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The Chinese Key

By William Safire

WASHINGTON — Last year, when Henry Kissinger went to China, the reception he received was decidedly cool. Following that, when President Ford made his political pilgrimage to Peking, his reception was polite and correct, but edged with Chinese warnings of the dangers of appeasing the Soviets.

Last week, as David and Julie Eisenhower visited China, the treatment given them contrasted sharply with the Kissinger and Ford receptions. Mao Tse-tung received them warmly, the Chinese press was instructed to pay attention to their tour, and official doors were opened wide.

How do we read those tea-leaves? What are the Chinese telling us, especially now that they are preparing for the funeral of Chou En-lai?

No sentiment is attached, Richard Nixon as a person won no hearts and minds in his visit in 1972. By welcoming his daughter and son-in-law, the Chinese leaders are sending a signal as clear as subtlety will allow: Return, they say, to the policies set forth in your original opening to the East. Let us use each other, in our individual self-interests, to counter the threat of the Soviet Union.

Even though China has lost some confidence in America's will to assert her interests, the Chinese leaders still need the United States. The recent Chinese feint toward the Soviet Union, with the return of a few helicopter pilots, was cosmetic; there can be no lasting détente between the Soviet superpower and the Chinese future superpower. Their destiny is to compete for leadership of the Communist world.

Accordingly, United States policy should temporarily "tilt" to use a once-favored term, toward the weaker of the two. It is imperative in the short term, and may be decisive in the long term, for the United States to expand and nurture its China ties. The Soviets know that China is no threat to them today, but even a loose alliance of China and the United States could be an enormous threat to the U.S.S.R. in ten or fifteen years.

That was the Russian fear which the Nixon foreign policy exploited, while stoutly denying it was doing any such thing. "Foster Dulles never had a China," Mr. Nixon liked to say. While holding out the carrots of détente—grain sales, technology agreements, legitimization of borders—we also brandished our stick, which was the possibility of a U.S.-Chinese deal in the Pacific.

Meanwhile, we exploited the Chinese fear of Soviet encirclement. That fear is on the increase today. To the south, the Chinese see India—already the possessor of atomic weapons—becoming a Soviet puppet state. In Southeast Asia, the Chinese see North Vietnam still in the Soviet orbit as it continues an unreported war on dissidents, including some Vietcong, who resist Hanoi's will. And the Chinese see Japan as a Soviet-Chinese economic battleground, with Andrei Gromyko asserting Russian influence in Tokyo this week.

The Chinese fear of Soviet encirclement and domination is why China wants the United States to act as a great power. That is why they were sorry to see us withdraw support from allies in Southeast Asia, why they want us to lean hard on Japan to keep its ties to the West, and why the Chinese worry about our reliability as an anti-Soviet force from Europe to Angola.

The Chinese vital interest is clear; the question is, does the vital interest of the United States parallel China's at this moment in history? A few years ago, the Chinese thought so, and

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agreed to ignore the question of Taiwan so the first steps could be taken. Richard Nixon thought so, too, and made the first moves.

After Mr. Nixon's fall, of course, everything came apart. The Senate repealed the Nixon doctrine, Southeast Asia collapsed, isolationists declared war on the CIA, and the Soviets seized the initiative around the world.

So be it; back to the old drawing board. With a reinvigorated foreign policy, the United States can move to a new two-way détente, and the key to that new détente with the Soviet Union can once again be our relationship to China.

Even as old Chinese leaders die and Americans learn to pronounce difficult new names, and even as we abhor the eradication of freedom in the world's most populous nation, the opportunity of traveling along parallel lines in common interest has not been lost. At least, that's the signal received by some China-watchers, including a man who is not without experience in receiving signals from Peking.

And so, on successive days in the past week we could say Farewell, Premier Chou, Happy Birthday, Mr. Nixon, and Welcome Home, David and Julie. The time is not quite ripe for an opening of the door to a new détente, but the Chinese key has not been lost.

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