[**Gastric diplomacy**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1633867/gastric-diplomacy)

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FIFTY years ago today, on July 8, 1971, Dr Henry Kissinger as president Nixon’s envoy made a stopover in Rawalpindi to meet president Yahya Khan. Kissinger came from New Delhi, leaving a perplexed prime minister Mrs Indira Gandhi wondering why he had dropped in for such insubstantial talks.

In Rawalpindi that night, Dr Kissinger had dinner with the president, during which they discussed the secret they had shared for two years — the furtive contact between US president Nixon and the Chinese leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong and premier Zhou Enlai.

Dr Kissinger expressed his apprehension over his visit to Beijing, insisting at one stage that president Yahya should accompany him as a guarantor of his safety. Yahya demurred and offered Kissinger a tin hat and a general instead.

In the early hours of July 9, while his ‘double’ (ostensibly with a gastric upset) drove to Nathiagali, Dr Kissinger flew out of Chaklala airport in a PIA aircraft. He spent the next few days in Beijing and returned on July 11.

Fifty years have passed since Kissinger’s momentous visit.

I dined with former president Yahya Khan four years later, on Aug 2, 1975. He was then in ‘protective custody’ in his Harley Street home. I asked him about Chairman Mao: “Like an ocean”. Zhou Enlai? “Courteous, far-sighted but like a mouse in front of Chairman Mao.” And president Richard Nixon? “A true friend of Pakistan.”

Yahya Khan — the go-between trusted by both the Americans and the Chinese — maintained a confidential record consisting of 49 documents, kept in a loose-leaf folder which his son Ali Yahya hid under his bed. Occasionally, tantalisingly, he would reveal some but not all its contents.

Years later, Ali gave me a full set of the papers. These I was able to convert into a book — From a Head, Through a Head, To a Head: The Secret Channel between the US and China through Pakistan (2000). Later, I discovered a cache of Nixon’s presidential papers stored in the US National Archives, in Washington, D.C. They proved uniquely valuable, because Kissinger had put an embargo on his own papers.

Nixon’s papers contained inter alia Kissinger’s voluminous briefing book titled POLO (Kissinger’s oblique compliment to that earlier Sinophile Marco Polo). It bore Richard Nixon’s pithy notations, such as: “Put in fear RN would be hard on V Nam.” Nixon’s archives also had the detailed Memorandum of Conversations Kissinger had with Zhou Enlai, transcribed by Winston Lord. From them, we know that Zhou Enlai opened the historic conversations with “There is special news this afternoon — you are lost”.

Yahya Khan recalled that Kissinger returned to Rawalpindi “a different man — extremely relieved and grateful”. En route to Washington, Kissinger collected two American secretaries from Tehran and dictated to them a 27-page report for Nixon.

Kissinger’s trip was not quite as secret as he and Nixon thought. Even while Kissinger was in Beijing, State Department officials over-familiar with his Byzantine style of diplomacy, speculated openly that Kissinger’s stomach ache was a ruse, intended to mislead the press. And, before Kissinger landed in the US, his notes and papers had been photocopied on the plane by a nimble-fingered Naval yeoman Charles Radford, who passed the information to the US service chiefs in the Pentagon.

My book on Kissinger’s visit and its sequel The White House & Pakistan: Secret Declassified Documents 1969-74 (2002), I was told by a former Indian high commissioner, had been made mandatory reading in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs — “to learn how you Pakis pulled off such a coup”.

Fifty years have passed since that momentous visit. Dr Henry Kissinger has survived his peers but he has lived too long, long enough to see his government and its co-conspirators plot to isolate the People’s Republic of China again, to repeat John Foster Dulles’s mistake of treating the PRC with hostile disdain.

To the West, the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 gave it the opportunity to denigrate communism and its half-comrade socialism as unworkable social systems. On July 1, 2021, China, marked the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party, celebrating its success in rejuvenating China through “socialism with Chinese characteristics”, and asserted its leadership of the future world.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, standing where Chairman Mao stood, dressed as Mao did, declared: “We have never bullied, oppressed, or subjugated the people of any other country, and we never will. By the same token, we will never allow any foreign force to bully, oppress, or subjugate us. Anyone who would attempt to do so will find themselves on a collision course with a great wall of steel forged by over 1.4 billion Chinese people.”

The Chinese government invited only our leader of the opposition to attend their CCP’s celebrations. His forced absence will not be forgotten by them.

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