

# TRIANGULAR DIPLOMACY RECONSIDERED: NEW SOURCES AND AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, 1969–1976

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## I

Who can count the books and articles published on U.S. foreign policy between 1969 and 1976? Who can follow the broad track of publications on Henry Kissinger alone, not to mention his own writings or the even more numerous works on President Richard Nixon? Do we need even more?

By definition, historiography is a creative rather than definitive process. In theory, each new scholarly publication should advance our knowledge and capacity to reflect on a certain subject. In reality, many simply present another account of the same sources over and over again or ignore results of other work. Therefore the number of publications on a certain subject does not indicate much; there might be no significant advancement of our understanding. The volume of publication might simply reflect the popularity of a subject. What has always driven historiography forward and will continue to do so, however, is first and foremost the quest for unearthing and analyzing new sources, presenting and reflecting them from different perspectives and applying a diversity of methods to the evidence available in order to comprehensively further our understanding. Until the present, political, especially diplomatic history has seemed remarkably immune to modern methodological approaches. Yet aspects of social and cultural history promise to deepen our understanding of a classical topic of diplomatic history. This project, featuring Henry A. Kissinger as a main protagonist, also aims at aspects of intellectual history and will certainly shed new light on this renowned, but highly controversial politician and academic. Since most of the relevant archival material has been released in recent years and much more will become available in the near future, the use of new sources will certainly lead to new findings and interpretations.

On November 1, 2001 President George W. Bush signed Executive Order 13233, which, if upheld, will severely limit historians' access to new information on the presidencies and also affect research at the National Archives and in Presidential Libraries. By reinterpreting, in fact revising, the 1978 Presidential Records Act, this order entitles incumbents as well as former presidents or their families to veto the release of major

segments of their presidential papers. If enacted as intended by the White House, the order will keep randomly secret the filed communications between a president and his advisers and so deny historians access to the crucial deliberative processes that lie behind an administration's policy-making. This Executive Order has already been challenged in court by major professional historical organisations and individuals. It may take years to settle this dispute. In any event, the sitting president's order will apply to the Reagan, Bush I, Clinton and Bush II administrations. Fortunately for this project, it will not, however, affect the way in which the papers of the Nixon and Ford presidencies are governed by the 1978 Presidential Records Act, an important piece of legislation enacted in the aftermath of the Watergate experience. These sources will be exempt from any executive orders and the currently contested files on "deliberative processes" can be explored in rich detail as far as the presidencies between 1969 and 1976 are concerned. Historical evidence on the foreign policy of this period is accessible at the National Archives in Washington and the Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor.

The two terms of the Nixon presidency, the second of which came to an early end and had to be finished by Vice President Gerald Ford, were one of the most intriguing and innovative in post-1945 U.S. foreign policy and world history. Despite Richard Nixon's grave personal shortcomings, some foreign policy achievements of his presidency are generally well respected today. It remains disputed to what extent such praise is justified. Foreign policy in the Nixon/Ford era was brilliantly framed and spectacularly as well as deviously executed by Henry Kissinger in his roles as National Security Adviser and later Secretary of State.<sup>1</sup> Kissinger had acquired unprecedented standing and powerful leverage on two American presidents, but was totally dependent on them for his own political power. During Kissinger's tenure in the White House and at the State Department, foreign policy temporarily achieved the celebrity<sup>2</sup> status of its protagonist.<sup>3</sup>

The years from 1969 to 1976 therefore fully deserve a thorough analysis from various methodological perspectives also from outside the English-speaking scholarly community. Conversely, a broadening of its focus to topics of international history might help German-speaking historiography to overcome narrowly German perspectives. There also is a European aspect that pertains to the impact of traditional European strategic thinking on world politics—or at least the impact of such a self-perception on Kissinger's part. Comprehensive historical studies on international foreign policy and the US-Soviet-Sino relationship between 1969 and 1976 making use of the newly available sources are basically nonexistent in Germany. Publications so far consist of works of political scientists<sup>4</sup> exploring, systematizing, and analyzing so-called geo-strategic

concepts and “grand designs” of U.S. foreign policy or Chinese strategic flexibility and astuteness<sup>5</sup> during the Nixon/Ford/Kissinger period.

