Chen Donglin, *Sanxian jianshe: Beizhan shiqi de xibu kaifa* [The Construction of the Third Line: The Development of the Western Region during the Period of War Preparations] (Beijing, 2003), 48.

55. "Foreign Minister Cheng Yi's Reply Telegram to Vietnamese Foreign Minister Xuan Thuy Concerning U.S. Expanding War of Aggression," September 7, 1964, 106-01445-05, MFAA, 11-19.

56. "The Report by the General Staff's Operation Department," April 25, 1964, *Dangde wenxian*, no. 3 (1995): 34-35; Chen, *Sanxian jianshe*, 75-76.

57. Jin Chongji ed., *Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1949-1976* [The Biography of Zhou Enlai, 1949-1976] (hereafter ZEZ) (Beijing, 1998), 810-11. For a detailed study of Three-Line defense, see Lorenz Lüthi, "The Vietnam War and China's Third Line Defense Planning before the Cultural Revolution, 1964-1966," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 26-51.

58. The LRO CCP CC ed., *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949-1976* [The Chronology of Zhou Enlai, 1949-1976] (hereafter ZEN), vol. 2 (Beijing, 1997), 724.

59. "Remarks by Several Responsible Comrades at the Center during the Discussion of 'Instruction for War Preparations' at the Politburo Meeting Transmitted by Comrade Wang

explicitly expressed his feeling over this dreadful possibility, “whether or not a nuclear war will occur? It’s possible [for the U. S.] to drop a few nukes, but it’s impossible to drop many. Anyhow, we ourselves are testing nukes and dropping some over there [Lop Nor]. The plan should be based on [the eventuality of] fighting [a nuclear war].”⁶⁰

The Chinese leadership also decided that if the situation on the ground deteriorated and necessitated it, China, upon request from Hanoi, would send ground troops to North Vietnam. As Deng noted, “The current task is to try all possible means to help Vietnam,” adding, “Besides goods and materials, in terms of personnel, we will go once we are asked to go, and send as many as requested, and whichever part [of our troops] is asked to go, will go.”⁶¹ Liu Shaoqi, President of the PRC, told the visiting Van Tien Dung, Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnamese People’s Army, “We think the best situation is the current one in which we, as your rear area, support you with some aid. This is the best for us.” But Liu also made it clear that if the United States landed troops on North Vietnam and therefore “brings the war to China,” China would then send combat troops to fight U.S. troops alongside their Vietnamese comrades.⁶²

As the danger of war with the United States loomed large, Mao began to reconsider China’s overall defense strategy. Overturning the so-called “holding firmly in the north and allowing an enemy to come in the south” (*beiding nanfang*) strategy developed by Defense Minister Marshal Lin Biao in the early 1960s that was intended to protect China from a multidirectional and massive invasion by the United States and its Asian allies, Mao laid out the strategy of “luring the enemy in deep” (*youdi shenru*) in 1965. At a June 1965 meeting with top military leaders in the city of Hangzhou, Mao went to great lengths to explain what China’s military strategy would be if invaded by U.S. troops.⁶³ Mao believed that China’s coastline was too long to be effectively defended at every point, and that even if solid fortifications were built, they would become predictably “useless” in the same way France’s Maginot Line or China’s Great Wall had.⁶⁴ Therefore, Mao argued, it would be erroneous “if you don’t give him [the U.S.] some goods or let him taste some flavor. He will not come in if so . . . We should be prepared to give Shanghai,

Wei,” April 12, 1965, 1162-3011-GOPPC (The General Office of the Provincial Party Committee), JPA.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. “Record of Conversation of Chairman Liu’s Receiving of Vietnamese People’s Army Chief of Staff Van Tien Dung,” June 9, 1965, 106-00890-01, MFAA, 83-90.

63. Luo Ruiqing transmitted Mao’s views to a Central Secretariat meeting on June 23. See “A Recorded Copy of Luo Ruiqing’s Talk,” June 23, 1965, 1162-3011-GOPPC, JPA; “Remarks When Listening to the Briefing of Planning Work in Hangzhou,” June 16, 1965, in *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong junshi wengao* [The Military Manuscripts of Mao Zedong since the Founding of the PRC] (hereafter JYMZJW), vol. 2 (Beijing, 2010), 314-15.

64. Hu Zhefeng, “A Discussion and Analysis of Several Military and Strategic Guiding Principles since the Founding of the PRC,” *Dangdai zhongguo shi yanjiu* [Contemporary China History Studies] 7, no. 4 (July 2000): 26.

