

July 12, 1969

**Memorandum of conversation of the Ambassador of
the USSR A.F. Dobrynin with Kissinger**

Citation:

"Memorandum of conversation of the Ambassador of the USSR A.F. Dobrynin with Kissinger", July 12, 1969, Wilson Center Digital Archive, SCCD, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 558, LI. 92-105. Translated for CWIHP by Mark H. Doctoroff.
<https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/114842>

Summary:

In this July 1969 report to the Politburo, Soviet ambassador to Washington Anatoly Dobrynin recounts a wide-ranging conversation with national security adviser Henry A. Kissinger a half-year into President Richard M. Nixon's first term. Dobrynin also offers his candid personal evaluation of Kissinger and the secret White House "backchannel" established by Nixon to circumvent the State Department and communicate directly with the Soviet leadership.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Send to members of the Politburo, CC CPSU and to candidate members of the Politburo, CC CPSU

July 12, 1969

A. Gromyko

Secret, Copy No. 1

Memorandum of conversation

of the Ambassador of the USSR to the USA A.F. Dobrynin with Kissinger, Aide to President Nixon

On the eve of my July 12 departure to Moscow, Kissinger, aide to the President, called me and expressed his wish to meet with me before I left. I agreed and the meeting took place in Kissinger's White House office (like all previous meetings with him, this meeting was unannounced). Kissinger began the conversation with a comment to the effect that President Nixon knows about my departure to the USSR and that this meeting was organized with the President's knowledge, so that, while in Moscow, the Soviet Ambassador in his report to his government could, if necessary, provide "first hand" knowledge of the President's point of view on various international questions and especially on Soviet-American relations. Kissinger said that he can with full responsibility declare, that in foreign policy—besides the settlement of the Vietnam question (on which he intended to dwell a little later)—President Nixon feels that the other basic area which demands his attention is Soviet-American relations. He poses his main goal in this area as the necessity of avoiding situations which could lead to direct confrontation between the USA and USSR. He, the President, feels that such a task is entirely feasible. In any case, he, Kissinger, according to instructions from the President, can assure me, that Nixon will not allow any third countries or any situation to develop in this or any other region of the world, which could pull him along a path fraught with the threat of direct confrontation between our countries. The President hopes and believes that the Soviet government has the same point of view on this question.

Nevertheless, went on Kissinger, this is only one side of the question. Nixon would like very much that during his Presidency—until 1972, or maybe even until 1976 in case he's re-elected—Soviet-American relations would enter a constructive phase, different from those relations which existed during the "cold war" and unfortunately continue to make themselves apparent even now. Although ideological disagreements, undoubtedly, will remain, and since they are very deep will make themselves known, the President nonetheless thinks that the above-mentioned turn in relations between our countries is entirely possible and desirable, although time and mutually tolerant work, taking into account the interests of both sides, is required.

President Nixon assigns the question of a meeting with the Soviet leaders an extremely important place in all this, continued Kissinger. He, however, approaches this question with a certain degree of caution, mainly because of the domestic political considerations and the corresponding reaction around the world. The thing is that such meetings are accompanied by an unavoidable ruckus and various sensations and ill-considered prognoses, leading to initial "great expectations" and then disappointments of the same magnitude, although, properly speaking, it is difficult to expect great results from a two- or three- day summit meeting, especially since the most complicated international problems can hardly be decided quickly, since it is necessary to clear the corresponding obstacles and long-term blockages step by step. Unfortunately, mass public opinion expects "miracles" from such meetings, and insofar as these are difficult to achieve, various speculations of "misfortune" and "failure" begin, and these cannot help the process of searching for a resolution, since they put negative psychological pressure on the summit participants, who from the very beginning begin to think about the fact that at the

end of the summit they will have to present the results to the press.