## II

Newly released sources from this period have ended the monopoly of interpretation that historical protagonists enjoyed for a long time. These sources will enable us to raise scholarly debate on U.S. and international foreign policy after 1969 to a new level. This will finally “level the playing field” between historians and historical actors, as it was recently put by the American diplomatic historian Robert Schulzinger, who wrote about Henry Kissinger as a “Doctor of Diplomacy” in the pre-access period.<sup>6</sup>

In the beginning there were visible public actions, definitions, and pronouncements by the various contemporary actors on different sides. The years between 1969 and 1974 allegedly were those of a grand design of U.S. foreign policy that ushered in a new era of “classical realism.” The United States as the foremost global power would apply “triangular diplomacy,” designed by Kissinger as the president’s primary political adviser, vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. This policy was supposed to balance the other world powers by according them seeming respectability, while secretly hampering Soviet and Chinese strategies wherever possible and thereby establishing a Metternich-style order to maintain a permanent “equilibrium” refereed by the United States of America. Whereas Russian and Chinese public statements and positioning remained carefully phrased and restrained by ideologically polarized thinking, the American administration, having to face the electorate every four years, reached for the stars rhetorically. Richard Nixon referred to his historic trip to China in February 1972 as a “week that had changed the world”. When he returned from a summit in Moscow later that year he declared “the beginning of the end of an era” in which millions of people had lived under the shadow of a nuclear threat and an arms race.

Kissinger, the President’s National Security Adviser and Secretary of State, confided to the journalist James Reston in 1974: “I think of myself as a historian more than a statesman”.<sup>7</sup> Henry Kissinger, the former Harvard professor of international relations, loved to convey the image of the diplomatic thinker trained in European history and a diplomatic practitioner in the tradition of aristocrats like Castlereagh, Metternich and Bismarck<sup>8</sup>, who, in pre-democratic eras, dealt with monarchs, nobles and rubber-stamp assemblies enabling them to define and manipulate nations solely according to their presumed power and interests. Although there is no consensus whether the comparison of Kissinger with those nine-

teenth-century statesmen should be regarded as flattering or telling, many scholars continue to invoke such analogies.<sup>9</sup>

This alleged grandeur of foreign policy came under heavy domestic fire from the left as well as from the right when Nixon's presidency sank under the weight of Watergate. Events in Vietnam and other parts of the world turned ever more against U.S. interests and began to sink detente as well. Triangular diplomacy and the political careers of its protagonists suffered badly. In 1975 Zbigniew Brzezinski, who would become National Security Adviser two years later, showed his disgust with contemporary American foreign policy. Kissinger's former Harvard colleague, who was to become quite controversial himself, described the diplomacy of those years as "covert, manipulative and deceptive in style. It seemed committed to a largely static view of the world, based on a traditional balance of power, seeking accommodation among the major powers on the basis of spheres of influence."<sup>10</sup>

The less than glorious end of the Nixon and Ford administrations and the ever fascinating concept of a balance of powers steered from Washington provoked some former political actors to set the historical record straight with hindsight and to shift blame to former and current critics in Congress, the media and the antiwar movement. As a result, immediately after 1976 the conflicting spin of the actors entered the public stage. Major and minor figures wrote memoirs and published essayistic and anecdotal reflections, among which the publications of the two main actors clearly stand out. According to their memoirs, it will always be controversial to what degree Nixon or Kissinger shaped actual policy (and maybe even history), but the analysis of new sources available might to some extent help to overcome this dilemma and current guesswork.

Writing their versions, both Kissinger and Nixon took advantage of the fact that archival sources would be closed to the public for a considerable time. Kissinger, in particular, made brilliant use of this opportunity to shape historiography, giving his files to the Library of Congress as "personal papers" and keeping them away from the National Archives, requesting that they remain closed until at least 2001 or five years after his death. Supported by teams of collaborators, he produced comprehensive, masterfully written volumes on his role in the Nixon and Ford administrations<sup>11</sup>: "It would be difficult to think of any public figure who has himself chronicled that involvement at greater length, or with such care."<sup>12</sup> These historiographically ambitious memoirs determined the discourse for some time, although they were countered by journalistic accounts based on oral interviews with actors who were more or less favorable to the personalities and policies of the protagonists from the era between 1969 and 1976.<sup>13</sup>

