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## Donald Trump's Reverse Kissinger Strategy

While Kissinger sought to befriend China to isolate Russia, Trump aims to reverse this by aligning with Russia to counter China.



Henry Kissinger, former U.S. Secretary of State and national security advisor for Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, discusses the Vietnam War with LBJ Presidential Library director Mark Updegrove on Tuesday, April 26, 2016. Photo: Wikicommons

US President Donald Trump called Russian President Vladimir Putin and told him that the US government is committed to a peace process in Ukraine. As part of the deal, Trump's administration made it clear that sections of eastern Ukraine and the Crimea would remain in Russian hands. Speaking at the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Trump's Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said that it was "unrealistic" to assume that Ukraine would return to its pre-2014 borders, which means that Crimea would not be part of any negotiations with Russia. NATO membership for Ukraine, he said, was not going to be possible, as far as the United States was concerned. The United States, Hegseth told

NATO, was not “primarily focused” on European security, but first and foremost on putting its own national interests first. The best that the European leaders at NATO could do was to demand that Ukraine have a seat at the talks, he said, but he didn’t comment against the US pressure that Russia be given concessions to come to the table. Ukraine and Europe can have their say, Hegseth said, but Trump would set the agenda. “What he decides to allow and not allow is at the purview of the leader of the free world, of President Trump,” Hegseth said with characteristic midwestern swagger. The cowboys, he said with his body language, are back in charge.

While Hegseth was in Brussels, Trump was in Washington, DC, with his close ally, Elon Musk. Both are on a rampage to cut government spending. Over the past five decades, the US government has already shrunk, particularly when it comes to social welfare provision. What remains are areas such as the arms industry that have been jealously guarded by large corporations. It has always seemed as if this industry was inviolate and that cuts in military spending in the United States would be impossible to sustain. But the arms industry can rest easy (except Lockheed Martin, which might lose its subsidy for the F-35 fighter jet); Musk and his team are not going to cut military contracts, but will go after military and civilian employees. During his confirmation hearing, Hegseth told senators that during World War II, the United States had seven four-star generals, and now it has forty-four of them. “There is an inverse relationship between the size of staffs and victory on the battlefield. We do not need more bureaucracy at the top. We need more war fighters empowered at the bottom.” He said that the “fat can be cut, so [the US military] can go toward lethality.”

There is a fundamental misreading of these moves by the Trump administration. They are sometimes seen as the idiosyncratic flailing of a far-right president who is committed to putting “America First” and so is unwilling to pursue expensive wars that are not in its interest. But this is a short-sighted and erroneous assessment of Trump’s phone call with Putin on Ukraine and his approach to the US military. Rather than see these as isolationist maneuvers, it is important to understand that Trump is attempting to pursue a Reverse Kissinger Strategy, namely, to befriend Russia to isolate China.

Trump understands that Russia is not an existential threat to the United States. The US government does not fear Russian energy sales to Europe since there is no pretence that these primary commodity sales will undermine overall US control of the global economy. However, China’s rapid development of technology and science, as well as of new productive forces, genuinely pose a threat to US domination of key sectors of the global economy. It is

the perceived “threat” from China to the United States that motivates Trump’s approach to alliances and enemies.

### **Kissinger’s strategy: Befriend China to isolate Russia**

Henry Kissinger (1923–2023) was one of the most influential US foreign policy bureaucrats in history. During the presidency of Richard Nixon from 1969 to 1974, Kissinger essentially ran the foreign policy of the United States. Both Nixon and Kissinger closely followed the dispute between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). When Nixon became president, the USSR-PRC border dispute around Zhenbao Island almost escalated into a potential Soviet nuclear strike against Beijing. Kissinger had recognized that this dispute was of great value to the United States since it prevented the two large Eurasian countries from building an integral union against the Atlantic alliance encapsulated by NATO. If Russia and China had come together, Kissinger wrote, then they would be able to undermine the foundation of Western power in the world. To prevent such an alliance was essential, and to use the Sino-Soviet dispute to build a deep wedge between the two countries was at the core of Kissinger’s policy. Rapprochement with China also allowed the US to attempt to close the logistical supply line for the Vietnamese national liberation forces in their war against US aggression.

It was for that reason that Kissinger began secret talks through Pakistan with the Chinese government in 1970, made a secret trip to Beijing in 1971, and thereby opened the door for Nixon to visit China the following year. In his verbal report to the White House staff after his visit to China, Kissinger made the following important comment: “The Chinese were extremely serious people. They don’t wish us well. We have no illusions on that score. But in terms of our overall situation, with Soviet pressure and with the situation in Southeast Asia, it is in our interest to bring the Chinese in.” Nixon’s epochal visit to China was entirely driven by US interests to divide Russia and China so that the US could establish its power on the Asian continent.

Long after the USSR collapsed, Kissinger continued to make the case that the United States should befriend China, isolate Russia, and subordinate Europe to continue its long-term dominion. That is the underlying argument in Kissinger’s 600-page epic, *On China*, published in 2011.

### **Trump’s reversal: Befriend Russia to isolate China**

With the fall of the USSR, the United States establishment developed a strategy to befriend both Russia and China, but more so Russia. It was thought among the foreign policy elite that Russia’s subordination to the United States – under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency from 1991 to

1999 – was total and that the Russians would become a minor player on the Eurasian continent. Russia's entry into the G7 (which then became the G8) in 1998 was the pinnacle of that subservience. The return of Christianity in public in Russia and the promotion of Russia's Europe-facing culture suggested that Russia had embraced its Western heritage. It appeared that it had moved away from both sovereignty and from Asia, and therefore, China. In 1993, US President Bill Clinton phoned Yeltsin and said, "I want you to know that we're in this with you for the long haul."

A far-right wing section of the US establishment identified two trends in the late 2000s. First, China's technological development of its productive forces seriously threatened intellectual property domination by US firms. Second, Russia's new nationalism had been premised both on sovereignty (identified by the emergence of Putin's patriotic parties) and on white supremacy and Russian Orthodoxy (such as that anchored by the theories of Aleksandr Dugin). There is an entire bloc in the US far right that sees in Russian patriotic nationalism its own ideology, and it sees in Chinese communism its adversary.

Even in his first term, Trump sought to befriend Russia to isolate China and subordinate Europe. This reversal of Kissinger's strategy is not progressive but similarly reactionary and dangerous. The unifying goal is to ensure the supremacy of the United States with the same strategy of division, but with the actors reversed. Trump was then accused of being a beneficiary of Russian interference.

What the United States is now doing is attempting to break the relationship established between China and Russia since 2007, when Putin made his official break from the United States at the 43rd Munich Security Conference. Good cooperation between China and Russia has moved swiftly, and the two countries have a security agreement underlying the transfer of goods and services in roubles and renminbi. Breaking up this relationship will not be easy, but it is now the strategy Trump has decided to attempt to carry out.

It is worth remembering Kissinger's assessment of the Chinese leadership in 1971: "Their interest is 100% political... Remember, these are men of ideological purity. [Zhou En-lai] joined the Communist Party in France in 1920, long before there was a Chinese Communist Party. This generation didn't fight for 50 years and go on the Long March for trade." This view captures not only Zhou En-lai and Mao Zedong, but also Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. They, too, have been steeled in a struggle against the United States over the course of the past decade. It is unlikely that a few baubles will attract Putin to adopt Trump's reverse Kissinger strategy.

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