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Warriors and Philosophers

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, Feb. 17—Just before President Nixon left here for China, Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Congress that, regardless of how U.S.-Soviet-China relations may develop in the future, the United States must always retain enough nuclear power "to cope with both the Soviet Union and China simultaneously."

This was true, he explained, because "even if we were involved in a nuclear war with only one of these nations, we would still need sufficient strategic forces to deter, simultaneously, a nuclear attack from the other."

Well, odd things happen in this city, and Admiral Moorer's timing was probably an accident wholly unrelated to the China visit, but it illustrates the difficulty of trying to move from the language of the cold war to the new "era of negotiation" Mr. Nixon is now seeking in both Peking and Moscow.

One of the perplexing problems before the President on this first of his historic diplomatic journeys is that he cannot merely conduct one mission at a time, for the business of this vast Government has a life of its own. The war in Vietnam goes on, and the enemy build-up and the bombing to smash the threatened offensive from the North cannot be stopped overnight for the Peking talks. The business of the Congress also goes on and so does the election campaign, with all its charges and countercharges.

Meanwhile, the Soviet military build-up continues despite the Moscow-Washington negotiations for a strategic arms limitation agreement, and what Admiral Moorer apparently was trying to do was to warn the Soviets that, unless they reach some kind of dependable accommodation on strategic arms, the United States would have to order another round in the arms race

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in order to maintain the power balance.

Even so, it is not easy to understand how an Administration so conscious of public relations and so determined to create a favorable atmosphere for the Peking talks, could overlook or fail to imagine how the Admiral's pronouncements would look in Peking on the eve of the talks.

Mr. Nixon's major theme has been much more conciliatory. While determined to maintain the balance of power despite Moscow's missile and naval build-up, Mr. Nixon himself told the Congress before he left: "Our alliances are no longer addressed primarily to the containment of the Soviet Union and China. They are, instead, addressed to the creation, with those powers, of a stable world peace."

The two contrasting statements by the Admiral and the President, however, underscore how difficult it is for the President to keep so many plates in the air at the same time. The Soviets understand blunt talk like Moorer's—in fact, they seem to understand little else—but the Chinese leaders are likely to be more interested in the President's philosophy of peace than the Admiral's fears of a two-front nuclear war.

"Our failure to understand the Chinese," Françoise Geoffrey Dechaume wrote in "China Looks at the World," "starts, in fact, with a failure to understand ourselves, to recognize what they reject in us and about us. Each grows more unyielding, while a contracting planet encircles and binds us closer together, each seeming a monster to the other, with no means of communication. . . ."

This, one gathers, is at least part of what Mr. Nixon had in mind when he personally took the initiative to approach China in the hope of starting

a philosophic dialogue, if nothing more, and he not only deserves credit for the effort, but sympathy for the complexity of his conversations in Peking.

For, whatever is said there by either side, is likely to be interpreted in quite different ways by many diverse and powerful antagonists. Both Mr. Nixon and Chou En-lai obviously have their hawks and doves at home, who take contradictory views of the wisdom of these conversations.

Similarly, in his efforts to move toward that "stable world peace" with both the Soviet Union and China, Mr. Nixon has to find the narrow line between winning the trust of Peking without provoking even more mistrust among the suspicious men in Moscow.

Then, too, at least the main themes of the Peking talks will, at the President's instruction, be reported to Japan and Taiwan and the other Asian allies, and to the allies in Europe as well, all of whom had vague fears that one day the giant powers might reach compromises at the expense of the smaller nations.

To attempt all this, with the whole world looking on via satellite television—which in itself is a factor in China's rising prominence among the nations—will require all the skill and philosophy both sides can muster. Yet it is undoubtedly a worthwhile if spectacular experiment.

"No step in international relations," Mr. Nixon said before he left, "is taken without some painful adjustments and potential costs. Indeed, the tendency is to focus on the risks that might flow from a departure from familiar patterns and to lose sight of its possible benefits. It is precisely this tendency that inhibits major initiatives and perpetuates established policies which sustain the status quo."

A Chinese proverb puts the point more simply: "Even the highest towers begin from the ground."