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National Security Strategy:
Examining Chou En Lai's Rapprochement with the United States

Core Course I Essay

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Summary

In 1971, Chinese Premier Chou En Lai, deeply concerned about the threat posed by growing Soviet power in Asia and its willingness to employ it to advance Soviet interests, concluded that rapprochement with the United States would help counter the Soviet threat and offer China other important benefits. It would enhance China's international image, reduce its isolation, signal to rival Taiwan U.S. recognition of China's preeminence, and provide possible longterm economic opportunities through enhanced economic links with the West. Relying on his diplomatic skill, pragmatism and understanding of American and Soviet objectives, he engineered President Nixon's visit to China in February 1972 that was capped by the Shanghai Communique. This document, while outlining the two governments' key areas of agreement and differences, made clear to the Soviet Union that China and the U.S. would oppose Soviet efforts to extend its influence in Asia. The rapprochement with the U.S. successfully accomplished Chou's key objectives of reducing China's vulnerability to Soviet intentions and enhancing its world position despite its relative military and economic weakness.

Introduction

When Chou En Lai died January 8, 1976, few would argue that China was a master of its destiny unlike any time in the twentieth century. Upon hearing of his death, President Nixon referred to Chou's legacy as having helped end China's darkness, describing Chou as one of a handful of men with comparable impact on world history.¹ Henry Kissinger described Chou as a remarkable statesmen of modern times, "... one of the two or three most impressive men I have ever met."² Indeed, these three men had come together at a critical time in history to alter strategically and permanently China's position on the world scene and set in motion events that continue to shape current international relations. Drawing broadly on the analytical framework to assess national security strategy presented by Professor Terry Deibel,³ this paper analyzes briefly Chou En Lai's strategy of charting a new course for China, namely rapprochement with the United States, at a critical moment in China's history. It will examine key factors he took into account as he formulated his strategy, his objectives and the means he employed to achieve them, and the resulting outcome.

The Setting

China in the late 1960's was an immense, backward country with a rich if, at times, turbulent past. The world's largest

communist nation still driven by ideological zeal, it faced important internal and external factors, over which its leadership had limited control. With a population of over 600 million people, its economy remained largely agrarian, its level of commerce with the outside world trivial compared to the world's major trading nations, its industrial and technological base rudimentary.

China's internal political environment was unsettled. It was coming out of four difficult years of its system-wrenching Cultural Revolution. Chairman Mao was aging and in poor health. Premier Chou En Lai, in his early seventies remained vigorous but was saddled with a leadership still adjusting from the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. His overarching task was to help chart an ideologically acceptable yet pragmatic course for China's development and security in an uncertain international climate while maintaining domestic stability. Even at the top, the Chou and Mao leadership team, together since independence in 1947, faced internal challenges. The most notable one came from longstanding comrades Lin Piao and Chen Po-Ta, over fundamental differences on China's future course, -- ideological, economic, political, international. ⁴

China's foreign policy reflected its recent turbulent past. As a young Marxist-Leninist nation not even twenty-five years old, China was fiercely proud of its ideological commitment and desirous of serving as a role model for other developing countries. By 1971, it was finally winning its bitter and longstanding struggle with Taiwan to de-internationalize the

China legitimacy issue and was poised to assume its seat on the U.N. Security Council.⁵ In short, China showed signs of emerging from its self-imposed isolation of the 1950s and 60s and believed its voice and perspective on many key international issues deserved serious attention.

But the perceived external threat to China from its ideological if estranged cousin, the Soviet Union, was of immediate and growing concern. In Chou's view, China remained weak militarily and economically while the Soviet Union, its neighbor and physically closest adversary, continued to show increasingly aggressive tendencies in Asia as elsewhere. The Soviet Union had in place some 40 well-equipped divisions along China's northern border by the late 1960's and had made thinly veiled nuclear threats. It had become North Vietnam's principal supporter in its struggle against the United States along China's southern flank and a close ally of another longstanding Chinese antagonist, India. The Soviets were not hesitant to project their power in defense of their perceived interests, as their military incursion into Czechoslovakia in 1968 to quell a peaceful democratic transformation made clear.⁶ Even Chou's immediate internal political challenges contained important Soviet linkages: Lin Piao and others were known to prefer Soviet rapprochement to thawing relations with the United States despite the mounting evidence that Soviet intentions posed a challenge to Chinese long term interests.⁷

The U.S., still very much China's ideological as well as military adversary, was, in Chou's view, also the critical

counterweight to Soviet expansionist designs worldwide. America remained the principal ally of China's civil war foe, Chiang Kai Shek, even though Taiwan no longer posed an immediate, serious military threat. But the U.S. was bogged down in Vietnam which, in China's view, distracted the U.S. from challenging effectively Soviet expansion worldwide. Forcing the U.S. to retreat from its superpower adventures in Asia was certainly welcome, in Chou's view, but having a weakened U.S. in the face of growing Soviet challenge posed altogether new risks to China.

In sum, by 1971 Chou saw emerging international trends that held serious implications for China's national security and long term national interests. China's leadership would have to be creative and pragmatic to alter the strategic balance of power in China's favor. The U.S. held the key.⁸

Setting China's Objectives

To apply Paul Seabury's description of a "realist" in international politics,⁹ Chou En Lai assessed his options from the "realist" perspective. He accepted such notions as balance of power -- with its ancillary requirements of shifting alliances, friendships, secret diplomacy and animosities -- and the uncertainty of international relations -- and set out to shape events to alter the strategic balance in China's favor.

