

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection
Rusk XXXXX: Part 2 of 2
Dean Rusk interviewed by Richard Rusk
1986 January

The complete interview also includes Rusk WWWW: Part 1.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, Pop, I asked you about [Roger] Hilsman's speech in 1963.

DEAN RUSK: Yeah, well I don't recall that I personally read it over carefully, but I didn't object to the speech.

RICHARD RUSK: Did he ask your permission to give it?

DEAN RUSK: He may have talked to me about it. But I took the view that any Assistant Secretary of State ought to have a certain leeway in making speeches. After all, I had gone through some of that experience when I was Assistant Secretary of State and once or twice created a little controversy myself. But the main theme of this speech, as you remind me of it, is that the People's Republic was likely to endure. That's just a simple statement of fact. And the trend toward a two-Chinas policy had been something that was in my mind for a long time. As a matter of fact, it had been in [John] Foster Dulles's mind before he became Secretary of State. It never got anywhere because both Taiwan and Peking flatly rejected it, but I myself thought that the realistic view would be two Chinas. After all, there are two Chinas. There's one on the mainland. There's one in Taiwan. So I didn't take exception to his speech.

RICHARD RUSK: After he gave it and--

DEAN RUSK: I don't even remember that there was all that much controversy about it.

RICHARD RUSK: You didn't call him into the office, after the speech was given, in response to the controversy?

DEAN RUSK: No, no. It's possible we talked about it at some point. I saw him frequently when he was Assistant Secretary.

RICHARD RUSK: Was there anything to the significance of John Kennedy having been killed two weeks earlier and the fact that he was no longer on the scene?

DEAN RUSK: Oh I don't know. It's possible, but I sort of doubt it. See, Kennedy simply did not want to reopen the China question in any way. I've got that on another tape.

RICHARD RUSK: That's right. How about Lyndon Johnson? Was he any more receptive toward reopening the China question? Can you contrast the attitudes of both your Presidents with respect to China?

DEAN RUSK: No, I think during Lyndon Johnson's period that the role played by Peking in the Vietnam affair would have blocked off any interest on the part of Lyndon Johnson in normalization of Peking.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, was it not true that we authorized and supported a number of covert operations against the People's Republic in the early sixties?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I don't recall any covert operations by us except possibly for an occasional U-2 flight along the coast, and maybe we even conducted a U-2 flight over their nuclear installation at one point. But there were a number of so-called covert activities attempted by Taiwan on the mainland, but those were pinpricks. The people on Taiwan, for example, found it extremely difficult just to maintain any agents on the mainland, despite the huge crowds on the mainland and the inevitable confusion the sheer masses of people bring about. So I don't think whatever happened there was worth a hill of beans. It was of no significance.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, do you care to comment on some of the advice that Ambassador [Anatoly F.] Dobrynin and other Soviets might have given you regarding whether or not the Chinese are actually defensive in orientation or aggressive?

DEAN RUSK: I don't think we took our advice from the Russians about Chinese intentions. And I also took with a grain of salt any suggestions from the Russians that China was the expansionist nation and that they, the Russians, were trying to act in good faith with regard to Southeast Asia because I think there was another element in it that made a big difference. Russia and Great Britain had been cochairs of the Geneva conferences on Laos and on Vietnam. And when we got the Laos Accords, we did not get any performance by the North Vietnamese on those Laos Accords of 1962. But when we took it up with the two cochairs, Great Britain and the Soviet Union, we had the impression that the Soviet Union did not really do much to press Hanoi to comply with those accords on Laos. And I think the reason probably was that at that time, Russia and Communist China were vying with each other for influence in Hanoi. And I don't think either one of them wanted to put the kind of pressures on Hanoi that would cause Hanoi to move right into the arms of the other. So I don't believe that the Russians made much of an effort to get Hanoi to assume more peaceful and moderate policy.

RICHARD RUSK: Right. Did you find Dobrynin's arguments, his explanations for the reasons for the split between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic convincing?

DEAN RUSK: Well, I think there were other elements than those that Warren [I.] Cohen attributes to Dobrynin. For example, the Chinese were refusing to accept the Soviet Communist party as the big brother of the communist world. Indeed, communist and Soviet attachments and various communist parties in other countries became a source of keen rivalry between them. I think that was important. And there were certain state interests between Russia and China that were in the picture. The Chinese have long thought that large areas of what is now Siberia really belong to China. They were unjustly taken away from China by the czars. They've laid claim to some of those large areas from time to time. They haven't done it recently, but there are all sorts of elements. The dominant position of the Soviet Union in Outer Mongolia is galling to the

Chinese because both Chinas think that Mongolia is a part of China. And so there are all sorts of reasons for those differences. Some of them are probably due just to personalities.

RICHARD RUSK: Pop, when Red China first exploded a nuclear weapon in October 1963, do you recall anything of that incident and its significance?

DEAN RUSK: Although we did not have advance notice that they were about to explode one, it didn't really surprise those of us who were veterans of the Acheson-Lilienthal report and the Baruch plan. We just assumed that any nation that really wanted to invest the effort and the resources in producing a nuclear weapon could do so. Science is a matter of general knowledge. Some of the technology might be a little difficult to work out. But we weren't really surprised in the general sense when they exploded one. The Chinese are very intelligent people. If they wanted to do it, they can do it. There was some speculation about some kind of preemptive strike against China at that time, a strike against their nuclear facilities. We didn't give that five minutes thought. That was just not on. It didn't make any sense to do that.

RICHARD RUSK: Where did that comment come from? That idea?

DEAN RUSK: There was some speculation in the press about it.

RICHARD RUSK: But nothing within the administration? Do you recall any speculation?

DEAN RUSK: But we didn't give any serious consideration of the idea of a preemptive strike against China.

RICHARD RUSK: Did you give any consideration at all?

DEAN RUSK: And I tend to downgrade the reports that somehow the Russians were very anxious to produce a preemptive strike against China and to ask us to take part. I don't remember that at all, and I think I would have remembered it if it had occurred.

RICHARD RUSK: Although I think that request later went to Henry [Alfred] Kissinger during the Nixon years.

DEAN RUSK: Well that may be. That would be up to Henry and Nixon to figure out, but it certainly didn't come up in my time. And we weren't under any pressure in our administration to make a preemptive strike against China.

RICHARD RUSK: Was it discussed at the highest levels at all?

DEAN RUSK: Well you're always boxing the compass, and of course the thought came up. People in the State Department and in the government usually think of things that anybody else would think of. But, in terms of giving any serious thought about the possibility of doing it, that just wasn't on. It was almost summarily rejected as an idea.

RICHARD RUSK: Okay, should we say amen to China?

DEAN RUSK: Okay.

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