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CHOU ENLAI AND BALANCE OF POWER STATECRAFT

An Essay

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I. INTRODUCTION

In 1971, after years of hostile relations, the leaders of the United States and the People's Republic of China - then known as Red China - were finally, albeit cautiously, engaging in dialogue ultimately culminating in President Richard Nixon's visit to China in February, 1972. The opening of China's door and subsequent actions by the two countries represents a classic case in *balance of power* diplomacy, orchestrated by Premier Chou Enlai and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, two brilliant but ideologically opposed statesmen who shared a common realist perspective in the conduct of foreign policy. In what Kissinger referred to as "Triangular Diplomacy",¹ the seemingly simple act of receiving a US President (the leader of an avowed enemy) in the Chinese capital provided a critical benefit to both countries by checking the advance of Soviet influence and lessening the possibility of direct conflict between the three powers. By tempering strongly held ideological convictions with realist pragmatism, Chou Enlai acted on his recognition of a situation where the political "cost-benefit ratio" in terms of gains and concessions (foreign and domestic) would be highly favorable to both China and the United States.

II. THE SINO-AMERICAN SUMMIT: 1972

President Nixon's visit to China produced what became known as the "Shanghai Communiqué", a document which was drafted by

¹ Henry Kissinger, excerpts from "The Journey to Peking," and "Nixon's Trip to China," Chapters 19 and 24 in White House Years (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 763.

Chou and Kissinger, and agreed upon by Mao Tse Tung and Richard Nixon. The statement is important in that it addresses attempts by the two countries to move towards normalizing relations. Yet what is even more significant about the communiqué is what it *does not say*. The Chinese wanted the US to distance itself from alliance with Taiwan (Nationalist China) - long the source of Sino-American friction - and clearly achieved that in the communiqué. But the language was made deliberately vague enough to offer Nixon and Kissinger a way of publicly denying outright US abandonment of Taiwan while simultaneously allowing the Chinese a way of showing their own internal political opposition that they had made gains on the issue. The communiqué also emphasized the fact that there remained serious and conflicting differences between the two governments, which may have helped to offset the vagueness in language referring to Taiwan. By subtly stepping around the Taiwan issue, Chinese and US leaders were able to mitigate domestic political opposition to their efforts at rapprochement and focus on the more weighty problem at hand: the Soviet Union.

III. EVENTS LEADING UP TO SINO-AMERICAN RAPPROCHEMENT

By the time the US responded to Chinese diplomatic overtures in 1971, the split in Sino-Soviet relations was well known. The origins of this increasingly adversarial relationship can be traced back to 1956, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev denounced the repressive policies instituted by his predecessor, Joseph Stalin. In doing so, he allowed for a relaxation in

political control over other communist countries and even more, went so far as to advocate a policy of *peaceful coexistence* with the west. A radical change (the Chinese probably considered it a direct contradiction) to original Marxist-Leninist ideology, peaceful coexistence allowed that a nation's transition to socialism did not necessarily require violent revolution and that capitalist nations could coexist with socialist nations while socialism perpetuated itself throughout the world.

This eventually posed two problems for the Chinese. The first is that they still had territorial ambitions (namely the reassimilation of nationalist Taiwan) which required the political support of the Soviet Union. The second problem involved ideology itself. Mao was a firm believer in Marxism-Leninism and challenged perceived Soviet backsliding from its tenets, especially since they hurt his credibility while he was engaged in a power struggle with political opposition over cultural reform (Mao saw himself as having the final say in Chinese communist ideology and also pursued domestic economic policies similar to those of Stalin).² Since the Soviet Union and China were both concerned at the time with United States encirclement, illustrated by strong US influence in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and a growing interest in Vietnam, Sino-Soviet relations were strained but remained intact through the late 1950s. It was also during this time that the Soviets provided the Chinese with enough

² Harvey W. Nelson, Power and Insecurity: Beijing, Moscow and Washington, 1949-1988. Boulder and London: Lynne Reiner, 1989, p. 21.

advanced technology to eventually enable them to produce their own nuclear weapons and crude missile delivery systems. China formally broke with the Soviet Union in April of 1960, after Khrushchev sought to improve relations with the west by suggesting the Chinese recognize the existence of nationalist Taiwan.³

With the collapse of the Great Leap Forward forced collectivization program in 1960-61, famine ensued and further exacerbated ethnic tensions in the northwest Chinese province of Xijiang. In July 1964, Mao threatened to use military force to maintain the integrity of the northern border areas along the Amuri and Ussuri rivers. Tensions increased further as the Soviets deployed additional troops and SS4/5 Medium Range Ballistic Missiles to the far east in 1966, which represented the first real direct threat to China's security. As military buildups on the border continued, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush a rebellion instigated by the reformist policies of Alexander Dubček. That action became the basis for the Brezhnev Doctrine, which declared that the solidarity of the international proletariat outweighed national concerns.⁴ During those years the US government was largely preoccupied with the Vietnam War, and viewed world communism as being monolithic and controlled from Moscow. Only gradually did the west begin to realize the seriousness of the Sino-Soviet split, which was outwardly demonstrated in a series of border clashes in March 1969. Later that same

³ Nelsen, p. 29.

⁴ Nelsen, p. 74.

year the United States leadership, plagued by an increasingly unpopular war in Vietnam (another source of Sino-Soviet friction), announced the Nixon Doctrine, which provided political justification for US withdrawal from Vietnam and also set limits on future US military involvement against communist aggression. Although China wanted the US out of Vietnam, it did not want the US to completely withdraw from that part of the world and leave a vacuum for the Soviets to fill just as President Richard Nixon was sworn into office.