Chou's (and Mao's) most immediate goal was to contain and, if possible reduce, the growing strategic military threat posed by the Soviet Union. In the long term, this might be

accomplished by strengthening China's own capability to defend itself from both conventional as well as nuclear attack. In the short run, however, China would have to rely on its diplomatic skills to alter the international landscape to oblige the Soviets to reconsider their own foreign policy intimidation vis-a-vis China.

Such a strategy, while posing new risks and at odds with China's longstanding view of dealing directly with U.S., offered several benefits. First, it would demonstrate in a tangible way that China was prepared to act on the old maxim, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," even if it meant charting a new course with China's other world adversary, the U.S. Even beginning a rapprochement with the U.S. without preconditions or concessions given past U.S.-Chinese tensions would send a strong signal to the Soviet leadership that China was prepared to take bold diplomatic steps to protect itself, even if China was temporarily weaker militarily.

Second, if successful, rapprochement with the U.S. would buy time for China to strengthen itself both militarily and economically. Chou saw that China's future lay in economic reform and strengthening its economic base; gradually opening up to the West, including the U.S., could eventually gain China access to sorely needed new technology to strengthen its industry and military and access to large markets to spur trade and Chinese economic growth.

Third, it would strengthen China's image as a world power. While eschewing any desire to promote China as an emerging

superpower, Chou believed its voice deserved greater international consideration¹⁰. China's self-imposed isolation in the 1960's had gotten in the way of China's emerging desire to project itself as a Third World spokesman on opposing superpower domination. Demonstrating to the world that China could establish a new relationship with its longstanding adversary, the U.S., without compromising its independence or ideological commitments, would bolster its reputation and clout.

Fourth, rapprochement with the U.S. would strengthen his and Mao's hand within the Chinese leadership. It would deal a strong blow to the Lin Biao challenge who held strong differences in both the domestic as well as foreign policy arenas (which included favoring rapprochement with the Soviets). In this way, Soviet efforts to support opposing internal Chinese factions would be proven ineffective.¹¹

Finally, charting a new beginning with the United States without preconditions or Chinese concessions would deal a mortal blow to Taiwan's efforts to argue it was the legitimate representative of the Chinese people. Even if the U.S. remained a staunch ally of Taiwan in terms of economic and military support, rapprochement with the United States, capped by a visit to Beijing by President Nixon, would be unmistakable in its message to Taipei and to capitals around the world that Beijing, not Taipei, was now preeminent.

Means, Plans and Execution

Chou proved a master in achieving his objectives. By relying on his diplomatic skills, his understanding of U.S. and Soviet concerns, and a willingness to be pragmatic yet true to China's commitment to its ideology and independence, he sent an unmistakable signal to the Soviet Union that China would not stand idly by in the face of a growing perceived Soviet challenge to China's national security. At the same time, he joined the United States in a new relationship largely on his terms: without compromising China's ideological beliefs, its key objectives vis-a-vis Taiwan or its avowed opposition to Superpower domination.

Two key elements formed the basis of his strategy; neither required significant commitment of resources or deployment of China's military assets. First, Chou signaled confidentially to the Nixon Administration that he was prepared without preconditions to consider reestablishment of government-to-government contacts after a hiatus of nearly two decades. The Americans responded positively. This, in turn, led the famous secret Kissinger visits in 1971 that set the stage for President Nixon's famous visit to China in February 1972.

Second, Chou insisted that the Nixon visit produce a formal description of the terms of this new rapprochement: the Shanghai Communique. This document, rather than hide or obfuscate on key issues, laid out in broad but unequivocal terms the areas where the two countries agreed and disagreed. Through this device, both sides signaled to the world that this new relationship did not represent an abandonment of their respective principles on

key issues. However, it underscored that both governments shared the view that the region should not be dominated by "hegemony" of any one country -- a clear signal to the Soviet Union.¹²

Conclusion

Chou En Lai died before the full benefit of his strategy became apparent. Nevertheless, his legacy is clear: he charted a new direction for China at a critical moment of history. It bought time for China to reform its economic policies which eventually led China to become one of the world's most dynamic developing nations. It ended China's isolation and strengthened its international image. Finally, and above all, it positioned China vis-a-vis its greatest external threat, the Soviet Union, and its other key adversary, the United States, in a way that reduced China's vulnerability to physical attack despite its relative weakness in traditional military or economic power terms.

Endnotes

1. New York Times, January 9, 1976; p. 6.
2. For Kissinger's comment about Chou upon Chou's death, see New York Times, January 9, 1976 p. 6. Other descriptions of Chou as a person taken from Kissinger's White House Years, Little, Brown and Company. 1979, p. 745.
3. Deibel, Terry L., "A Design for Grand Strategy," Lecture Outline, 1992.
4. See Brugger, Bill, China: Radicalism to Revisionism 1962-1979. 1981, Crown Helm. Ltd. London and Yahuda, Michael B. China's Role In World Affairs. 1978, St. Martin's Press : New York for a more detailed account of some of the competing political and ideological crosscurrents that challenged China's leadership at this time.
5. See Yahuda pp. 212-213.
6. Yahuda, pp. 225-6.
7. Yahuda, pp. 221.
8. For a more complete description of the perceived challenges facing China's leadership at this time, see Robert A. Scalapino, "China and the Balance of Power," Foreign Affairs Vol. 52, No. 2 1974 pp. 352-357.
9. see Seabury, Paul, "Realism and Idealism" ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY, Vol.III, Alexander Deconde, Editor Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978, pp. 856-857.
10. see Yahuda's description of the Shanghai Communique and China's New Role for Beijing's opposition to "superpower-dom", p. 229.
11. See Scalopino, pp. 361-362 for a more complete description of Mao and Chou's fears of Soviet strategy aimed at Chinese internal politics.
12. This assessment draws heavily from Kissinger, Chapters 19 and 24, and Yahuda, pp. 228-232.