Grudgingly, the main actors had to admit that their selective memories would not have the final say. Back in 1971, when he started to have all his conversations in the White House taped, Richard Nixon had sown the seeds that would destroy his historical reputation, which he had so carefully rebuilt with his memoirs<sup>14</sup> and public appearances.<sup>15</sup> "The President is very history-oriented and history-conscious about the role he is going to play, and is not at all subtle about it, or about admitting it," his adviser Alexander W. Butterfield told a Senate Committee on July 16, 1973.<sup>16</sup> Since Nixon was even less subtle in his conversations, the first release of his tapes in 1996, which he and his family had so desperately sought to prevent, revealed his personality and finally overshadowed his achievements. Besides the contents of such tapes, there are probably more gems to be discovered in the archives, such as the President's personal "madman theory."<sup>17</sup>

Kissinger, the trained historian of diplomacy, did a much more sophisticated job of shielding himself from potential distortions by future historians, when in his 1979 volume of memoirs he claimed a monopoly of adequate interpretation for the contemporary actors and minimized the relevance of archival sources:

The written record would by its very volume obscure as much as it illuminated, it would provide no criteria for determining which documents were produced to provide an alibi and which genuinely guided decisions, which reflected actual participation and which were prepared in ignorance of crucial events [ . . . ]. Official files of our period would not necessarily disclose what decisions were taken by the 'backchannels' bypassing formal procedures or what was settled orally without ever becoming part of the formal record. [ . . . ] The participant has at least one vital contribution to make to the writing of history: He will *know* which of the myriad of possible considerations in fact influenced the decisions in which he was involved, he will be aware of which documents reflect the reality as he perceived it, he will be able to recall what views were taken seriously, which were rejected, and the reasoning behind the choices made.<sup>18</sup>

Such sophistic arguments, which are all too well known to contemporary historians, should not be rejected outright as deliberate manipulations of historiography, since they contain some truths and apply to most political bureaucracies in history. They remind the historian to be careful and circumspect in his or her judgment, but should always be considered as what they really are—namely, a challenge rather than the deterrent that the historical actors intended them to be. The second intention definitely applies to the author of the lengthy quote just cited above.

This challenge is a very serious one and ideally will lead to true historiography, access to historical sources and the subsequent process of writing or re-writing history by historians. Now the playing field has indeed been levelled. With regard to American sources, regular declassification is proceeding due to President Clinton's Executive Order 12958, mandating the release of all material twenty-five years and older for which no exemption claims have been raised by federal departments and agencies. Despite many invocations of national security for certain files and some stalling of agencies, with the help of mandatory reviews and the Freedom of Information Act historians and the public have so far witnessed the release of many important files concerning the foreign policy of the years from 1969 to 1976. Especially the indefatigable staff of the private National Security Archive at George Washington University has unearthed many crucial documents<sup>19</sup> on this period and keeps focussed on it. Most spectacular were the recently announced releases of transcripts from Henry Kissinger's telephone conversations during his tenure as National Security Adviser and Secretary of State between 1969 and 1976, which were provoked by pending lawsuits. The relevant records of the State Department, the all-important National Security Council Files, and the Henry Kissinger Office Files from the White House were opened in April 2001, and further material from the Nixon Presidential Project at the National Archives and the Gerald Ford Library in Ann Arbor permit a thorough scrutiny of U.S. sources on foreign policy in general and the bilateral relations and triangular diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China in particular. Regular declassification processes and releases of Nixon tapes over the next few years will turn up even more records. There are rumors about the current administration amending the declassification policy shaped by the preceding Clinton administrations, but politics is a tedious process and further developments remain to be seen.

Of course, it would be highly desirable and utterly fascinating to have similarly systematic access to Russian and Chinese archival material of this period. From time to time we might see some files concerning those years opened in Russia and in China. The United States provides the best conditions for individual scholars, organized efforts like the Cold War International History Project or institutionalized initiatives from historical offices of federal departments to turn up or trade archival material from these two countries. Russian- and Chinese-born scholars<sup>20</sup> now working at U.S. academic institutions use personal networking with their countries of origin to obtain material and include hardly accessible unofficial foreign-language material in their English-language publications. Provincial archives outside of Beijing or archives in former Soviet republics now outside of Moscow's reach could serve as a partial substitute for

the closed central party and state archives in these two respective capitals with regard to the period concerned. Perhaps we might get even more revealing glimpses than we have had so far. The international situation might always unexpectedly further archival access in these countries. Actually, compared to its current status such access can only improve.