And that is why, said Kissinger further, President Nixon is convinced that the organization of only one such meeting with the Soviet leaders during his entire Presidency (as was the case with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson) is not the correct path to follow. It would be preferable to conduct a series of meetings, at predetermined intervals, say, once a year. Then the meetings will be less of a sensation, and will have a more business-like character. In the course of such meetings it would not be strictly necessary to search for an externally stream-lined formula, which would in a way satisfy society but in reality do little to move the process forward. Instead of this it will be possible to make an efficient periodic survey of the most important problems, and to search out a mutually acceptable approach, not fearing consequent labels imposed by the press, to the effect that the leaders of the USSR and USA "did not agree" or that a misfortune befell them, since everyone will know that in a while there will be another meeting, at which the consideration of the issues will continue, and that during the interval between the meetings corresponding efforts will be undertaken via diplomatic channels.

At such meetings, continued Kissinger, it will be important not only to strive toward settlement of the most difficult issues (which it will not be possible to always do immediately), but also to conduct mutual consultations, an exchange of opinions on potentially explosive situations which could draw both sides into conflict; even if their points of view on such situations will not coincide, the sides will better understand each other's motives and not overstep dangerous borders in their actions. It goes without saying that it will be necessary to prepare carefully and in good time for every summit, keeping in mind the necessity to get from them the maximum beneficial payoff in these or any other concrete conditions.

Kissinger was interested in my opinion on the idea of periodically holding such meetings. I answered that in my personal opinion, the idea deserves consideration.

Moving on further to concrete problems and regions, Kissinger said that in Europe Nixon agreed that it is not appropriate to undertake any sort of attempts to change the situation which developed there as a result of the Second World War. The USA, as is well known, in principle favors the unification of Germany, but this is still a question, taking everything into account, realistically speaking, of the very very distant future. The current administration does not intend to push or force events in this direction. On the contrary, it is interested in achieving a certain degree of stability around West Berlin, so that events there do not from time to time inflame Soviet-American relations. We are waiting, Kissinger added, for any possible more concrete proposals on this issue from the Soviet side, taking into account that this was mentioned in the first note of the Soviet government to President Nixon in February of this year.

To my counter-question about what the American side could suggest on this question, Kissinger answered in such a way so as to assert that they would like first to receive more concrete Soviet thoughts. From his rejoinder it would be possible to understand that in exchange for "calm" on the access routes to West Berlin, they would consider measures to "neutralize" those actions of the FRG in that city which are a cause of "frictions" between the DDR [East Germany] and its allies, particularly the USSR, and the FRG and its allies, including the USA. It was at the same time possible to understand that Washington however is not now ready to accept for West Berlin the status of a "free city."

In the course of the conversation on European affairs Kissinger repeated that President Nixon takes into account the special interests of the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe, and does not intend to do anything there which could be evaluated in Moscow as a "challenge" to her position in that region. This is Nixon's basic approach

to this question, and it is not necessary, asserted Kissinger, to pay much attention “to isolated critical public comments about some East European country, because that is only a tribute to the mood of certain sub-strata of the American population which play a role in American elections.”

Kissinger, like Secretary of State [William P.] Rogers earlier, brought up the issue of joint ratification of the agreement on non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, as President Nixon proposed to us several months ago. Kissinger underlined that Nixon as before has two reasons for ascribing great importance to the simultaneous ratification by the Soviet Union and the United States. First, this would be the first important joint Soviet-American act since the beginning of his Presidency, giving it, in his opinion, a significance beyond the limits of the act itself. Second, joint Soviet-American ratification, Nixon is convinced, would strengthen the pressure on those countries which so far have not signed that agreement.

I expressed our position on this question. I reminded him that, as the American side had already been informed, this agreement is now under review by the international commissions of the Supreme Soviet, which is a constituent step in the ratification process according to Soviet law. I also expressed my personal opinion, that the USA is not now putting the necessary influence and pressure on the government of the FRG, which is openly inclined against signing the agreement, which could make the agreement basically purposeless. I further expressed the hope that the Nixon government would act much more actively towards Bonn in order to achieve their early signing of the agreement.

