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Review by **Garret Martin**, American University

Martin's Albers's article provides an engaging look at the normalization process between Western Europe and China in the crucial period of 1969-1972. As he correctly argues, this topic has too often been overlooked by the wider scholarship dedicated to the Sino-American rapprochement that was pursued by the Richard Nixon administration, and the limited body of work on Sino-European relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s has tended to concentrate on specific countries and "particular aspects of national strategies towards China" (219). Albers suggests that "what is missing is a comparative analysis of European policies towards the People's Republic of China (PRC) to put them into the larger context of detente and the global cold war" (219).

His article seeks to fill that void by looking at "the China policies of the three main players in Western Europe - Britain, France, and the Federal Republic of Germany - during the key years of Sino-Western detente under Mao, 1969 to 1972" (220). These three countries provide an intriguing study in contrast insofar as the differing positions, challenges, and opportunities they faced in their normalization process with Beijing.

Of the three case studies, France experienced the easiest path. It had already recognized the PRC in 1964, under the impetus of President Charles de Gaulle, and exchanged ambassadors. Paris and Beijing did not have any major bones of contention; and although the Cultural Revolution had stalled bilateral relations for a while, its effects were not prolonged. Indeed, when Chinese Ambassadors – who, for the most part, were recalled during the Cultural Revolution – were sent back to their posts in 1969, "only the Chinese Ambassador to Albania returned to his position before his colleague stationed in France" (221).

The resumption of a high-level Sino-French dialogue between 1969 and 1972, according to Albers, fitted with the larger Gaullist goals of pursuing French 'grandeur' and promoting a more multipolar world. But that dialogue also aimed to achieve more specific goals, including: "intensifying relations with the Chinese by creating a climate of mutual understanding and promoting cultural and economic exchange"; learning "about the Chinese positions and explain their own actions in Europe and toward the Soviet Union, thus trying to

connect détente in Asia with détente in Europe”; and acting as “mediators between East and West by presenting their views of other countries’ policies to the Chinese” (221). In that capacity, France tried to help other Western countries, such as Canada, the United States, or the United Kingdom (UK) in their quests to pursue rapprochement with the PRC.

While Paris faced few obstacles in its dialogue with Beijing, Albers highlights the very different situation of London. Even though the UK had recognized the PRC as early as 1950, in large part to protect its interests in Hong Kong, Cold War constraints had effectively prevented any significant bilateral dialogue in the subsequent twenty-year period. Relations even hit a low point in 1967 during the Cultural Revolution when protests broke out in Hong Kong. The British decision to engage in mass arrests led Chinese protesters to burn down the British mission in Beijing as well as to harass some of the staff.

The attempt by the UK to pursue a path of detente with the PRC after 1969, and to finally exchange ambassadors (previously relations were at the *chargé d'affaires* level), proved rather challenging. In part, this reflected the fact that both countries first needed to settle a number of tricky bilateral problems: the status of Hong Kong and prisoners held by British and Chinese authorities; the question of supporting PRC membership in the United Nations; and the legal status of Taiwan. But it also resulted from the extent to which “the British government depended on external events to reach their goal of rapprochement with the PRC” (230). Indeed, the UK’s détente with China at first moved slowly because London wanted Washington’s support before moving forward; later, it took a back seat to the Nixon administration’s rapprochement with Beijing. Only after President Nixon’s trip to China was the UK finally able, on 13 March 1972, to exchange ambassadors with the PRC.

The last case study, West Germany, also differed from the British and French experience. As Albers mentions, although the Federal Republic was late to the game and only recognized the PRC in the fall of 1972, despite important commercial ties, “the reasons why this step came so late were fundamentally different from the British case. There were no bilateral disputes to be overcome because unlike the United States, France, or Japan, the Federal Republic had never established official ties with the Nationalist regime on Taiwan” (230).

Instead, the policy of *Ostpolitik* initiated by West German Chancellor Willy Brandt constituted the most important break on any Sino-German rapprochement. At first, Bonn feared that any rapid normalization of relations with Beijing could undermine or jeopardize its goal of improving ties with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, while Beijing opposed *Ostpolitik* because it might place increasing pressure on the Sino-Soviet border. By 1972, however, détente in Europe no longer appeared to be an insurmountable problem. The PRC, feeling more secure with its rapprochement with the U.S., pressured West Germany to normalize relations, and Bonn, confident in the success of its *Ostpolitik*, was happy to oblige.

Based on these three case studies, Albers highlights four main conclusions in regard to Sino-European relations in the context of détente in Europe and U.S. policy toward the PRC: first, he emphasizes a previously overlooked common European phenomenon of détente with China; second, despite their similar goals insofar as normalizing relations with the PRC, “all three European countries were influenced by particular national combinations of political incentives and challenges”; third, all three cases confirm some connections with the “process of superpower detente in Europe and also to U.S. China policy”; and, fourth and finally, the study of the case studies does shed light on Chinese policy, as well as the significance of Western Europe for the PRC (234-235).

There is much to commend in Martin Albers's well-written and well-researched article, and he certainly brings needed attention to a subject that has up to now been too often ignored. But there are also some aspects of his piece that are not quite as compelling. Some of the objections are more trivial in nature. Thus, his description of France as 'minor power' in the Cold War sounds a tad excessive (223). In the same vein, Albers mentions that "France could still claim to be the first Western country whose Foreign Minister (Maurice Schumann) paid an official visit to the People's Republic" (224). Yet, this statement omits the fact that William Rogers, the U.S. Secretary of State, was part of the Nixon trip to China in February 1972.

On a more significant level, Albers's article would benefit from a more detailed look at the Chinese side of the equation. That would mean first considering the extent to which Beijing actually changed its policies toward Western Europe in this period of 1969 to 1972. Was the perception of Western Europe in China's broad anti-Soviet united front that different than in the 'two intermediate zones' theory outlined by Chairman Mao Zedong in 1964?¹ It would also mean providing further evidence to substantiate broad statements such as the contention that Western Europe was "a factor of pivotal significance in Mao's project of forging a broad anti-Soviet coalition that would include the United States and its NATO allies" (235).

Finally, the article does not always quite deliver on the ambitious goals that it sets at the start. While it promises a comparative approach, the case studies are still mostly examined separately and Albers could do more to tie those stories together. He also emphasizes his desire to connect the normalization process in Asia with the larger context of détente in Europe, but the link between these two narratives are not always very clearly specified (with the exception of the case of West Germany).

Those objections notwithstanding, this article by Martin Albers is an engaging piece of scholarship and a recommended read for those interested in détente, China, and Western Europe. It is, additionally, a fine preview for his ongoing dissertation on the same subject, which should be a better platform from which to engage in a substantial and in-depth comparison of Western European policies toward China in that time.

Garret Martin is a Term Faculty at the School of International Service of American University, an Editor-at-Large at the European Institute, based in Washington, DC. He has written widely on transatlantic relations, both in the field of history and contemporary affairs. He is the author of *General de Gaulle's Cold War: Challenging American Hegemony, 1963-1968* (Berghahn Books, 2013).

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¹ For the two 'intermediate zones' theory, see Garret Martin, "Playing the China Card? Revisiting France's Recognition of Communist China, 1963-1964", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 10:1 (2008), 74-75; Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 146.