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Search

**FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1969–1976, VOLUME XXXIV, NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY, 1969–1972**

## 59. Editorial Note

An outgrowth of the Nixon administration's policy of linkage, making negotiating progress in one area dependent on progress in another, was the threatened use of U.S. or allied military force to encourage North Vietnam and their Soviet patrons to reach a settlement to the conflict in Vietnam. On May 15, 1969, Nixon briefed a joint meeting of the National Security Council and the Cabinet on his strategy of placing additional pressures on the enemy to achieve a settlement in Vietnam. A memorandum of the meeting reads as follows: "In a summary statement, the President began by pointing out that the end of World War II was delayed by the insistence on unconditional surrender. 'If the enemy knows there is no way out but military defeat, he has nothing to gain by offering a settlement. What we have provided is a way out. On the other side of the coin, some people feel that it is only necessary to put out a proposal to get peace. What must be realized is that we are talking to an enemy whose first objective is not peace. They want South Vietnam. So if we are going to get genuine negotiations, just putting out a proposal is not enough. We needed to threaten that if they don't talk they will suffer.'

"The President listed four principal factors in the U.S. position. One, we are for peace—we are reasonable. Two, we aim to convince the enemy that if there is no settlement, we have an option which is military action not only at the present level but an expanded level. Three, we want to make clear that they can't win by sitting us out. Four, we want to convince them that they aren't going to get what they want by erosion of the will of the U.S. So, said the President, we have offered them a way out. We have tried to indicate that we will not tolerate a continuation of their fight-talk strategy. We have tried to convince them that the time is coming when South Vietnam will be strong enough to handle a major part of the load. Beyond all this, said the President, it was necessary to give the impression to the enemy that the people of the U.S. are going to support a sound peace proposal and not accept peace at any price. Then and only then will the enemy realize that the war must be ended." (Memorandum of a meeting by James Keogh; National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, White House Special Files, President's Office Files, Box 1, Memoranda for the President's Files, Beginning May 11, 1969) See also Foreign Relations, 1969–1976, volume VI, Vietnam, January 1969–July 1970, Document 68 .

Nixon made specific threats. On August 3, at the end of his worldwide trip that began on July 22, President Nixon met with Romanian President Nicolae Ceaucescu at the Council of States Building in Bucharest. In the course of asking Ceaucescu to help broker a deal between the United States and the Soviet Union, Nixon again threatened escalation of the war [Page 231] in Vietnam. According to a memorandum of conversation, Nixon said the following: "I am concerned by reports from Paris that the North Vietnamese leaders have concluded that their best tactics are to continue to talk in Paris with no substance and to continue to fight in Vietnam thinking that public opinion will force us to capitulate and get out. I never make idle threats; I do say that we can't indefinitely continue to have 200 deaths per week with no progress in Paris. On November 1 this year—one year after the halt of the bombing, after the withdrawal of troops, after reasonable offers for peaceful negotiation—if there is no progress, we must re-evaluate our policy.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear about North Vietnam. I don't hate the North Vietnamese. While I disagree with their government, I admire the courage of the people, their willingness to sacrifice. We want an equal chance for both sides; we want justice and peace for both sides. All we get from them is a take it or leave it position. There is nothing more important to me than to end this war on a fair basis. It will make possible the many Romanian-U.S. actions we talked

about, could make possible U.S.-Chinese relations, and would help relations with the Soviet Union. All this is possible." (National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, Box 1023, President's Trip Files, Memcons—The President and President Ceaucescu, August 2–3, 1969)

According to H.R. Haldeman, the President's Assistant, Nixon intentionally planned to signal to Moscow and Hanoi that he was a "madman" capable of any irrational deed, up to and including using nuclear weapons, to end the stalemate at the negotiating table and bring about an end to the war. The so-called "madman theory" was first suggested in Haldeman's memoirs, published in 1978. Haldeman recalled: "the Communists feared Nixon above all other politicians in U.S. public life. And Nixon intended to manipulate that fear to bring an end to the War. The Communists regarded him as an uncompromising enemy whose hatred for their philosophy had been spelled out over and over again in two decades of public life. Nixon saw his advantage in that fact. 'They'll believe any threat of force that Nixon makes because it's Nixon,' he said."

Haldeman wrote of Nixon's belief that President Dwight D. Eisenhower had convinced North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union to end the Korean war in 1953 only by issuing a nuclear threat. "He saw a parallel in the action President Eisenhower had taken to end another war. When Eisenhower arrived in the White House, the Korean War was stalemated. Eisenhower ended the impasse in a hurry. He secretly got word to the Chinese that he would drop nuclear bombs on North Korea unless a truce was signed immediately. In a few weeks, the Chinese called for a truce and the Korean War ended."