Kissinger in fact did not deny that at the present time they are not putting in this sense any sort of serious pressure on Bonn. He tried to justify it as a response to the “dragging out of our answer” to Nixon’s proposal as to the simultaneous ratification of the agreement by the USSR and the USA. In Kissinger’s words, the leaders in Bonn, besides referring to the election campaign in the FRG, assert to the Americans that they, the West Germans, feel no need to hurry so long as the USSR itself has not ratified the agreement.

Overall from the conversation on this question arises the impression that Nixon, apparently, detects in our leaning against his proposal for simultaneous ratification more our disinclination in the present situation (the CPSU plenum, the sharpening of Soviet-Chinese disagreements) to demonstrate by taking such an act unity of actions with him, Nixon, than the conviction on our part that the absence of our ratification puts any sort of pressure on the FRG. (Kissinger in various ways asserted that the failure of the USSR and the USA to ratify the agreement actually helps those powers in the FRG who are against the agreement.)

Overall, judging by our observations, it is evidently possible with a sufficient degree of confidence to say, that the USA itself will not in the near future conclusively ratify the agreement or put strong pressure on the FRG, as long as we have not agreed with Nixon’s above-mentioned proposal or have not reacted to it in a more concrete manner than we have up until now. (In the opinion of the Embassy, it is not advisable to drag out the review of this agreement by the commissions of the Supreme Soviet. In an extreme case, the agreement could be ratified with a special proviso regarding the necessity that the FRG adhere to it.)

Speaking about other areas where, in Nixon’s opinion, Soviet-American contacts and bilateral exchange of opinions should develop, Kissinger cited the problem of a Near Eastern settlement, questions of strategic nuclear arms control, and, in the long-term, the gradual development of our trade relations.

Touching on the Near East, Kissinger said that Nixon thinks that if in general it is possible to do anything now, in order to bring this tangled and extremely complex

problem closer to a decision, then this can be accomplished only through an unpublicized exchange of opinions between the USSR and USA, who know what their "clients" want and to some extent share their views, but need not be under the thumb of their clients.

In Kissinger's words, in the near future (he has recently finished working out his "plan of action" on the Vietnam question and hopes soon to review and approve directives to the prospective Soviet-American strategic arms negotiations) Nixon intends personally to make a more detailed study of the concrete possibilities for a Near Eastern settlement. Besides the recent meeting with the King of Jordan, a meeting with the Israeli premier Golda Meir is planned for this month. With her, the American government intends, in particular, to consider the developing situation, especially in light of the on-going bilateral Soviet-American exchange of opinions and taking into account the Soviet answer, which is eagerly awaited in Washington and which soon should be received, after Soviet minister A.A. Gromyko returns to Moscow from his visit to Cairo (the conversation with Kissinger took place during this visit).

During the ensuing discussion of Near Eastern affairs, Kissinger shied away from consideration of concrete questions which I raised, saying that he himself had not yet studied these questions deeply because he had been occupied with Vietnam, but that he will be ready, if necessary, in about a month or a month and a half, to become "personally involved" in the Soviet-American relations on these questions, but that he will not substitute for [Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs Joseph] Sisco on the details. He, Kissinger, can secretly meet with me for the all-sided consideration of "key questions" which we might raise, and then present his personal report and recommendations to the President. This report, in Kissinger's words, might serve, depending on the development of the situation and other circumstances, as the basis for supplemental Presidential instructions to the State Department for the long-term exchange of opinions with the Soviet side, without any reference to the conversation with the Soviet Ambassador. He added that in his opinion, for success it would be necessary for both sides (the Arabs and Israel) to "swallow the bitter pill of certain compromises." But Kissinger did not broach the details.

He also said that the President expects that all these questions relating to a Near Eastern settlement will be the subject of detailed consideration by A.A. Gromyko and Secretary of State Rogers during the U.N. General Assembly session.

After all these statements Kissinger moved on to the Vietnam question, which as was evident from everything, occupies the main place in the minds of the President and his most important advisors.