Suzhou, Nanjing, Huangshi, and Wuhan to him.” The chairman argued that only by allowing the Americans to take some ground could China lure American forces to areas where concentrations of superior Chinese forces could “first annihilate a battalion, then a regiment, then a division,” and eventually “score a great victory.”⁶⁵

“Regardless of whether or not [the enemy] will come and whether [we] can resist [the invasion] or not, [we] should be prepared for the eventuality that [the enemy] will come in and that [we] will even lure him in,” Mao told his generals, adding, “regardless of whether or not an atomic [war] will be fought, we should be prepared for the eventuality that it will be. In short, [we] should prepare ourselves for both eventualities, and place the emphasis of preparations on the most difficult part.”⁶⁶

However, Chinese leaders were also trying carefully not to involve China in a bloody, Korean-War-style military conflict with the United States. Beijing tried to send messages to Washington both publicly and through private channels, warning that an invasion of North Vietnam would trigger Chinese intervention.⁶⁷ In particular, Beijing tried to communicate through Pakistani channels. During an April 1964 visit to Pakistan, Zhou Enlai asked Pakistani President Ayub Khan to convey three messages to the United States: “First, China will not provoke war with the United States on its own initiative; second, Chinese words count; third, China has made the preparations.” Zhou warned that the war could not be contained if the United States escalated it.⁶⁸ Again, after the Gulf of Tonkin incident on August 4, 1964, Zhou sent Khan several letters reiterating China’s position, hoping that Pakistan would convey the messages to Washington.⁶⁹

Chinese leaders believed that the best strategy to deter the United States from expanding the war into Chinese territory was to pin U.S. troops down in Vietnam. By keeping the war out of China and by pouring enormous amounts of aid into North Vietnam, including troops that provided logistical support, Beijing could

65. See “A Recorded Copy of Luo Ruiqing’s Talk,” JPA; “Remarks When Listening to the Briefing of Planning Work in Hangzhou,” *JYMZJW*, 314; “Excerpts of the Summary of Mao Zedong’s Conversations with Some Responsible Comrades of East China Region,” November 1965, *Dang de wenxian*, no. 3 (1995): 42. Suzhou is a city close to Shanghai, Nanjing is the capital of Jiangsu province, Wuhan is the capital of Hubei province, and Huangshi is a city close to Wuhan.

66. “A Recorded Copy of Luo Ruiqing’s Talk,” JPA.

67. For an account of Chinese signaling, see James Hershberg and Chen Jian, “Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy: China’s Signals to the United States about Vietnam in 1965,” *The International History Review* 27, no. 1 (March 2005): 47–84.

68. “Record of Meeting between Premier Zhou Enlai and Pakistan President Ayub Khan,” secret, April 2, 1964, 203-00653-01, *MFAA*, 18–22. When the postponement of Ayub Khan’s trip to the United States prevented him from taking Zhou’s message to the Americans, Zhou, during his visit to Tanzania in June 1965, made another attempt by asking Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere to deliver the messages to Washington. See *ZEN*, vol. 2, 735–36.

69. “Premier Zhou Enlai’s Letter to Pakistan President Ayub Concerning the Vietnam Issue (The Gulf of Tonkin Incident) and the Pakistani President’s Reply Letter,” August 15, 1964, 105-01876-01, *MFAA*.

significantly weaken American power without directly confronting U.S. military forces.⁷⁰

In many ways, the United States' catastrophic war in Vietnam not only fundamentally defined U.S. foreign policy in the 1960s, but also significantly shaped the course of U.S.-China relations.⁷¹ The Vietnam War brought Beijing and Washington to the brink of their largest military confrontation since the bloody war they fought on the Korean peninsula more than a decade earlier. Operating in uncertainty, both sides prepared for the worst. Washington made contingency plans for a large-scale Chinese intervention in Vietnam on the one hand, and Beijing mobilized its people to defend against a possible U.S. invasion on the other. Despite a number of gestures by the Johnson administration in 1965 and 1966, the unresolved war in Vietnam effectively made the Sino-American reconciliation untenable.

