Jean Kang and Victor Kaufman shed light on one of the more intriguing questions of Sino-American-Soviet relations during the Cold War: Why in the early 1960s, after achieving the rupture in the Sino-Soviet alliance sought by U.S. policy since 1950, did the United States tilt toward the Soviet Union rather than toward the People's Republic of China (PRC)? The U.S. tilt toward alignment with the USSR against the PRC in the early 1960s is paradoxical because, as U.S. leaders recognized in 1950, the USSR represented a far greater threat to the United States than did the PRC. The USSR constituted one of only several global centers of industrial and technological power. It had achieved a fairly high level of industrialization and technological prowess by the 1950s and had proved its ability to translate those economic capabilities into effective military power, both conventional and nuclear. The USSR controlled the eastern half of Europe and deployed powerful military forces on the frontiers of Western Europe—its an industrial and technological center second only to North America. The Soviet state had spawned and for several decades directed a global Communist movement founded on inveterate hostility to the "bourgeois" values and institutions of the West. The USSR had already for a generation used the resources mobilized by its powerful state to wage protracted political war against the capitalist world.

The PRC by contrast was preindustrial and technologically primitive. Its armies abutted areas whose resources might weigh significantly in the global balance, but they were nonindustrialized areas. In Asia, only Japan ranked in the same league with Europe as a center of industrial-technological wealth and power, and there was no prospect that Chinese armies or political agents might bring about Japan's defection from the U.S.-led alliance system. Moreover, the PRC was successor to previous Chinese states that had several times cooperated with the United States in important ways while sometimes viewing Russia with deep suspicion.

These geopolitical factors were recognized by leaders of the Truman administration in late 1948 and early 1949 when they decided to "let
the dust settle," allow Sino-Soviet contradictions to develop, and work to draw the PRC away from the USSR. When the Eisenhower administration decided during its first eighteen months in office to intensify pressure on the Sino-Soviet alliance with the objective of eventually breaking it apart, this was done on the implicit understanding that Europe was the epicenter of U.S. interests, with the USSR representing the greatest threat to those interests. Moscow, not Beijing, was recognized as the greatest global challenge to the West. Pressure on the Sino-Soviet alliance was maintained until that alliance eventually split. The result, however, was a U.S. tilt toward Moscow, not Beijing. Why?

The hatreds generated by the Korean War can explain only so much. Kang and Kaufman both conclude that the Kennedy administration attempted to use food aid as a tentative wedge toward opening the way to improved relations with the PRC. In June 1961, Ambassador Jacob Beam in Warsaw told PRC Ambassador Wang Bingnan that the United States might consider allowing private food donations. Wang "summarily rejected" the U.S. proposal, according to Kaufman. A year later, Kang found, another U.S. ambassador, John Cabot, reiterated a similar offer in Warsaw. On this occasion too, "the suggestion was rejected by the Chinese ambassador outright," according to Kang. Washington was ready to try a third time in late May 1962, Kang found, but before its ambassador in Warsaw could broach the possibility of the United States considering commercial grain sales to China, a stern statement by Foreign Minister Chen Yi ruled out Chinese acceptance of any U.S. aid. Throughout the period when the United States attempted to use food aid as a mechanism toward improving Sino-U.S. relations, Beijing's militant international behavior continued unmitigated—in Indochina, in Tibet, and on the Sino-Indian frontier. According to Kang, "The most decisive factor mitigating against a change in Sino-American relations was the increasingly belligerent posture assumed by Peking."

A full explanation of China's rejection of the U.S. initiative in 1961–62 must await an examination of China's archives. A tentative explanation only is possible at this point. It seems probable that China's leaders Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Chen Yi—understood the broad purpose behind the Kennedy administration's offers of food aid: as a first move toward improved U.S.-PRC relations. They were not interested in this at that particular juncture. The modalities of the U.S. bid (the demand for a Chinese "request," and so on) were probably not fundamental. Had China's leaders been interested in a broad redefinition of U.S.-PRC relations, they could have found an appropriately indirect and subtle way of