

# H-Diplo

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Review by **Chris Connolly**, University College Cork

The transformation of the dynamics of the Cold War that occurred between 1969 and 1972 has meant that many of the key documents relating to this period have had an unusually wide circulation, beginning with Henry Kissinger's selective and self-serving quotations that found their way into the various volumes of his autobiographies. To considerable interest, the National Security Archive put into published form in 1999 William Burr's edited volume entitled *The Kissinger Transcripts*, that placed in the public domain some of the 'memcons' of Kissinger's momentous secret visit to Beijing in July 1971, among others. The Digital National Security Archive made a huge amount of this material available to researchers in the middle of the last decade, and then in the summer of 2006 the Office of the Historian published *FRUS Volume XVII, Documents on China, 1969–1972*, which was quickly followed a few weeks later by the release of Volume E-13, the companion volume containing 175 additional documents that had been referenced or foot-noted in Volume XVII. The document fetishists among our number will be particularly pleased to find that as well as in standard HTML webpage form, scanned copies of the original documents are also available for download, providing that extra authenticity and 'feel' for the documents that arise from seeing them in their original format.

It is unsurprising nonetheless that there is little within this additional collection of documents that is particularly new or previously unknown. It does, however, add substantially to our understanding of the texture and modalities of the burgeoning relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China by revealing the content of the 'backchannel' communications between Washington and Beijing, beginning with the memcon of a meeting between Kissinger and Pakistani Ambassador Agha Hilaly, which is the subject Document 54 in the corresponding printed FRUS volume. This is a fitting choice for the first document in the volume, whose purpose is to fill in the gaps in

almost singular narrative of the main volume and of this supplemental one – the path towards Sino-American rapprochement. Indeed, a comparison of this document with the final one in this collection, dated December 29, 1972, in which the U.S. side almost casually apologises for a missile that landed on Chinese territory, illustrates how far relations between these two nations had come in the interim.

Having said that, there is still much to be found within the pages of these 175 documents that scholars working on Sino-American rapprochement will find valuable, as our inquiry into its substance goes deeper and becomes more nuanced. From a more general reading, however, it is difficult to pick out many broad themes that distinguish this e-volume accompaniment from its print companion. One possible exception is the manner in which this volume expands our understanding of the role played by the U.S. Military Attaché in Paris, Lieutenant General Vernon Walters, as the “Paris backchannel” and therefore during most of this period the main conduit for messages between Washington and Beijing. Walters’ commentaries on each visit to the Chinese Embassy in Paris, in which he invariably recounts the amount of “nonsense and persiflage”, “chitchat”, jasmine tea and preserved apples that he suffered in the service of his country provides a nice human touch to the generally lofty and arid exchange of diplomatic notes. They also serve as a reminder of how much the personal relationships between the principal actors were a key factor in driving forward the rapprochement process.

One personal relationship that certainly did not drive forward the Sino-American rapprochement was the famously contentious one that existed between Kissinger and Secretary of State William Rogers, and its difficult nature is emphasized in these documents. From reading documents 45-50, one can feel Kissinger’s frustration at being ordered to take a stopover in Anchorage, Alaska at Roger’s recommendation to the President, so as not to arrive back in Washington from Beijing immediately before the United Nations voted on the ‘ChiRep’ (Chinese representation at the UN) issue. Having been excluded from any meaningful role in the management of the opening to China, one can sense Rogers’ grabbing the opportunity to keep Kissinger out of the picture for as long as possible, and Kissinger’s resentment at being shut out. Similarly, in some of the more technical discussions on the choreography of Nixon’s summit visit to China in 1972, the question of how to give Rogers a meaningful yet unimportant role features large. Similarly, the last minute changes to what would become known as the Shanghai Communique that were demanded by Rogers and the State Department are brought to the fore in document 99, while Kissinger’s comments to Zhou in the preceding document that “No one knows about my trips to New York City to talk with your Ambassador. Secretary Rogers knows that our contact point is Paris, but he does not know of any of the messages that have come back and forth” are particularly revealing. The emptiness of Zhou’s meeting with Rogers on February 27 1972 contrasts sharply with the expansive and substantive discussions with Kissinger.

Through his correspondence we also get to learn more of the role of Alexander Haig, later Secretary of State himself under Reagan but who, unlike Walters, does not emerge covered in glory from his January 1972 trip to Beijing. In particular document 79, the memcon of Haig’s January 6th meeting with Zhou Enlai stands out, highlighting Haig’s ineptitude and

lack of finesse in handling substantive discussions with the Chinese, as demonstrated in his earlier meeting with Zhou documented in *Volume XVII*, documents 183 and 184. Just as the Rogers memcons highlight the shallowness of his contribution to the China opening, so too do these documents highlight Haig's diplomatic failings, such as when he is forced to apologise for his January 3rd comment in which he appeared to vouch to the PRC that the United States would guarantee its "future viability".<sup>1</sup> "As I pointed out at the time I gave those views," he backtracked to the Chinese Premier, "they were views which were largely conveyed in my own language as I understood the general thrust of my instructions. In several instances, I believe the simple language of a soldier might have been more blunt than it might have been. I believe some of my words may have been misinterpreted."<sup>2</sup>

Of particular note in its own right, is document 65, "Checklist of Undertakings With the Government of the People's Republic of China, Washington, June 17, 1972", which in the opinion of this researcher, deserves to be in the main volume, outlining as it does every promise the U.S. government believed it had made to the PRC. Given how much of the discussion about these historical events hinges on what precisely was promised by each side, surely this document is an important starting point for much research on the topic.

The extent to which Kissinger and Nixon kept the Chinese government informed of their moves on Vietnam also becomes clear, as Kissinger passed over to Ambassador Huang Hua copies of significant messages and negotiating papers regarding his peace negotiations with the North Vietnamese in Paris, intended to illustrate to the Chinese the reasonableness of the U.S. position, presumably in the hope that Mao and Zhou would do what they always denied they would do: exert pressure on Hanoi to conclude a peace agreement. Indeed, many of the documents contained in this volume are the formal papers or messages handed over in meetings, the memcons of which are found in the main volume.

As such, we learn little that is factually new, but get another layer or two of the texture of these key interactions. As such, when read in conjunction with the 280 documents in *Volume XVII* researchers on this topic now have at the click of a mouse an impressive collection of primary archival materials to guide their work that less than a decade ago was barely imaginable.

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<sup>1</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII, Documents on China, 1969-1972*, eds. Stephen Phillips and Edward O. Keefer (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2006, document 183, memcon, Zhou, Haig et al., January 3, 1972, midnight.

<sup>2</sup> Confusingly this memcon is dated January 7, 1971, though the volume's editors list it as "Beijing, January 7, 1972, 11:45 p.m." In fact the conversation took place late on the night of January 6, 1972; Haig's party left Beijing for Shanghai on January 7.

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