SINO-SOVIET BORDER CLASHES AND THE SHAPING OF TRIANGULAR POLITICS

On July 4, 1964, Mao, while receiving a delegation of the Japanese Socialist Party, commented that China had the right to recover tens of millions of square miles of land stolen by Tsarist Russia.⁷² Mao's remarks were quickly leaked to the Western media, triggering furious reactions from Moscow, including an implicit nuclear threat issued by Khrushchev. Mao became seriously concerned about the possibility of a Soviet military attack.⁷³ In light of the escalation of the Vietnam War following the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Chinese leaders contemplated the contingency of "fighting on two sides" with Soviet revisionism joining forces with U.S. imperialism. Yet they still perceived the American threat as greater and more imminent than the potential Soviet threat.⁷⁴ In fact, Mao never believed that a massive Soviet invasion was probable at the time.⁷⁵

70. "Mao Zedong's Remarks When Receiving the Party and Government Delegation Headed by Premier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Pham Van Dong," October 5, 1964, *JYMZJW*, 267-72.

71. Nancy Tucker, "Threats, Opportunities and Frustrations in East Asia," in *Lyndon Johnson Confronts the World: American Foreign Policy, 1961-1968*, ed. Warren I. Cohen and Nancy Tucker (New York, 1994), 99-101.

72. See "Record of Conversation between Chairman Mao Zedong and the Centralist and Leftist Personnel of the Japanese Socialist Party Including Sasaki Kozo, Kuroda Hisao, Hososako Kanemitsu," secret, July 4, 1964, 105-01897-01, MFAA, 14-15.

73. For a discussion of the episode, see Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC, 2009), 113-15; Christian Ostermann, "East German Documents on the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 6/7 (Winter 1995-1996): 187; Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore, MD, 1980), 210-11; Huang Yao and Zhang Mingzhe, *Luo Ruiqing zhuàn* [The Biography of Luo Ruiqing] (Beijing, 1996), 415.

74. "Talk by Zhou Enlai When Receiving All the Delegates of the Operations Meeting of the Central Military Commission," May 21, 1965, in *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* [Selected Military

However, as Sino-Soviet border tensions rose, Moscow stepped up its military buildup along the border in the Far East, especially in Mongolia. In January 1966, Moscow concluded a new Soviet-Mongolia defense treaty that allowed Soviet troops to be stationed in Mongolia. By early 1967, Moscow had moved nearly a hundred thousand troops to Mongolia.⁷⁶ Between 1965 and 1969, Moscow dramatically increased the number of Soviet divisions along the Sino-Soviet border from seventeen to twenty-seven.⁷⁷

The Soviet military buildup along the border, as well as the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the unveiling of the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” greatly unsettled Chinese leaders. Increasingly worried about Soviet intentions, Chinese leaders had, publicly and privately, expressed their fear that the Soviets might not stop at Czechoslovakia.⁷⁸

As early as January 25, 1969, the Heilongjiang Provincial Military Region proposed an operation at the Zhenbao Island, a tiny islet disputed by Beijing and Moscow, using three companies of elite forces to ambush the Soviets. The proposal, with recommendations from the supervising Shenyang Military Region, was submitted to Beijing for a final decision. Mao was cautious, however. The chairman was waiting for the best timing. It was not until after the perceived Soviet provocations in early February that Mao made the final decision. The General Staff and the Foreign Ministry approved the proposal on February 19. The General Staff also gave instructions that the “counterattack in self-defense” should be restricted to the Chinese side of the border and the operation should be carried out “swiftly,” without “entanglement” or “protraction” in combat. The Shenyang Military Region sent out a team of commanders, headed by Deputy Commander Major General Xiao Quanfu to command the battle directly.⁷⁹

Papers of Zhou Enlai], vol. 4, ed. LRO of the CCP CC and the PLA Academy of Military Science (Beijing, 1997), 520–25.

75. Li Danhui, “The Year of 1964: Sino-Soviet Relations and the Change in Mao Zedong’s Thinking in Foreign Invasion and Domestic Trouble,” in *Zhong E guanxi de lishi yu xianshi* [The History and Reality of Sino-Russian Relations], ed. Luan Jinhe (Kaifeng, Henan, 2004), 557–74.

76. Gurtov and Hwang, *China under Threat*, 212.

77. Christian Ostermann, “East German Documents on the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969,” 187; Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 202.