In the course of a detailed exposition of their positions on the Vietnam question, Kissinger in essence repeated all the basic thoughts and arguments which Nixon expressed to me during my last meeting with him, at the White House in May, as well as that which Kissinger set forth earlier on the President's instructions for transmission to the Soviet government.

A more direct call to us to cooperate in overcoming the existing dead end in Paris sounded somewhat new, however.

Noting that the U.S. government as before highly values the positive things that the Soviet Union has already done in support of the Paris negotiations, Kissinger said further that, speaking frankly, the impression was growing, however, that Moscow in recent months had less actively been involved in the negotiations, leaving them, evidently, almost entirely to the discretion of the leaders from Hanoi, and that Soviet influence at the negotiations had in any case become noticeably less than the influence over Hanoi and the NLF [National Liberation Front] of South Vietnam which

the Soviet Union should have at its disposal, since it is the main supplier of military and economic aid to them. We, of course, know well Moscow's basic position, that it does not conduct negotiations for the DRV [Democratic Republic of Vietnam] and NLF. But all the same, he noted in passing, what he had said raises among several aides to Nixon a question which is asked more and more often at meetings in the White House: "Doesn't Moscow think that in the final analysis the continuation of war in Vietnam benefits them in a variety of ways, and that therefore it is not worth it to them to hurry to settle the conflict?"

According to Kissinger neither he nor President Nixon shares this point of view. They think that Moscow is interested in finishing the war, for it costs a lot and also because the Vietnam conflict is a serious stumbling block, which, if not removed, will make it impossible to think about a really serious improvement in Soviet-American relations.

Obviously in the same context Kissinger touched here on the question of China. Recalling Nixon's idea, which had been told to us before, that they were not going to interfere in the present-day Soviet-Chinese conflict in any way, and once more confirming the stability of this principle, Kissinger said that they of course don't mind improving relations with China and are ready to take "reasonable steps" forward in this direction, but this process must have a bilateral character. Nevertheless a thorough analysis of the last CPC [Communist Party of China] decisions and of the ensuing events, according to Kissinger, didn't in any way prove to Americans that Beijing leaders were ready to carry out a more peaceful policy towards the USA.

Though, he added in a more ironical manner, the USSR now occupies our place as the main object of Chinese attacks, and we have come to take as if second place, in every other respect the Beijing attitude toward us remains the same. The Chinese still insist on the return of Taiwan to them. The USA can't accept this, though they have no objections to Beijing and Taiwan discussing this problem, but the latter doesn't express such a desire and the Nixon administration will not urge it to do this. Taiwan still occupies an important place in the chain of bases for restraint of Beijing's expansionist aspirations.

But all this is not really important, asserted Kissinger. We are realists. The main force of the countries of the socialist camp in both military and industrial respects is not China but the Soviet Union. This will be true not only now but also during the whole period of Nixon's Presidency. From this point of view, frankly speaking, our main rival is the Soviet Union, if we speak in global terms and about possible consequences for the US in case of a nuclear war. That's why Nixon considers it important first of all to maintain good or at least more or less normal correct relations with the USSR, not to bring them to a dangerous precipice.

We understand, he went on, that in Moscow, evidently, there are people who think that the USA and China can somehow come to an understanding in opposition to the USSR. In its world historical aspect and taking into consideration different countries' past experience, this concept can sound convincing enough. Nevertheless in this concrete situation, if we speak on behalf of the US government, putting the question this way, asserted Kissinger, would not satisfy the interests of the US itself.

Of course it would be hypocritical, went on Kissinger, to assert—and you wouldn't believe us all the same—that your growing disagreements with the Chinese upset us. But there is here one significant circumstance, which Nixon considers very important. The president is sure that his best course is to not openly take the side of either the USSR or the PRC, and to be very careful not to give the Soviet government any grounds to think that the US somehow supports China's anti-Soviet course or seeks agreement with Beijing on the basis of such a course. Nixon's logic as a realist is very simple: the Soviet Union is much more capable than present-day China to

confront the USA in different parts of the world, and that can create dangerous situations, possibly leading to conflicts in which the very existence of the US as a nation may be at stake if the big war breaks out. As for its military-economic potential, China for several more years won't be able to present such a threat to the USA, but the USSR can.

