

Documents shed light on Nixon's 'betrayal'

Written by James Wang 王健
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Former president Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石) is said to have strongly resented his US counterpart, then-president Richard Nixon, for having “betrayed” him by going to Beijing and shaking hands with then-Chinese leader Mao Zedong (毛澤東) and Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (周恩來). However, declassified US diplomatic documents show Nixon was a complex strategist who was concerned about Taiwan.

Although Nixon was the one who started normalizing relations with China, he had doubts about the timing and necessity of then-US president Jimmy Carter's formal diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979. While Nixon cooperated with China to contain the Soviet Union, he was mindful that one day, the US might need to align with the Soviet Union to contain China.

Now, more than 30 years after those events, the situation that Nixon anticipated has to some extent come to pass. The current US strategy of “rebalancing” in Asia responds to Chinese expansionist ambitions through alignment with countries that feel threatened by China.

Records show that Nixon and then-US national security adviser Henry Kissinger had already established this strategy for maintaining a balance of power before Nixon's visit to Beijing. Kissinger encouraged Nixon, saying: “I think in 20 years, your successor, if he's as wise as you, will wind up leaning towards the Russians against the Chinese.”

Seven years later, when Carter announced the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, he sent Michel Oksenberg, a China expert on the White House's National Security Council, to brief Nixon on this development. Nixon said that he did not know how history would judge the China policy that he had initiated. He said that while it seemed that it had been the right thing to do, before the end of the century, the US might have to cooperate with the Soviet Union to keep China in check.

Nixon had planned to establish diplomatic relations with China during his second term, but he is said to have been genuinely surprised by Carter's decision. Nixon asked Oksenberg why Carter had decided to establish diplomatic relations at that time, and expressed doubt as to whether it was necessary. Nevertheless, Oksenberg's understanding was that, in his heart, Nixon admired Carter for having made such a bold decision.

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Nixon also had Taiwan in his heart. He wrote a letter to Carter, in which he raised major concerns, the first of which was about “the adequacy of guarantees against the use of force to resolve the Taiwan issue.”

Nixon recommended that the Carter administration should publicly declare that “any use of force against Taiwan would irreparably jeopardize our relations with the PRC.”

Nixon further recommended that the US should make it clear that it had the right to approve arms sales to Taiwan, and that it would exercise that right as long as there was a need to deter any use of force against Taiwan.

One can only wonder how Beijing's upstart leaders, with their inflated egos, might feel about these opinions Nixon kept to himself all those years ago.

James Wang is a political commentator.

Translated by Julian Clegg

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