

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24, 1973

'Generation of peace' no idle dream of Nixon's

WASHINGTON — The eloquence of the President's inaugural address had all the emptiness of solid fact that is customary on such occasions. But behind the large phrases and rhetorical stunts, one thing stood out.

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The heaviest emphasis was on the work still needing to be done to achieve "the generation of peace" the President so often predicts.

Here is the greatest secret of the Nixon Administration, so well kept that it has caused countless misunderstandings. The secret is, in brief, that the President truly believes he can achieve his generation of peace and perhaps a lot more than that. The right parallel is with the Congress of Vienna, so much maligned and so much studied by Dr. Henry A. Kissinger.

Between the Congress in 1814 and World War I in 1914 there was every kind of change, every kind of trouble, every kind of conflict — except one. For a hundred years after the Congress of Vienna there was no big Europe-wide war.

Now the scene has changed to embrace the whole world. Except for Russia, the great powers of the Congress of Vienna and World War I have all declined to medium powers or even, like Austria, to near zeros in the balance. The President mainly has to work with three great powers, the United States, the Soviet Union and China, and one potential greater power, Japan.

What Nixon truly means

What the President truly means when he talks about his "generation of peace" is far more complicated and solid than his phrase suggests. He means, in fact, that he intends to bring into being a new system of world-wide power relationships. The system is to be squarely based, in turn, on an entirely new relationship between the great powers, and more especially between the United States, the Soviet Union and China.

The secret of this intention has been well kept for two obvious reasons. The balance of power may be — indeed, it is — the mainspring of history; but that is not widely understood in this virtuous country. The complications and delicacies of balance-of-power politics also do not lend themselves to the free public discourse of the simpler Cold War years.

Dr. Kissinger's hero

Given the nature of American society, the odds against the President are considerable. Dr. Kissinger's hero, Prince Metternich, who was also the hero of the Congress of Vienna, would have found it impossible

to deal with the U.S. Senate. Yet the fact remains that the President is talking about something real, which he may well achieve against the odds.

He has an opportunity for achievement because of two cardinal facts. One is the seemingly irreconcilable enmity between the Soviet Union and China. The other, more complex fact is the mass of evidence that the Soviets are seriously thinking about the nuclear castration of China as an essential preventive step.

Taken at face value in Peking

Few people in this country take that evidence at face value. But it is taken at face value in the White House. Above all, it is taken at face value by the leaders in Peking. The enormous Soviet military build-up on the Chinese border alone made possible the new American relationship with China. And this served as a lever to begin a great change in our relations with the Soviets.

Thus the main short-term aim of the President's policy is "getting 'round the corner," as he has been known to describe it. The corner may be defined as the moment when the Soviets will have to give up any idea of preventive attack on China because the risks of a Chinese nuclear counterattack will have become too great. It is a moment that will surely occur during the second Nixon Administration.

In order to "get 'round the corner," what amounts to a tacit alliance between the United States and China — not offensive but defensive — has come into being. If the corner is indeed safely rounded, an entirely new relationship between the great powers will automatically emerge. And in the resulting Sino-Russo-American triangle of forces the United States will unavoidably occupy the swing position.

The heart of the matter

This is the heart of the matter. It will seem luridly strange to most people who trouble to read these words. Nonetheless, there is no doubt at all that this is indeed regarded as the heart of the matter by the President himself, and by the tiny circle who have his full confidence.

If you think about it, this heart of the matter, by its very nature, explains a great deal that has seemed mysterious. It is the main reason, for example, that the President has always insisted upon an honorable Vietnamese settlement, at much cost to himself as well as the country. But with the war out of the way, one must pray for the President's success in the next great phase of his effort.