

***Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Powers***  
***Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World***  
**Roundtable Review**



Reviewed Works:

**Robert Dallek.** *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power.* New York: Harper Collins, 2007. 740 pp. \$32.50. ISBN-13: 978-0060722302 (hardcover).

**Margaret MacMillan.** *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World.* New York: Random House, 2007. 404 pp. \$27.95. ISBN-13: 978-1-4000-6127-3 (hardcover). [Previously published in Canada as *Nixon in China: The Week that Changed the World* and in the UK as *Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao.*].

Roundtable Editor: David A. Welch

Reviewers: Jussi M. Hanhimäki, Jeffrey Kimball, Lorenz Lüthi, Yafeng Xia

Stable URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/NixonKissingerMao-Roundtable.pdf>

---

Your use of this H-Diplo roundtable review indicates your acceptance of the H-Net copyright policies, and terms of condition and use.

The following is a plain language summary of these policies:

**You may** redistribute and reprint this work under the following conditions:

- Attribution:** You must include full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.
- Nonprofit and education purposes only.** You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Enquiries about any other uses of this material should be directed to the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

H-Net's copyright policy is available at <http://www.h-net.org/about/intellectualproperty.php> .

---

H-Diplo is an international discussion network dedicated to the study of diplomatic and international history (including the history of foreign relations). For more information regarding H-Diplo, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/>.

For further information about our parent organization, H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, please visit <http://www.h-net.org/>.

---

**Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo**, a part of H-Net. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---

Review by Lorenz M. Lüthi, McGill University

---

### A Western View

Richard Nixon's visit to the People's Republic of China undoubtedly is among the most captivating events in the Cold War. In February 1972 the red-baiting congressman-turned-visionary president journeyed to Mao's crumbling and internationally isolated communist utopia in one of the great turnarounds during the Cold War. In Margaret MacMillan's well-written page-turner the actual visit takes up a relatively small amount of the book; the preceding years attract much of the attention. The book is roughly organized in chronological chapters from Nixon's departure to China on February 17 to his return to the United States ten days later. Most chapters contain wide-ranging flashbacks exploring various historical aspects of the story: China, Sino-American relations, Taiwan, the Soviet Union, Indochina, the Pakistani back channel, the preparations for the visit, and, of course, the main protagonists: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Richard Nixon, and Henry Kissinger. This departure from a conventional, linear narrative works surprisingly well, especially given that the book is intended for the general readership.

*Lorenz Lüthi is Assistant Professor of History at McGill University. His book *The Sino-Soviet Split* will be published in 2008 by Princeton University Press.*

MacMillan used an admirably wide range of sources from American and British primary materials, interviews with Western and Chinese participants and observers, memoirs from the U.S. side, a good sampling of the English-language secondary literature, and even a limited number of Chinese-language secondary sources in translation. As a result, the book offers a tasty *mélange* of official meetings, personal encounters, and entertaining anecdotes. MacMillan is at her best when she leads the reader through the infighting in the Nixon administration, the preparations to the President's seminal trip, and the sometimes improvised nature of what was supposed to be a carefully staged visit.

*Nixon and Mao* nevertheless offers a traditional interpretation of Sino-American relations. The focus is on the primary actors and on the endeavor of both countries to accomplish their respective strategic goals, that is, shoring up international standing (in the case of the United States) or establishing it in the first place (in the case of China). Given the preponderance of American sources and the obvious centrality of Nixon journeying to Mao (and not the reverse), the stronger emphasis on the U.S. side of the story is understandable.

However, this approach harbors the danger of obscuring some important aspects. Why did the United States and China seek rapprochement in the first place? Why exactly at that very point in time? MacMillan sees it as a strategic necessity -- "For

each the other was a card to play against the common enemy, the Soviet Union" (p. 5, also p. 123) -- and as the consequence of the isolation of the PRC (as a result of the Cultural Revolution) and of the United States (as result of the Vietnam War; pp. 115-122). While the international positions of both countries certainly were a reason for rapprochement, it was only the United States that subscribed to the idea of a Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle in which the two weaker members ally against the stronger. No evidence has surfaced that Mao and his fellow leaders thought along these lines; Chinese strategic thinking in the early 1970s was shifting away from Mao's theory of the intermediate zone (p. 113), describing a Soviet-American struggle over much of the world (the intermediate zone), to the three world theory in which the United States and the Soviet Union formed the first, industrialized Europe, Australia, Canada, and Japan formed the second, and the rest the third world, including China.<sup>1</sup> In early January 1972, Mao and Zhou explicitly forbade Nixon's Deputy Assistant for National Security Affairs, Alexander Haig, from seeing Sino-American rapprochement in the light of the Sino-Soviet-American relationship.<sup>2</sup>