78. Memo from Hughes to Rogers, February 11, 1969, CFPF, 1967–1969, Box 1974, POL ChiCom-U.S.S.R., RG 59, USNA; Intelligence Note from Denny to Rogers, March 4, 1969, in Burr ed., “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,” *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, available at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/>, accessed September 7, 2016; ZEN, vol. 3, 252–53; Wang Taiping chief ed., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaoshi, 1957–1969* [The Diplomatic History of the People’s Republic of China, 1957–1969] (hereafter ZRGW) (Beijing, 1998), vol. 2, 276–77; Jiang Benliang, “The ‘Czech Incident’ and Zhou Enlai’s ‘68’ Speech,” *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao*, no. 72 (December, 1999): 36–44.

79. Xu Yan, “The 1969 Armed Conflict on the Sino-Soviet Border,” *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao*, no. 5 (1994): 6; Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Mao Zedong’s Gratitude and Grudges with Moscow] (Nanchang, Jiangxi, 1999), 492.

The Zhenbao Island conflict flared up in early March 1969 and then spread from the Wusuli (Ussuri) River along the Sino-Soviet border into Central Asia. This incident proved to be a turning point in the triangular relationship between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington.⁸⁰ Mao's objectives in initiating armed clashes on the Sino-Soviet border were actually limited. Mao's first and direct goal was deterrence. Through a demonstration of determination and will, Mao believed, Beijing could force Moscow to refrain from provocations on the Sino-Soviet border. Mao's second and perhaps more important objective was to reunite the nation that had been torn apart by the tumultuous Cultural Revolution by creating tensions on the border. Satisfied that the Zhenbao Island conflict had served his purpose of mobilizing the nation and instilling order, Mao wanted to defuse the crisis.⁸¹ However, Moscow, having suffered humiliating defeat in two clashes on March 2 and 15, vowed revenge. Increasing military pressure, including nuclear threats, from the Soviet Union following the Zhenbao Island conflict quickly drove Mao to mobilize his troops, prepare the nation for "surprise attacks" by Moscow, and look to Washington to counter the Soviet threat. With anti-U.S. ideological rhetoric still lingering, the strategic thought of "allying with the U.S. to resist the Soviet Union" (*lianmei kangsu*) nevertheless gradually took shape in Mao's mind.⁸²

Mao reportedly commented after reading a report on the Zhenbao Island conflict that "the Americans have been assigned a good topic. A good essay can be composed now." According to Mao's head nurse Wu Xujun, Mao went on to note that the Sino-Soviet split would free the United States' hands by allowing Washington to base its global strategy on fighting "one and a half wars" rather than "two and a half wars." The United States, Mao predicted, would have the freedom to reevaluate its foreign policy based on the new reality of Sino-Soviet enmity.⁸³ Certainly the United States was in his mind when Mao was calculating the risks and benefits of initiating a limited conflict on the Sino-Soviet border. At the "Heads-Together" meeting with the members of the Central Cultural Revolution Small Group on March 15, Mao said, "If he [the Soviet Union] occupies Mudanjiang, the foreigners will then know [the implications]."⁸⁴ When he spoke of the "foreigners," Mao apparently was referring to the Americans. No doubt both Beijing and Moscow saw how deepening Sino-Soviet enmity might

80. Thomas Robinson, "China Confronts the Soviet Union: Warfare and Diplomacy on China's Inner Asian Frontiers," in *The People's Republic, pt. 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution*, ed. Denis Twitchett and John K. Fairbank, vol. 15 of *The Cambridge History of China* (New York, 1991), 254; Christian Ostermann, "East German Documents on the Border Conflict, 1969," 186.

81. Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 493; Li Danhui, "The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Origins and Consequences," *Dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu* 3, (1996): 48.

82. Yang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo jianguosbi*, 294; Niu Jun, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo duiwai guanxishi gailun*, 214-17.

83. Wu Xujun, "What Is in Mao Zedong's Heart," in the LRO CCP CC ed., *Mianbua Mao Zedong* [Cherish the Memory of Mao Zedong] (Beijing, 1993), 644-45. See also Li, "The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," 48.

84. Quoted in Li, "The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," 48.

significantly reconfigure the geostrategic landscape and alter the global balance of power. However, it might be a bit overstated, as some realist arguments tend to be, to suggest that Mao was deliberately “staging a show” for the Americans. We should not ignore the enormous uncertainties and apprehensions Mao and his colleagues faced. They were uncertain and even suspicious about U.S. intentions. After all, the United States was still increasing its military presence in Vietnam. The pressure on China’s southern flank was never allayed. U.S. President Richard Nixon, in his first press conference on February 8, 1969, refused to reconsider the long-held U.S. policy of blocking Beijing from entering the United Nations. No one, Mao included, could be totally certain that the Americans would not perceive Beijing as a threat greater than Moscow and “collude” with the Soviets against the weaker player, China, as they had relatively recently in the early 1960s.