Besides, added Kissinger, Mao Zedong's actions can't be evaluated using rational logic. Anything can be expected from him, though until now he obviously avoided anything that could cause a direct military collision between China and the USA (this doesn't refer to confrontations in third-world countries). Another thing is that the Soviet Union is governed by realistically thinking politicians who are interested in their people's and their country's well-being. It is possible to conclude concrete agreements with them, which satisfy the interests of both countries and not only these countries. That's why President Nixon once expressed to the Soviet leader his idea that if our countries manage within the next 10-15 years to unite their efforts or at least follow appropriate parallel courses in the most important and dangerous questions, then it will be possible to prevent dragging the world into major military conflicts, until China "grows up" and more responsible leaders come to power in Beijing.

But for this, according to Kissinger, it's necessary to stop the Vietnam conflict as soon as possible, and the Soviet Union must play a more active part in reaching a settlement, "without trusting everything to Hanoi, which evaluates the international situation only from its own, specific and narrow point of view, which often satisfies first of all the interests of China."

All Kissinger's subsequent and repeated speculations were centered on this basic thesis. One could feel that he had instructions from Nixon to give us precisely this kind of argument, though Kissinger expressed it as if in his own words.

The basic Soviet approach to the Vietnam conflict was expounded to Kissinger again. It was stressed that we are really striving to put an end to the Vietnam war, but only provided that all lawful rights, interests and expectations of the Vietnamese people are taken into consideration. It was also stated that the unrealistic course of American policy in Vietnam only benefits Mao Zedong and his group and interferes with the creation of a really independent and neutral South Vietnam, as suggested in the NLF of South Vietnam's well-known 10 points. The sooner they understand it in Washington, the better it will be both for Vietnam and for the US itself, and for relations between our countries.

Kissinger, however, still defended Nixon's program to settle the Vietnam conflict, constantly stressing, that they are ready to discuss "any suggestions and to look for compromises," if Hanoi and the NLF finally begin serious negotiations and "don't just repeat their ultimatums." Having mentioned "compromises," Kissinger noted that there can be "different variants, which can be discussed secretly," but added, that they "can't, nevertheless, reject [South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van] Thieu, because that would represent for Vietnam a political capitulation."

In the course of these discussions, Kissinger again (as Nixon had earlier) threw out a comment to the effect that if Hanoi will endlessly "obstruct" the negotiations, then after a few months it will be necessary for the government to think about "other alternatives in order to convince Hanoi."

I said firmly that there are not and there cannot be any other alternatives to peaceful negotiations and a peaceful settlement, if the current administration does not want to repeat the mistakes of the preceding administration, and the consequences to which they led, [which were made] sufficiently clear by the example of the previous owner of the White House.

Kissinger, obviously not wanting to sharpen the conversation, changed the topic. However, this sufficiently firm sounding theme of "other alternatives" in talks with both Nixon and Kissinger cannot but be noted. Although at the current stage these comments carry, evidently, more the character of attempts to blackmail the Vietnamese and in part the USSR with hints that upon expiration of a certain period of time Nixon might renew the bombing of the DRV or take other military measures, it is not possible to entirely exclude the possibility of such actions by the current administration if the situation, in Nixon's opinion, will justify it.

All the same, it is necessary to be ready for such a development of events, especially if Beijing's provocative course against the USSR will gather strength, and, if in Washington they start to believe that the situation in this sense may be unfavorable for Hanoi. In one place Kissinger, apparently not by chance, threw out a comment to the effect that if it nonetheless becomes necessary for them to turn to "other alternatives" then they hope that Soviet-American relations do not fall any further than a "dangerous minimum," for they from their own side will not do anything which could inflict any sort of a loss to the Soviet Union itself or its authority. Kissinger was told that any attempt of the USA to solve the Vietnam question by forceful means unavoidably is destined to fail and that such a course of action undoubtedly will bring in its train a general increase in international tension, which could not but touch on our relations with the USA.

