
Part IV: New Era in U.S.-China Relations

Moscow trumped Carter and Deng

by Richard Cohen

Part III of this series, "The Kissinger China Card Worked to Moscow's Advantage," described Henry Kissinger's policy of attempting to use improved Sino-American relations in order to mildly pressure Moscow in SALT I negotiations. As the Soviets' strategic military advantage emerged during the 1970s, Cohen wrote, the U.S.S.R. "repeatedly trumped Washington's and Peking's attempts to use their respective cards."

Under the Carter administration, China relations were put on the back burner until the normalization agreement of Dec. 15, 1978, at a time when the Soviets warned against such an agreement. "The Brzezinski NSC, intoxicated by Kissinger's formulas, was convinced that the normalization had enhanced the possibility of a SALT agreement, since Brzezinski's ultimate purpose in pursuing the China card was to use it to pressure the Soviet Union back into the original deal they had supposedly cut in the early 1970s, a deal by which they would restrain their behavior in areas of Western concern in exchange for the destruction of U.S. military advantage."

President Carter stated on Dec. 19, 1978 that the China normalization would not interfere with SALT, while White House script writers were hyping an imminent summit between Carter and Brezhnev. But the Vance-Gromyko Geneva meeting in January was an utter failure, and bitter State Department officials were leaking that the reason was the Dec. 15 China announcement.

Two days after the Geneva failure, Vietnam invaded Kampuchea, and it controlled most of the country by Jan. 10, 1979. During this period, a desperate Carter sent five secret dispatches to Moscow and six to Peking, begging for restraint. At the Jan. 5-6 Guadalupe Western summit meeting, a reassurance was delivered to Moscow that détente came first while China relations were secondary. The push for such a statement was led by West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt. Immediately after the conference, Carter sent a message to Brezhnev stating in no uncertain terms that the United States would not sell arms to China. This gave rise to the peculiar Jan. 27 public declaration by Carter that the United States would not sell arms to the Soviet Union or China.

Evidence was building that the original 1977 Vance policy of "evenhandedness" was now dominant.

Operating on this momentum, on the eve of Deng's Jan. 29-Feb. 5 visit to the United States, Carter was pressured by the State Department to avoid any appearance of a China tilt. Vance announced as the visit began that there would be no joint communiqué, eliminating the potential vehicle for an "anti-hegemony" clause.

Ironically, Deng had arrived after having lost a faction fight within the Chinese Politburo. In November, at the meeting of the Third Plenum of the 11th CCCP Central Committee—the most important Chinese leadership gathering since the 1976 ouster of the Gang of Four—Deng reportedly opposed a program calling for forceful retaliation against Vietnam and strong commitments to the Khmer Rouge forces of Pol Pot when Vietnam invaded Kampuchea.

For some time, Chinese leaders had concluded that such a move was inevitable. The Vietnam-Soviet military treaty of early November simply verified their conclusion. Forces allied with Hua Kuo-Feng and Li Xian-Nien successfully argued that the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance and the imminent Vietnamese invasion represented a direct security threat to China.

Deng's opposition appears to have been made public even after the decisive November-December Central Committee meetings. At a meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference on Jan. 1, Deng, speaking in the midst of the Vietnamese invasion, stated: "At present the threat to peace comes from the north. The source of instability and war in the world lies in the north, and should there be foreign aggression against our country, it would also come from the north." This argument challenged the essence of the CCCP communiqué, which stated, "The grave danger of war still exists. We must strengthen our national defense and be prepared to repulse at any moment aggressors from any direction."

But the decisions had been made, and the China card policy was now to reach its climax. In his public appearances, Deng toned down his criticisms of SALT and refrained from calling for a "common front" against Moscow, while lashing out against Soviet "hegemonism." By Feb. 1, Vance had lost ground as a joint communiqué was issued including an anti-hegemony clause. At the same time, Georgii Arbatov of

Moscow's U.S.A.-Canada Institute was on CBS-TV attacking Deng's "warmongering." On Feb. 7, TASS called for "clarification" and *Izvestia* noted "vacillation" in U.S.-China policy.

Vietnam and the Soviets

In mid-February, the P.R.C. invaded Vietnam. The U.S. government publicly warned the U.S.S.R. not to attack the P.R.C. and called for Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam and Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea. On Feb. 20, the Soviets responded through a TASS charge of U.S.-P.R.C. collusion in the invasion, and on Feb. 21, *Literaturnaya Gazeta* reiterated the charge.