Therefore, realistically speaking, if Mao had any hope that the Zhenbao Island conflict might ignite the Sino-American rapprochement, it must have been a remote one. It could not have been Mao’s primary motive for provoking the Zhenbao Island conflict.

The political report to the Ninth Congress of the CCP, delivered by Mao’s heir apparent Lin Biao and drafted under the chairman’s supervision, juxtaposed the Soviet Union and United States as two major enemies of China.⁸⁵ The Soviet Union, now labeled the “Soviet revisionist traitors’ clique,” for the first time was written into the new CCP Constitution, passed at the Ninth Party Congress, as China’s main enemy. While fears of the Soviet threat swept the nation, Beijing was also genuinely worried about the threat from the United States. The military leaders attending the Ninth Party Congress were particularly concerned about the U.S. strategic and military threat. For instance, in closed-door group discussions, top air force officers, pointing to the increasing number of surveillance flights conducted by U.S. troops, argued that the United States’ “half-moon encirclement” posed a serious threat to China’s security.⁸⁶

Anxious to ascertain the Soviets’ intentions, Mao turned to his trusted marshals for counsel. On February 19, 1969, Mao asked the “old marshals”—Marshals Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian—to “study some international issues.”⁸⁷ On the afternoon of March 1, 1969, the marshals had their first meeting in the Zhongnanhai leadership compound.⁸⁸ In late March, two weeks

85. Mao personally made many revisions to several drafts of the report. See “Comments on and Revisions to the Drafts of the Report to the CCP Ninth Congress by Lin Biao,” March and April 1969, in the LRO CCP CC ed., *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Manuscripts of Mao Zedong since the Founding of the PRC] (JYMZW) (Beijing, 1996), vol. 13, 11–16.

86. “The Conference Bulletin: The Air Force Small Group’s Study Situation of Vice Chairman Lin’s Political Report,” Northeast Group, No. 438, top secret, April 13, 1969, Series number: 189, Catalogue number: 2, Collection number: 235 (hereafter 189-2-235), Guangdong Provincial Archives (hereafter GPA), Guangzhou, China.

87. MZN, vol. 6, 229–30.

88. The Editing Group of *Chen Yi zhuàn*, *Chen Yi zhuàn* [The Biography of Chen Yi] (Beijing, 1997), 614.

after the Zhenbao Island clashes, the old marshals submitted to Mao a report entitled "To Observe a Zhenbao Island Tree from the Angle of the Forest of the World."⁸⁹ The report laid out the marshals' analysis of the Soviets' global strategic posture and intentions, arguing that the Soviet Union was "not yet ready" to launch "massive attacks against China from air, sea or land." The report concluded that the outbreak of the Zhenbao Island conflict did not change the fundamental structure in which both the Soviet Union and United States placed their strategic emphasis on Europe.⁹⁰

After the Ninth Party Congress, Mao authorized Zhou to make arrangements for the old marshals to restart joint study of the international situation. On the afternoon of June 7, 1969, the "seminar on the international situation" was resumed in the Zhongnanhai compound.⁹¹

In early July, after a month or so of discussions, the resumed study group of four old marshals completed another report. On July 11, a report entitled "A Preliminary Assessment of the War Situation" was submitted to Zhou. On July 20, the report was reprinted and distributed to the senior leadership by the General Office of the CCP CC.⁹² Ideological rhetoric aside, this report exhibited brilliant strategic insights and a nuanced understanding of international relations in general and of power politics in particular. It proved to be a product of the finest strategic and military minds China possessed at the time.

The report accurately pointed out that the rise in China's power had ushered in the dissolution of the bipolar system and the emergence of a multi-polar system. It argued that the struggles between the three "great forces" of China, the United States, and the Soviet Union now had become the focal point of the international power competition. Despite a tendency toward somewhat exaggerating China's strength and influence, the report's assessment of the impact of China's rise on the global configuration of power nevertheless proved correct.⁹³

"In terms of China itself, Nixon believes [China] is still a 'potential threat,' not a real threat." The report observed, "Regarding American imperialism and Soviet revisionism, the real threat lies in between the two." As China continued to "grow stronger," the report argued, it would become even more difficult for the United States and the Soviet Union to "form an anti-China united front politically" and to

89. The report, based on the discussion among the four old marshals, was authored by Marshal Ye Jianying. See Ye Jianying, "To Observe a Zhenbao Island Tree from the Angle of the Forest of the World," March 29, 1969, in the Editing Group of *Ye Jianying zhuàn, Ye Jianying zhuàn* [The Biography of Ye Jianying] (Beijing, 1995), 598n3.

