

Opinion – Trump's Reversal of Nixonian Logic

Written by Craig R. Myers

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CRAIG R. MYERS, MAR 2 2025

My Ukrainian friends feared President Donald Trump would sell them out and they now believe it's happening. Recent images of Ukrainian soldiers removing American flag patches in protest of what they see as a betrayal are saddening. It may be of little consolation at the moment, but to understand President Trump's puzzling and troubling moves toward a Russia-Ukraine peace deal, consider the *The King, the Mice, and the Cheese* – a beautifully illustrated 1965 book by Nancy and Eric Gurney. The cheese-loving king of a far-off land must deal with mice infesting his kingdom. The solution—cats! Soon the felines succeed in de-mousing the kingdom but take their place as public nuisance No. 1. So, another solution must be found – dogs. The canines rout the cats but begin causing their own chaos. In come the lions to chase out the dogs but ... you guessed it. Now what? Elephants to chase away the lions. When the pachyderms unleash panic and destruction, only one solution remains: Bring back the mice. International relations can be understood in a similar way—sometimes the solution becomes the problem in a seemingly endless cycle.

In the realist view, there are no permanent solutions in a world tainted by original sin and dominated by great power competition. Simply put, Trump is reversing President Richard Nixon's February 1972 rapprochement with China. The catalyst was the aggressive challenge of the Soviet Union across Europe, invading Czechoslovakia in 1968. Despite direct U.S.-China combat in the Korean War in the 1950s, both Beijing and Washington saw normalizing relations as a bulwark against the surging USSR. Chinese and Soviet troops were engaging in border clashes and seemed moving toward full-scale war. The U.S. was being pulled deeper into the Vietnam War on China's southern border.

In a tripolar world system, improving Sino-American relations would allow both to refocus on Moscow. In *The Peacemakers* Bruce Jentleson said a report conducted by Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai concluded, "While the United States saw China as a 'potential threat,' the Soviet Union saw China 'as its leading enemy, so it (the Soviet Union) is a greater threat to China's security than American imperialism."

And in their own chess game move: 'the United States tries to take advantage of the contradictions between China and the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union tries to take advantage of the contradictions between China and the United States. So we should intentionally take advantage of the contradictions between the Soviet Union and the United States. Pursuing talks with the United States...was a tactical action that may achieve strategic success (Jentleson, 16).

So in diplomacy characterized as three-level chess, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's talks with Zhou opened the door for Nixon's historic visit with Chinese leader Mao Zedong. But it involved what seemed to be public betrayal of a democratic nation—Taiwan, or the Republic of China (ROC). According to *Politico* writer James Mann:

Kissinger made crucial concessions ... that have governed and constrained American policy toward China and Taiwan from then until the present day. Before Kissinger's trip, the official position of the United States was that sovereignty over Taiwan was "an unsettled question." But Kissinger promised Zhou that the United States would not support two Chinese governments (one in Beijing, one in Taipei); that it would also not agree to a solution of "one China, one Taiwan"; and, finally, that it would not support an independent Taiwan.

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U.S. troops were withdrawn from Taiwan and years later Washington officially ended diplomatic relations. Yet Taiwan has survived as an independent, democratic, capitalist state in large part due to U.S. support even while remaining unrecognized by that most vaunted liberal IR institution, the United Nations. (Meanwhile, Trump angered Beijing in February by removing the phrase “we do not support Taiwan independence” from State Department messaging)

A similar sleight of hand is at work now, albeit more awkwardly. Ending the Ukraine war will allow focus on checking China, which is actively pursuing its stated goal of replacing the U.S. as the world's top military and economic power, according to K.T. McFarland:

The greatest strategic and existential threat to the United States isn't from ... the Middle East, or even Russia. It is from a Sino-Russian alliance aimed at the United States. Our refusal to talk to Russia for the last three years is one reason Putin has grown closer to Chinese President Xi. In the early 1970s, my boss, Henry Kissinger, drove a wedge between the anti-American Sino-Soviet alliance by opening relations with China. Potentially, Trump could do the same thing today, this time by reopening relations with Russia.

President Trump's criticism of Zelenskyy as a “dictator” was distasteful and his characterization of Ukraine as the war's initiator (a statement now walked back) was blatantly false. The GOP base has soured on Zelenskyy over alleged corruption and waste of taxpayer money. The new zeitgeist in Washington is one of rooting it out domestically and in foreign policy (consider the fate of USAID).

Trump's apparent pro-Russian pivot culminated Feb. 24 with America's disappointing opposition to a UN resolution condemning Putin's unjustified, brutal invasion on its three-year anniversary. What emerged instead was a milquetoast resolution seeking a swift end to the conflict and lasting peace. That being said, Zelenskyy had no leverage nor any political license to make any deal with Putin and former President Biden didn't make any real overtures for peace. So, negotiations by necessity had to be by Washington and Moscow. Paeans for Putin brought them to the table for a rapid reset driven by a two-part urgency—end the destruction and casualties now estimated at 1 million and allow Washington to pivot more fully to Beijing.

Congress appropriated \$163.6 billion to help Ukraine survive and in fact overperform in pushing back and bloodying Russian forces. Ukrainians have inflicted heavy losses and exposed the vaunted Red Army as a World War I style meat-grinder backed up by missiles. Russia has been damaged militarily, economically and reputationally in the world. But Kiev cannot win. Sending more-lethal weapons and aircraft early on might have changed the trajectory, but doing so now would only intensify and prolong what is now the definition of a stalemate.

It was said “only Nixon could go to China.” Similarly, perhaps only Trump can end Europe's worst war since WWII. Thus his somewhat shocking role of bad cop, while allowing special envoy Retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg to be the good cop. A peace deal seems possible that will allow Ukraine to survive and maybe fight another day. Ukrainians will lament it as a betrayal while rebuilding their nation, which has shown in massive protests that it has democracy and independence in its DNA.

As a survivor of Nazi Germany, the Jewish Kissinger was criticized for foreign policy that seemed absent morality. Jentleson notes Kissinger's “realpolitik” was a “pragmatic focus on interests, not ideology” with a goal of achieving big-picture changes that benefited millions. In the case of Taiwan, endangering a peaceful democratic nation. Time magazine's Kissinger obituary concluded:

After all, the detente between Washington and Beijing was always rooted not in mutual appreciation but shared enmity of the Soviet Union. With its gaze firmly on undermining Moscow, Washington was willing to engage with Beijing in the hope that China would reform, open up, and democratize. But the latter never happened. The status of Taiwan, just as when Kissinger sat down with Zhou over a half-century ago, remains the most combustible issue.

Realpolitik has returned and it's not pleasant to watch. But more than 50 years after another U.S. president's troubling handshake with a tyrant helped dismantle the USSR, China is now the elephant in the room.

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Craig R. Myers was a reporter and editor for newspapers in Alabama and Florida for more than 25 years. A graduate of Troy University, he earned a master's in International Affairs in 2022 from Middle Tennessee State University, where he writes full time and teaches journalism classes part-time. Myers holds a degree in Russian language and over the past 20 years has regularly travelled to Moldova and Ukraine with Christian NGOs.