As a result of all this developments, historical research on triangular diplomacy has many more sources at its disposal than it did a few years ago and therefore many publications have become outdated. Although analyses of the new material might overwhelmingly focus on the role of the United States, the self-perceived mastermind and director of this diplomacy, the gain for historiography will certainly exceed the scope of Washington's domestic infighting and foreign-policy concepts or the discussion of hegemony, strength and the decline of major powers. What is required is a comprehensive examination and analysis of the newly available sources by taking into account and keeping track of the scholarly and autobiographical literature on the subject. This also include interviews with historical actors who are willing to share their experiences with historians.

### III

We will certainly gain detailed insights into the structural and deliberative foreign-policy processes of the different branches in the U.S. government between 1969 and 1976. The scope and accuracy of the information on its foreign diplomatic counterparts can be evaluated and rated according to what we know today about the regimes in Moscow and Beijing at that time. Although some information obtained by American intelligence will be withheld from historians for national security reasons, the accessible sources will help to draw a picture of the state of knowledge of the decisive U.S. policymakers and shed light on the foundations of deliberative processes in Washington.

Historiography will be able to reconstruct more accurately how U.S. diplomacy was conducted through regular and secret channels between 1969 and 1976—and how this might have been perceived by the negotiating counterparts from the other sides. Some U.S. “backchanneling” with blunt disregard for other democratic institutions in the Executive and Congress, for which Henry Kissinger in particular became famous, might have resembled a secretiveness of politics and diplomacy that is quite familiar to politicians from authoritarian socialist countries. Notwithstanding the domestic debate on the moral conduct of a U.S. foreign policy to be grounded in the pursuit of human rights, the alleged effec-

tiveness of this secretive style inside a democratically elected government should also be investigated.<sup>21</sup>

The new historiography will teach us even more about Washington bureaucratic infighting between the White House and the State Department and among certain actors within these governmental institutions than we already know anecdotally from various memoirs and publications of informed observers. We may be able to reflect on the leverage that such infighting provided for America's diplomatic counterparts, especially when U.S. negotiating partners shared with them their disdain for other U.S. actors. It might be posited hypothetically at this point that American information on frictions within the Chinese or Russian or Vietnamese leadership might well have lagged behind the information those countries had about U.S. internal quarrels and divisions, both in quantity and quality. Who will ever know for sure as long as vital intelligence files from all sides remain classified?

Hopefully there will also be some new insights into how diplomacy was conducted by Soviet and Chinese officials<sup>22</sup> and which motivations, fears, and political processes were behind their decisions and maneuvers.

The process of detente and triangular diplomacy had clearly started with a fundamental weakness and alleged decline on the U.S. side motivating its paradigmatic changes vis-à-vis the two major communist powers. The war in Vietnam had developed into a domestic nightmare from which the Nixon administration had solemnly promised to withdraw after a settlement of "peace with honor."<sup>23</sup> Ending this war was perceived by the government coming into power in 1969 as the key for reelection in 1972. These well known facts gave America's foreign counterparts generous leverage over the U.S. On the other hand, the United States profited from the rivalry between the Soviet Union and China that erupted in bloody military clashes in the summer of 1969 and many threats later on. A tangled system of interests and incentives evolved on each side of the triangle, with the U.S. as the self-perceived main angle attempting to exploit the weaknesses of the other two and fostering their rivalry. But the questions of who was in fact exploiting whom, whether the U.S. self-perception was really accurate, and why detente had to collapse domestically, lead to two final, complex problems: Were the U.S. foreign-policy concepts and strategies of those years really shaped by traditions of nineteenth-century European diplomacy? Or was this merely rhetoric that attributed intellectual brilliance to an otherwise conventional approach? Did the history of diplomacy prove to be of any use in dealing with the world in 1969 and beyond and, if yes, to what extent? And did the actual secret diplomacy and its results match the intellectual framework displayed in public? To what extent did personalities involved matter more or less than concepts or presumed national interests?