90. Zheng Qian, "The Nationwide War Preparations before and after the Ninth Congress of the CCP," *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao* 41 (1992): 204–33; *Ye Jianying zhuàn*, 598.

91. Xiong, *Lishi de zhujiao: Huiyi Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai ji si laoshuai* [A Footnote to History: Reminiscences of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Four Old Marshals] (Beijing, 1995), 178, 180–200.

92. Xiong Xianghui, *Wo de qingbao yu waijiao shengyao* [My Intelligence and Diplomatic Career] (Beijing, 1999), 191; Niu, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo duiwai guanxishi gailun*, 213.

93. Niu, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo duiwai guanxishi gailun*, 184.

“hire anti-China roughnecks militarily.” This analysis is indeed close to the reality China was living in at the time.⁹⁴

Moscow’s heavy-handed reactions toward Beijing since the outbreak of the Zhenbao Island conflict—including military pressure, nuclear threats, and strategic encirclement—had backfired and alarmed Washington. The Nixon administration quickly stepped up its efforts to establish contact with Beijing, thus unleashing the delicate “signaling game” between Washington and Beijing.

While Washington was trying to send messages to Beijing, Chinese leaders were also attempting to signal to the Americans. They realized that in order to do so, China would have no choice but to temporarily put aside its dispute with the United States over Taiwan. At a late June 1969 meeting, the Politburo discussed an annual editorial by major party newspapers assailing the U.S. imperialist “aggression” against Taiwan. Apparently with Mao’s authorization, Zhou Enlai made the argument that since China was currently engaged in struggles against Soviet “border provocations” and the “black conference in Moscow”—referring to the International Conference of Communist Parties where Soviet leaders publicly denounced Mao—protests of “U.S. imperialism’s aggression against Taiwan, for the time being, should not be given prominence.” Zhou explained right after the politburo meeting: “The current situation is that the Soviet revisionism is colluding with Taiwan to go in for the so-called Asia Collective Security, not that the U.S. imperialism is playing the leading role.”⁹⁵

On July 16, 1969, two Americans accidentally entered Chinese territorial waters when their yacht ran ashore near Hong Kong. Zhou immediately directed the Foreign Ministry and the Ministry of Public Security to cautiously investigate the incident, take every measure not to “politicize” the case before uncovering the facts, and treat the Americans well and politely.⁹⁶ Zhou’s precaution soon paid off. On July 21, the State Department made a “low-key, matter-of-fact” announcement raising the dollar amount of Chinese goods U.S. tourists could purchase as well as relaxing restrictions on U.S. citizens’ travel to China.⁹⁷ These were small, symbolic steps but nevertheless sent a significant political message to Beijing. Three days later, Beijing responded to the U.S. move by releasing the two American yachtsmen.⁹⁸ This became the first round of a signaling game between Washington and Beijing, which they played repeatedly, though intermittently, in the months to come.

The old marshals were closely following the developments as well. At a special seminar, Marshal Ye argued that the U.S. State Department’s announcement, though a limited step indeed, indicated Nixon’s desire to “pull China [to his side] and press the Soviet revisionism.” Marshal Nie pointed to the sea change

94. *Ibid.*, 185–86.

95. Letter from Zhou to Lin, June 27, 1969, original manuscript, in Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [The Later Years of Zhou Enlai] (New York, 2003), 410.

96. Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai*, 410–11.

97. Memo from Kissinger to Nixon, July 11, 1969, Nixon Presidential Materials (hereafter NPM), White House Central Files, Subject Files, Countries (CO), EX CO 34 China, 1969–1970, box 17, USNA; Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA, 1979), 180.

98. Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai*, 410–11.

in Moscow's behavior—from “ferocious” anti-China rhetoric half a month earlier to a request for Sino-Soviet high-level talks—and argued that the reason for such a change was Moscow's “fear of the Sino-American rapprochement.” Marshal Chen's remarks were more emotional: “Shouldn't we say it with a sigh that [China and the United States] ‘have been at enmity for twenty years long?’ The Americans can land on the moon, but they cannot move close to China—approaching China is even more difficult than ascending the heavens ... Now American imperialism can't hold itself, neither can Soviet revisionism ... both are making eyes at China [*xiang zhongguo song qiubo*], and both are playing the China card against each other.” The old marshals concluded that now the situation had “come to a turning point” and China should stay tuned in order to “continuously observe” the situation unfolding and take appropriate actions accordingly.⁹⁹

On August 13, 1969, over three hundred Soviet troops, backed by two helicopters and dozens of armed vehicles, ambushed a Chinese border troop in Yumin county in northwest Xinjiang, and annihilated a patrol unit of over thirty soldiers.¹⁰⁰ The Soviet attack not only evoked fierce protest from Beijing but also elicited Washington's fear that Beijing would be overwhelmed by Soviet military might, as Nixon concluded that the Soviet Union was the “more aggressive party” and that it was against U.S. strategic interests to let China be “smashed” in a Sino-Soviet war.¹⁰¹

In hindsight, although China lost face in the August 13 border clash, it reaped an unexpected dividend: Washington's determination to side with Beijing in the eventuality of a Sino-Soviet war.

On August 28, 1969, the CCP CC issued a harshly worded decree, targeting border provinces such as Heilongjiang, Jilin, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Xizhang (Tibet), and ordered the troops in these border regions to be “ready to crush” Soviet “armed provocations” at any time and to prevent a Soviet “surprise attack.”¹⁰² Following the “August 28 Decree,” a wave of mobilization swept across the country. The military, particularly the troops along fronts in Northeast, North, and Northwest China, was ordered to first-degree combat readiness; the militias were mobilized; and the whole nation was geared toward war.¹⁰³

In an attempt to lessen tensions, Soviet Premier Kosygin made a stop-over visit to Beijing on September 11, and met Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport's Reservoir Lounge. The two agreed to take a number of measures to stabilize the situation

99. Xiong, *Lishi de zhujiào*, 189–90.

100. Zheng Hui et al. eds., *Lishinian guoshi jiyao: junsbi juan* [A Record of Fifty Years of State Affairs: the Volume of Military Affairs] (Changsha, Hunan, 1999), 546; ZRGW, vol. 2, 273; Xiong, *Lishi de zhujiào*, 191.

101. “President Nixon's Notes on a National Security Council Meeting,” San Clemente, California, undated, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, China, 1969–1972, eds. Steven E. Phillips and Edward C. Keefer (Washington, DC, 2006), 67–68; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 182.

102. JYMZW, vol. 13, 59–61 (note 1); ZEN, vol. 3, 317; Zheng, “The Nationwide War Preparations,” 215–16; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 498–99.

103. Zheng, “The Nationwide War Preparations,” 216–17; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 499.

along the border and to launch Sino-Soviet border negotiations. However, the Kosygin-Zhou meeting did not allay Beijing's suspicion of Soviet intentions.¹⁰⁴ Worrying about preemptive attacks by the Soviets, Beijing scrambled to mobilize the nation in preparation for war. On September 25, the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC), under Mao's instruction, convened a two-day war conference, pulling together commanders of military regions across China as well as heads of general departments under the CMC and of all the armed services.¹⁰⁵ Zhou Enlai asked the General Staff to compile reference materials for the top leadership on Hitler Germany's "blitzkrieg" attacks on Poland and the Soviet Union as well as on the Japanese "sneak attack" on Pearl Harbor. On October 7, the CMC and the State Council issued a joint directive ordering the creation of a nationwide alarm system including wired telephone and wireless alarm networks to prevent Soviet "strategic surprise attacks."¹⁰⁶ Mao became so worried that a Soviet nuclear preemptive attack might completely annihilate all the top CCP leaders in Beijing that he ordered a "strategic dispersion" of the Chinese leadership. Within a few days, all top leaders were relocated to military strongholds across the nation.¹⁰⁷

Kosygin's September 11 stop-over visit to Beijing, however, reinforced the old marshals' belief about the potential benefit of playing the America card. In a September 17 report to the CCP CC, the old marshals noted that China could exploit the Soviet's "strategic anxiety" about U.S.-China "jointly dealing with" Moscow in the Beijing-Moscow-Washington triangle. Meanwhile, China could capitalize on U.S. apprehensions about improved Sino-Soviet relations. Consequently, the report recommended that since China had agreed to hold border negotiations with the Soviet Union, if the United States asked to resume the ambassadorial talks, China should give a positive reply "at an appropriate time." "Such a tactical move," the report concluded, "might reap strategic effect."¹⁰⁸