Although it is unclear whether the Eisenhower's threat of nuclear expansion was received as such in China, [Page 232] Nixon planned to use the same tactic in Vietnam, Haldeman recalled. Although he lacked Eisenhower's long military résumé, "he believed his hardline anti-Communist rhetoric of twenty years would serve to convince the North Vietnamese equally as well that he really meant to do what he said. He expected to utilize the same principle of a threat of excessive force."

"The threat was the key, and Nixon coined a phrase for his theory," Haldeman continued. Nixon reportedly told Haldeman in the summer of 1968: "I call it the Madman Theory, Bob. I want the North Vietnamese to believe that I've reached the point that I might do *anything* to stop the war. We'll just slip the word to them that 'for God's sake, you know Nixon is obsessed about Communism. We can't restrain him when he's angry—and he has his hand on the nuclear button'—and Ho Chi Minh himself will be in Paris in two days begging for peace." Nixon himself recalled events differently, however. The former President, during an interview with historian Joan Hoff in 1984, denied using the term "madman theory" and claimed that he rarely discussed substantive foreign policy matters with Haldeman. (H.R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), pages 82–83; Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), page 177)

In October 1969, the U.S. military, including its nuclear forces, secretly went on alert, a fact that remained unknown for many years. The documentary record offers no definitive explanation as to why U.S. forces went on this alert, also known as the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) Readiness Test. There are two main after-the-fact explanations: first, that nuclear brinkmanship was designed to convince the Soviets that President Nixon was prepared to launch a nuclear attack against North Vietnam in order to convince Moscow to put pressure on Hanoi to negotiate an end to the war in Southeast Asia; second, that the President ordered the alert as a signal to deter a possible Soviet nuclear strike against China during the escalating Sino-Soviet border dispute.

The second explanation grew out of the intensification of the Sino-Soviet border dispute in early 1969, which lead to several armed clashes, raising concerns among U.S. officials that these skirmishes would provoke a broader clash between the two Communist powers. Fighting between Soviet and Chinese troops erupted in March along the Ussuri River, which formed part of the eastern border between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. After a brief inter-lude, armed clashes again took place, this time along the frontier separating the Chinese Autonomous Region of Sinkiang and the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, culminating in a serious engagement on August 13 that reportedly resulted in heavy casualties, particularly on the Chinese side. In the wake of that exchange, both the Soviet and Chinese [Page 233] Governments initiated civil defense measures in preparation for a possible escalation of hostilities. Negotiations ultimately

staved off a Sino-Soviet war, including talks between Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and his Chinese counterpart Zhou Enlai in early September and bilateral talks on border questions, which were announced on October 7 and began in Beijing on October 20.

According to the second after-the-fact interpretation, President Nixon, on the recommendations of Henry Kissinger, initially considered placing U.S. forces on alert as a signal to the Soviet Union to deter a Soviet preemptive strike against Chinese nuclear facilities. As the following documentation shows, U.S. foreign policymakers received several credible, but incomplete, intelligence reports beginning in August 1969 that Soviet leaders were considering such a move.

Kissinger, although he did not specifically mention the alert, recalled in his memoirs that the United States "raised our profile somewhat to make clear that we were not indifferent to these Soviet threats." Such threats included a trial balloon floated by a Soviet journalist with special ties to the Soviet Government, who on September 16 suggested "the possibility of a Soviet air strike" against a Chinese nuclear testing site. According to Kissinger, "A Soviet attack on China could not be ignored by us. It would upset the global balance of power; it would create around the world an impression of approaching Soviet dominance. But a direct American challenge would not be supported by our public opinion and might even accelerate what we sought to prevent." (Kissinger, *White House Years*, pages 184–186)

Nixon offered the most direct evidence of the link between the JCS Readiness Test and Sino-Soviet hostilities during an interview published in the July 29, 1985, issue of *Time* magazine. The former President revealed that he had "considered using nuclear weapons" on four separate occasions during his Presidency. One was in Vietnam. In weighing options to end the war in Vietnam, Nixon said, "one of the options was the nuclear option, in other words, massive escalation: either bombing the dikes or the nuclear option." Having decided not to avail himself of that option in Vietnam, the ex-President recalled also considering using nuclear weapons during the war in the Middle East in October 1973 and during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani crisis.

Another time Nixon said he considered using nuclear weapons "involved China. There were border conflicts. Henry [Kissinger] used to come in and talk about the situation. Incidentally, this was before the tapes. You won't have these on the tapes." Nixon continued, "Henry said, 'Can the U.S. allow the Soviet Union to jump the Chinese?'—that is, to take out their nuclear capability. We had to let the Soviets know we would not tolerate that." (*Time*, July 29, 1985, pages 52–53)