Overall from the conversation a certain impression was formed that for Nixon foreign policy problem No. 1 remains the question of how to find an exit from the Vietnam War under acceptable conditions, which would guarantee him reelection as President of the USA. Judging from everything, his attempts to "convince" the USSR to help settle the conflict will continue and this will to some extent make itself known in the course of our negotiations with this Administration on other international questions, if not directly, then at last as a definite slowing of the tempo of these negotiations or settlement of other problems.

Kissinger expressed a wish to talk again, after my return, about a broad set of questions in our relations and the general international situation. I agreed to this.

Several words about Kissinger himself. Observing the activities of Nixon and his main foreign policy advisors (and now I am acquainted with practically all of them), it is possible to state with sufficient confidence that at the present time Kissinger has basic, in fact dominant influence on the President in the area of foreign policy. In his hands is concentrated the collection and presentation to the President of all material on foreign policy (including intelligence data) which comes to the White House. He, along with a personally selected staff of 25 experts on various questions, prepares the agenda and materials for consideration by the National Security Council under the chairmanship of the President (this organ under Nixon began to work regularly, meeting no more rarely than once or twice a week). As recognized by Nixon himself, at my last meeting with him, Kissinger every week "pesters" him (that is, meets with him) significantly more often than any other aide.

Judging by my personal observations and compared with, for example, the relation of President Johnson with his aide [Walt] Rostow, I can say that Kissinger conducts himself much more freely than his predecessors in the presence of the President: one feels the certain confidence of a man who has won for himself a solid position at the White House (at the State Department they say directly that if "Henry"—Kissinger's first name—speaks against that or some other proposal, then Nixon will most probably reject it).

Kissinger himself, though he is a smart and erudite person, is at the same time extremely vain and in conversations with me, especially during a private lunch (we

have established a pretty good personal relationship), not averse to boasting about his influence. During our last conversation he, for example, without any excessive humility, announced that in all of Washington "only two people can answer precisely at any given moment about the position of the USA on this or that question: these are President Nixon and he, Kissinger." Regarding this he suggested to me that if it is necessary to precisely define something really important "for the correct understanding in Moscow of Nixon's policy on a concrete question," I should quietly appeal directly to him.

I should say that he himself readily welcomes the Soviet Ambassador or visits us in the Embassy for a private conversation immediately following a request from our side. He himself often takes the initiative to arrange such meetings. Evidently, he also cites all this as a confidential channel of communication with the Soviet side in order to strengthen his own personal position with Nixon. In this connection I should mention that Kissinger holds under his own personal control all communication of members of his staff with our Embassy personnel, and sternly requires that all such conversations are reported directly to him, and if he considers it necessary, that he himself report to the President. Most recently, his tendency to limit the number of such communications and subsume them all into the flow of his personal contacts with the Soviet Ambassador has been noticeable.

Evidently, it would be expedient over time to more and more actively develop and use the channel with Kissinger in order to influence and through him drive home directly to President Nixon our points of view on various important questions, especially in situations where a certain delicacy is called for or where any sort of publicity is undesirable, which is often not possible to achieve when acting through the State Department. It goes without saying that we will as always have to handle routine and official matters, especially those where it is necessary to fix our position, through ordinary diplomatic channels. Secretary of State Rogers has noticeably begun to gather strength and operate more actively in the area of American foreign policy, leaning on the wide apparatus of the State Department and Foreign Service. And all the same, it is necessary to take into account that Kissinger's influence on the formulation of Nixon's foreign policy course, judging by all our observations and information in our possession, for now remains commanding.

A. DOBRYNIN

(Source: SCCD, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 558, LI. 92-105.)