Interestingly enough, about the same time the old marshals were entertaining the idea of resuming the Warsaw Talks, the Nixon administration was playing with the same idea. At a White House meeting on September 9, 1969, two days before

104. ZEN, vol. 3, 321, 325; Xue Mouhong et al. eds., *Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao* [Diplomacy of Contemporary China] (Beijing, 1990), 126; Xiong, *Lishi de zhujiào*, 194.

105. Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 501-2.

106. ZEN, vol. 3, 321-24; ZRGW, vol. 2, 275-76; Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan jishi: Lin Biao mishu buiyulu* [A True Record of the Bay of Mao Family: Memoirs of a Secretary to Lin Biao] (Beijing, 1988), 308-15; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 502; "The Report Prepared by the General Staff and Transmitted by the State Council and the CMC Concerning the Establishment of an Alarm System in Prevention of Enemy's Surprise Attacks," October 7, 1969, top secret, 263-2-235, GPA.

107. ZEN, vol. 3, 328; Zhang, *Maojiawan jishi*, 316; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 502-3; Xiong, *Lishi de zhujiào*, 199-200; Zheng, "The Nationwide War Preparations," 219-24.

108. Xiong, *Lishi de zhujiào*, 195-97; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 249; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu mosike de enen yuanyuan*, 506.

Kosygin's dramatic visit to Beijing, Nixon directed the U.S. ambassador in Warsaw, Walter J. Stoessel Jr., to "talk directly" with Lei Yang, the Chinese Chargé d'affaires in Poland on "an appropriate occasion."¹⁰⁹ On the night of December 3, 1969, the tenacious Stoessel "followed"—literally chased—the Chinese diplomats at an event in Warsaw and got Nixon's message to the Chinese.¹¹⁰ The U.S.-China Ambassadorial Talks resumed a month later in Warsaw. The two sides quickly agreed that China would "receive" in Beijing a special representative sent by Nixon, eventually (progress was temporarily stalled by U.S. involvement in the Cambodian crisis in the spring of 1970) leading up to Henry Kissinger's historic visit to Beijing in July 1971.¹¹¹

The dramatic shift from enmity to rapprochement in the U.S.-China relationship was among the Cold War's most important geostrategic reshuffles. Despite the realist prediction that as the Sino-Soviet split grew Beijing would band together with Washington to counter-balance the Soviet threat, Beijing chose to take an antagonistic stance toward Washington. Existing theories failed to explain the prolonged hostilities between Beijing and Washington. To understand the logic of China's policy toward the United States in the 1960s, we need to bring power politics back into the picture. Using newly available Chinese archival evidence, I argue that Chinese leaders were sophisticated strategists. Whenever necessary, Chinese leaders were able to compromise with the United States and prevent crises from escalating into conflict. At a fundamental level, however, Chinese leaders believed that seeking reconciliation with the United States would undercut China's grand strategic ambition of contending for great powerdom. Breaking with the Socialist camp, Beijing assiduously wooed leftist forces and non-aligned countries. China's possession of nuclear capability further lifted China's confidence and optimism in pursuing an anti-U.S. strategy. The escalation of the U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War worsened China's threat perception of the United States. Beijing, while sending deterrence messages to Washington, was preparing for the worst case scenario: an American invasion of North Vietnam that would compel China to send combat troops to fight the Americans. The outbreak of the Zhenbao Island conflict and, particularly, Moscow's iron-fisted reaction, fundamentally changed Beijing's threat perception and motivated Chinese leaders to seek rapprochement with the United States. More broadly, bringing power politics back will not only reshape the debate about the change in U.S.-China relations in the 1960s, but also help refine our understanding of China's foreign policy behavior during the Cold War.

109. MemCon by Nixon and Stoessel, September 9, 1969, Central Foreign Policy Files, 1967-1969, box 1973, RG 59, USNA.

110. Ibid.; Kissinger, *White House Years*, 188.

111. Telegram from Rogers to U.S. Embassy in Warsaw, January 17, 1970, NPM, National Security Council Files, Country Files, Europe, box 700, USNA; ZEN, vol. 2, 348; ZEZ, 1089; Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai*, 416.

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