In that vein, MacMillan suggests that the Sino-Soviet border war in early 1969 changed Mao's thinking on international affairs (pp. 131-144). Although I agree that the border clashes (which were provoked by the Chinese) were an important catalyst, they seem to have been only one moment in China's fundamental foreign policy evaluation. After the sudden withdrawal of the Soviet specialists in mid-1960, the PRC quickly established economic and trade relations with many non-socialist countries; it even imported U.S. grain, as long as it was brought in via France and Albania. In 1968, Mao dropped the claim that China was the center of world revolution.<sup>3</sup> The PRC sought contacts with the outside world before seeking rapprochement with the United States. From the summer of 1969 to Nixon's visit, for example, China had re-sent ambassadors to the forty or so countries that had recognized the PRC before the start of the Cultural Revolution, established full diplomatic relations with at least another twenty, and had become a member of the United Nations.<sup>4</sup> At the turn of the decade, China was in the full process of opening up toward the whole world, of which the United States was only one -- albeit an important -- part. The reasons for this drastic diplomatic turnaround derived from

---

<sup>1</sup> King C. Chen, ed., *China and the Three Worlds* (Broadway: M.E. Sharpe, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> "Haig to Kissinger," 1/3/1971, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976*, XVII, 650. Also: Li Danhui, "ZhongMei huanhe yu yuanYe kangMei: Zhongguo waijiao zhanlüe tiaozheng zhong de Yuanan yinsu" ["Sino-American Detente and the Vietnam War: the Vietnamese factor in the adjustment of China's foreign policy strategy"], <http://www.shenzhijia.net/muluyuenan.htm>, accessed on November 16, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ma Jisen, *The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China* (Honk Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004), 308-313.

<sup>4</sup> Ma Jisen, *Cultural Revolution*, 320-321.

23 September 2007

the end of the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution in 1968, the need for increased trade for modernization purposes, and the resulting overall de-emphasis of ideology in foreign policy. The Nixon visit fell into this phase; it had not “taken three years to arrange,” as MacMillan claims (p. 5), but roughly one (spring 1971 to February 1972). After some pleasantries and a show of Chinese willingness to allow a high-ranking American official to come to Beijing to talk about Taiwan in the informal ambassadorial meetings in Warsaw at the turn of 1969/1970 (167-168), American military actions in Cambodia had sent all contacts back into the deep freezer for almost one year.

While MacMillan successfully and subtly explores the risks (and eventual domestic rewards) of the visit for President Nixon, readers will not find much information about how the Chinese leadership explained the sudden turnaround internally. MacMillan simply asserts that “public opinion did not matter in China” (p. 11). But Mao and his fellow leaders were keenly aware about their image within and outside of the party. The economic disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the human tragedies of the Cultural Revolution (which MacMillan does acknowledge on pp. 72, 79-80, 111) had discredited their leadership and had led to widespread disillusionment among the Chinese. Zhou Enlai spent much intellectual energy constructing explanations for why China was inviting the head of the class enemy, especially after the country’s media had spent so much ink over the previous two decades painting the United States as the greatest foe of the world’s people. In the new -- and, of course, again distorted -- version of historical reality, Mao ‘acceded’ to Nixon’s pleading for a visit -- a version that intentionally downgraded the President’s trip from a seminal visit to a beggar’s pilgrimage to a sage.<sup>5</sup> Much of Zhou’s rhetoric was designed to prove Mao’s past policies correct, thereby shoring up support for the policy of the contemporaneous Chinese leadership.

Finally, I would have liked to see an assessment of the greater meaning of Nixon’s visit to the Cold War. How much did it change the world, as the subtitle of the book suggest? MacMillan acknowledges that it was more symbolic than substantial (p. 1) and that Sino-American relations did not develop after February 1972 (pp. 313-314). Despite Nixon’s 1967 claim that China’s isolation in the world should not last much longer for the greater good (p. 10), the president’s goals during his visit were rather myopic. In the talks with Zhou, he expected to get Chinese assistance in bringing about a negotiated end to the Vietnam War (which he did not receive); on a global scale, he hoped to exploit Sino-American rapprochement as a tool against the Soviet Union (which he did achieve). Given this largely instrumental view of Sino-American rapprochement, it was no wonder that the president pursued Soviet-American détente once the Soviets reacted to Nixon’s affair with Mao. Only the collapse of Soviet-American détente and Vietnam’s great power aspirations in

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example: “Why did our country accede to Nixon’s request for a Visit? Chou Enlai’s Internal Report to the Part on the International Situation, December 1971 (Excerpts),” Chen, *China and the Three Worlds*, 133-142.

23 September 2007

Indochina at the end of the 1970s brought a resumption of Sino-American rapprochement. Although Deng Xiaoping's visit to Jimmy Carter's White House in early 1979 was less symbolic, it was much more substantial than Nixon's trip to Beijing seven years earlier.

Despite this criticism, MacMillan's book is a great addition to the literature. Her extensive use of primary and secondary material in two languages provides many insights into a fascinating story. For both the general audience and the specialist, the book is an important starting point in our understanding of this complex and occasionally still emotive event of the Cold War.

---

**Copyright © 2007 by H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---