We might also look for possible convergences between the conduct of diplomacy and the way of thinking that went along with it, when a democracy like the United States and totalitarian, rather than authoritarian, systems like Brezhnev's Soviet Union and Mao's China applied similar patterns of political diplomacy. Did the triangular diplomacy, as it actually happened, weaken or strengthen the democratic or the totalitarian partner? What did the partners gain or lose with regard to their respective foreign-policy strategies and conduct of diplomacy? One might suspect a slight undertone of envy when reading Henry Kissinger's remarks from 1979 about the Soviet Union: "The Soviet leadership is burdened by no self-doubt or liberal guilt. It has no effective domestic opposition questioning the morality of its actions. The result is a foreign policy free to fill every vacuum, to exploit every opportunity, to act out of implications of its doctrine. Policy is constrained principally by calculations of objective conditions."<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Rescuing Choice from Circumstance: The Statecraft of Henry Kissinger*, in *The Diplomats 1939–1979*, ed. Gordon A. Craig and Francis L. Loewenheim (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 564–592.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Valeriani, *Travels with Henry* (Boston, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> See early appraisals and critiques during Kissinger's tenure in government: David Landau, *Kissinger: The Uses of Power* (Boston, 1972); Stephen R. Graubard, *Kissinger: Portrait of a Mind* (New York, 1973); Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (London, 1974); John G. Stoessinger, *Henry Kissinger: The Anguish of Power* (New York, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Christian Hacke, *Zur Weltmacht verdammt. Die amerikanische Außenpolitik von J. F. Kennedy bis G. W. Bush* (München, 2001); Stefan Fröhlich, *Zwischen Verteidigung und globaler Eindämmung: Geostrategisches Denken in der amerikanischen Außenpolitik während des Kalten Krieges* (Baden-Baden, 1998); Christian Hacke, *Die Ära Nixon-Kissinger 1969–1974. Konservative Reform der Weltpolitik* (Stuttgart, 1983); Gebhard Schweigler, *Von Kissinger zu Carter: Entspannung im Widerstreit von Innen- und Außenpolitik 1969–1981* (München 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Xuewu Gu, *Ausspielung der Barbaren. China zwischen den Supermächten in der Zeit des Ost-West-Konflikts* (Baden-Baden, 1998). On the American side: Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969–1989* (Stanford, CA, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> Robert D. Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger. Doctor of Diplomacy* (New York, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, October 13, 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, "The White Revolutionary: Reflections on Bismarck", *Daedalus* 97 (Summer 1968), 888–924; and *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the Problems of Peace, 1812–22* (New York, 1957).

<sup>9</sup> For instance: "In a twist of strategy Bismarck would surely have appreciated, by agreeing to accord both of its Cold War rivals the status of normal states, the United States gained the leverage to play each off against the other. The Russians and the Chinese achieved the respect they desired, but only by becoming objects of American manipulation." (Gaddis, *Rescuing Choice*, 576).

- <sup>10</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York 1992), 699–700.
- <sup>11</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston/Toronto, 1979); and *Years of Upheaval* (Boston/Toronto, 1982); and *Years of Renewal* (New York, 1999).
- <sup>12</sup> Gaddis, *Rescuing Choice*, 564.
- <sup>13</sup> Outstanding: Isaacson, *Kissinger*. See also: Seymour M. Hersh, *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House* (New York, 1983).
- <sup>14</sup> Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York, 1978).
- <sup>15</sup> Stanley I. Kutler (Ed.), *Abuse of Power: The New Nixon Tapes* (New York, 1997).
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV.
- <sup>17</sup> Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Kansas City, 1998).
- <sup>18</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, p. xxiii.
- <sup>19</sup> William Burr (Ed.), *The Kissinger Transcripts. The Top Secret Talks with Beijing and Moscow* (New York, 1999).
- <sup>20</sup> Robert S. Ross and Jiang Chengbin (Eds.), *Re-examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954–1973* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001); Qiang Zhai, *China & The Vietnam Wars 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. William Bundy, *A Tangled Web. The Making of Foreign Policy in the Nixon Presidency* (New York, 1998); Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation. American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington D.C., 1985).
- <sup>22</sup> Limited primary sources are so far: Xiahong Liu, *Chinese Ambassadors: The Rise of Diplomatic Professionalism since 1949* (Seattle, 2001); Anatolij Dobrynin, *In Confidence. Moscow's Ambassador to America's Six Cold War Presidents* (Seattle/London, 1995). For insights from American accounts see: Raymond L. Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence* (Washington D.C., 2001); Nancy Bernkopf Tucker (Ed.), *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations* (New York, 2001); John H. Holdridge, *Crossing the Divide: An Insider's Account of the Normalization of U.S.-China Relations* (Lanham, 1997).
- <sup>23</sup> Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York, 2001); Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *A Prize-Winning Performance? Kissinger, Triangular Diplomacy and the End of the Vietnam War, 1969–1973* (Oslo, 2001).
- <sup>24</sup> Kissinger, *White House Years*, 116–17.