The charge was repeated by Gromyko on Feb. 25, and on Feb. 28 *Pravda* charged that the U.S. "gave the P.R.C. the green light"; but by that time Moscow had already known that China's "American card" was a fraud. Mass Soviet naval maneuvers in the South China Sea during the height of Sino-Vietnamese conflict did not meet a whisper of U.S. naval or air challenge, and the urgent private messages from Carter and the Guadelupe reassurances were sure to have convinced the Soviet leadership that Brzezinski's rhetoric was bluff.

Indeed, there was evidence that the Soviets had never believed the United States would risk its own security for that of China, and that Moscow's primary aim throughout this period was to secure a permanent cut-off of Western high technology to the P.R.C.—technology which 10 to 20 years ahead might mean a formidable military challenge to Moscow.

Frustration in Peking

The Soviets capped the most intense period of China card failure in mid-March, following the Chinese withdrawal from Vietnam. Showing total dominance, the U.S.S.R. held unprecedented maneuvers on the Sino-Soviet border. On April 3, China voided the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty, only to open up a half-year-long process of border pacification talks with Moscow. The America card had fallen into total disrepute as U.S. visitors to Peking reported P.R.C. disillusionment with U.S. backtracking; in early August, Sen. Henry Jackson, returning from a trip to Peking, called the Chinese attitude frustrated and unhappy.

At the June 15-18 Carter-Brezhnev summit in Geneva, the absurd SALT II treaty was signed. The strain in U.S.-China relations was not allayed by a late-August trip to China by Vice-President Walter Mondale. As a sop, Mondale granted China Most-Favored Nation status, a status the Soviet Union did not enjoy. In addition, while Mondale denied a U.S. military umbrella to the P.R.C., he told the Chinese "any nation that tries to weaken you is acting counter to U.S. interests."

But by at least the end of 1979, the Chinese leadership had absorbed the lesson of the failure of the "American card," as well as the more immediate lessons of the forces associated with Deng Xiao-Ping, who had warned of both the economic and military pitfalls of the Vietnamese engagement. Apart

from a hubbub following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at the end of 1979, the Deng-dominated policy of prioritizing border pacification and staying out of costly military engagements would become a permanent factor in rapidly undermining the China card policy.

In the United States, efforts to ratify the SALT II agreement were undermined by a sudden discovery of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba in September. While Vance moved to protect SALT at all costs, Brzezinski went berserk, calling for every conceivable impotent gesture, short of reversing the Kissinger-codified strategic equation. On Oct. 1, Carter publicly sided with the Vance position, but privately the administration tried to crack down on high-technology sales to Moscow while classified reports were leaked to undermine the possibility of a SALT passage. State Department officials frantically warned that the leaks were damaging U.S.-Soviet relations.

Then in late December, while the prospect of SALT ratification on Capitol Hill dimmed, Moscow invaded Afghanistan. In a trip prescheduled for January 1980 and later publicly attacked by Vance in June after his resignation, Defense Secretary Harold Brown visited Peking, one of a number of Carter initiatives aimed at responding to the Soviet invasion. At best, Brown obtained a P.R.C. agreement to replace ground-monitoring stations recently lost by the United States in Iran. This minimal move was joined by a U.S. agreement to sell to China non-lethal weapons; the P.R.C. would hardly ever exercise this limited option. The disgraced Carter administration then welcomed Chinese military help for Thailand, if Vietnam invaded that country, and also agreed to loosely coordinate their efforts to support Pakistan and aid Afghanistan rebels.

These actions plus military absurdities typified by the push for a pint-sized Rapid Deployment Force were added to a grain embargo and a withdrawal from the Olympics, and a silly new "Carter Doctrine" aimed at protecting the American position in the Persian Gulf.

'No longer adequate'

While leading Chinese figures, including Hua, would visit Japan in May, and Defense Minister Geng Biao visited Washington to discuss possible arms purchases, the P.R.C. was now undergoing thorough factional consolidation around the policies of Deng Xiao-ping. In the United States, policy was paralyzed by the ugly Iranian hostage situation.

In early June, Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs Richard Holbrooke, a Vance understudy, issued the last major Carter administration pronouncement on China policy. Holbrooke declared that the "famous triangular diplomacy of the early 1970s is no longer an adequate conceptual framework in which to view relations with China. In short, relations with China are not a simple factor of our relations with the Soviet Union." Holbrooke's obituary for the China card would soon be read more strongly by the incoming Reagan administration.