

Nixon and China: His finest hour

WASHINGTON — When the history of the Nixon Administration is finally written, the chances are that his China policy will stand out as a model of common sense and good diplomacy.

For the moment, he is being criticized for giving away too much on Taiwan, for troubling the Japanese and the Soviets, and for playing politics with the great issues of war and peace, but in the larger perspectives of history, these are likely to be seen as secondary issues.

The main thing is that he personally identified one of the great problems of American foreign policy — the isolation and hostility of China — and by over three years of patient effort, brought it to an end.

He has not settled anything with China, and he has undoubtedly unsettled a lot of things in Tokyo and Moscow along the way, but he will be going to Moscow in late May and undoubtedly to Tokyo later in the summer, and if he handles his problems there as well as he did in Peking, the atmosphere of world politics should be a little better by the end of the year.

If you assume that the Cold War is a permanent condition of life — as many intelligent and sincere men and women do — it is easy to condemn Nixon's opening to China, and Chancellor Willy Brandt's opening to the Soviet Union, but Nixon and Brandt are trying to dismantle the Cold War and go on from there to a more dependable world order. And even if they fail, which is quite possible, the historians of the future are likely to praise them for trying.

Suspicion in Moscow

Moscow is suspicious of the President's China trip, for the Peking mission has dramatized China's emergence on the world scene and suggests that the United States is playing the old British game of throwing its influence, if not its power, on the side of the weaker nation—specifically on the side of China, Moscow's ideological adversary.

If this is what the men in the Kremlin think, they are probably right, for Nixon

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undoubtedly is playing balance of power politics in Asia as his predecessors since the last war did in Europe. He is arguing against the domination of the Pacific basin by any nation, the United States and the Soviet Union included, and to create a new order in Asia, he needs at a minimum, not only the absence of war, but the cooperation of all the major Asian powers, the Soviet Union, Japan and China.

A lot of time

It is going to take a lot of time even to explore the possibilities of such a Pacific system, and he has completed only the first phase of his journey. In fairness, he has to visit both Tokyo and Moscow before his purpose is made clear, and the Japanese, of all people, owe him a little patience before deciding that he is acting against their interests.

No doubt he has made some tactical blunders en route to Peking. By sending Dr. Henry A. Kissinger to China last summer and autumn he virtually assured the expulsion of Nationalist China from the United Nations. By worrying too much about "leaks," he kept that mission secret from Japan and embarrassed the Sato government.

But on its postwar record of aid to Japan, which is surely unprecedented in the relations between victorious and defeated nations, the U.S. is entitled to have a little more time and confidence from Japan while it tries to work out some accommodation with Peking, which is essential to any new order in the Pacific, and with Taiwan, which is not.

Common sense

Nixon's report on the China trip from the plane-side when he returned to Washington tried to put these questions in some perspective. He dropped the exaggerated talk about the "week that changed the world," and talked common sense to the American people for a change.

There was no pretense this time that

anything fundamental had been settled in China. The differences were conceded and defined. The deadlocks on Taiwan and Vietnam, and the ideological conflicts over aggression and liberty were stated clearly and accurately, and the difficulties ahead were acknowledged.

Nixon even admitted that such candor at the summit of world politics was "unique." "This communique," he said, "was unique in honestly setting forth differences rather than trying to cover them up with diplomatic double-talk."

More than that

If the Peking trip did nothing more than reopen communication between Washington and Peking, it would have been worthwhile.

But it did more than that.

It cut away some of the illusions of the past generation, which have contributed to both the Korean and Vietnam wars. It cast at least some doubt on the Chinese conviction that the American armies in Korea and Vietnam were aiming at the destruction of the Peking regime, and on the American fear that China was embarked on a campaign to expand its authority all over East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Reduced the fear

It did not remove the Chinese anxiety over the rising military power of the Soviet Union and the expanding economic power of Japan, but it must have reduced the fear that the United States was planning to detach Taiwan from China and use it as an American military base of operations on China's southern flank.

None of this would have happened without Nixon's personal initiative in reaching out to China over the last three years, despite his own anti-Communist record and the opposition of powerful elements within his own party. He has shown foresight, courage and negotiating skill. He has changed his direction, his policy, and the tone of his diplomacy, and there are few people in this capital today who don't welcome the change.