As the 1970s approached, the Chinese made their first attempt at opening a dialogue with the United States. Occurring just prior to the Sino-Soviet border clashes, these diplomatic overtures were ignored as Nixon chose to focus more on relations with the Soviet Union, which were specifically aimed at producing constraints on the deployment of Soviet nuclear delivery systems. As a result, Chou may have lost some influence in Beijing with the American refusal to engage in dialogue, and he therefore may not have been able to make another offer again until 1971.⁵ By then numerous additional events were rapidly combining to compel the Chinese leadership to seek better relations with the United States, including:

- initiation of Soviet-American détente and Soviet-European Détente, which could potentially allow the Soviets to shift military forces from west to east;
- increased Soviet influence in North Vietnam; and

⁵ Nelsen, p. 97.

- growing Soviet influence in India and Pakistan after settling the Indo-Pakistani War in 1965;
- increased Soviet involvement in the Middle East;

As a whole, the above factors indicated to the Chinese that the Soviet Union was now taking up the role of encirclement previously attributed to the United States in the 1960s. Assuming the Chinese, like US leaders, held the same view of influence among nations (east versus west) as a zero-sum game, Moscow's advances could only be interpreted as US retreat. The only answer for Mao (and Chou) was to move politically closer to the United States in the hopes of lessening, or better yet, completely foiling Soviet-American détente, and encourage the US into taking a more aggressive position against Soviet influence. It was at this point that Mao spoke with visiting journalist Edgar Snow during the 9th Party Congress in September 1970 and suggested American leaders come to Beijing.⁶

IV. CHINA IN THE BALANCE OF POWER EQUATION

In considering the factors which comprise a nation's power, Chinese leaders were dealing from a relatively weak position. Militarily the Chinese had a huge army in terms of numbers of men, but they were severely lacking in modern equipment. The Chinese Navy was small and did not include large capital ships capable of open ocean operations. Even though the Chinese had the hydrogen bomb since 1967, they lacked sophisticated, long range delivery systems needed to reach larger, western Soviet

⁶ Nelsen, p. 100.

cities like Moscow. China was also at a geographic disadvantage in that it did not control any strategic water or land areas and claimed no significant territory outside the Asian continent. To make matters worse, the Chinese economy was a virtual basket case, having suffered severe setbacks as a result of large scale reform failures over the years (the Great Leap Forward and Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution).

In addition to being in a weak geopolitical position, the Chinese leadership also had to confront dissent within their own ruling party. Such power struggles took on added importance in that the price for political failure was not only one's job but quite possibly one's life as well. Chou and those favoring rapprochement with the United States had to deal with opponents in the Chinese Politburo led by Defense Minister Lin Pao, who favored maintenance of a "dual adversary" approach to the US and Soviet governments.⁷ For all their perceived political power, Mao and Chou could not always make unilateral decisions and strike out in any direction they chose when pursuing foreign or domestic affairs. As a result, they walked a narrow line between pursuing actions in support of China's national security interests, and maintaining sufficient political support for those actions among the other politburo members.

The only strength for the Chinese lay in the possibility of using their position as a potential counterbalance between the two opposing superpowers. For the US, not only was the prospect

⁷ Nelsen, p. 100.

of better Sino-American relations a critically needed lever against the Soviets, but it was also crucial in helping the US methodically disengage from Vietnam with as little international and domestic political fallout as possible. Since the Chinese leaders were described by Kissinger as "cold blooded practitioners of power politics", or in other words, realists like himself, there can be little doubt that Chou saw a great political opportunity for both China and the United States.⁸

V. THE STRATEGY BEHIND THE SINO-AMERICAN INITIATIVE

During a planned visit to India in July 1971, Kissinger secretly flew to Beijing to meet with Chou and lay the groundwork for a Sino-American summit. It is interesting to note that like his Chinese counterpart, Kissinger also shared the problem of domestic political opposition which he used to justify his secrecy. It was also advantageous to keep the meeting quiet in order to surprise the Soviets, who were stalling on proposed arms reduction talks to the political detriment of the President. As soon as Chou and Kissinger finished laying the groundwork for proposed summit, the US and China issued a joint statement announcing the Presidential visit scheduled for February of 1971. At this point, according to Kissinger, previously stalled negotiations with the Soviets "began magically to unfreeze"⁹, and they anxiously suggested that Nixon visit Moscow before going to Beijing. Before the Sino-American summit even got underway, it

⁸ Kissinger, p. 747.

⁹ Kissinger, p. 766.

was obvious that Chou's primary goal of throwing the Soviets off balance and checking their expansion was virtually assured. Additional aims of the Chinese and American leaders during Nixon's visit were clear. Chou and Kissinger negotiated terms which would:

- Keep the United States actively engaged in the Far East (especially in an economically resurgent Japan) while allowing for an orderly withdrawal from Vietnam.¹⁰
- Get tacit US recognition of the People's Republic of China's status as the dominant "China", (i. e. pull back support for Taiwan).

Although sources do not specifically detail all the negotiations concerning Taiwan, it does appear that Chou gave Kissinger some kind of assurance that China would essentially leave Taiwan alone, although Chinese political rhetoric remained antagonistic. With this approach, Chou and Kissinger were able to find common ground and work towards satisfying their mutual interests.

VI. THE RESULTANT SHIFT IN THE BALANCE OF POWER

With the Shanghai Communiqué as its initial product, the improved Sino-American relationship provided great dividends. As I have previously mentioned, the Soviets were immediately compelled to seek their own summit with the United States. Chinese influence helped bring Vietnam and the United States to the Paris peace talks. After some short-lived protests over Taiwan quickly faded, it became practically irrelevant as a geopolitical issue.

¹⁰ Nelsen, p. 98.

Although the United States initially realized greater benefits from the summit than did China, the Chinese none the less realized gains over time. Continued US engagement in the Far East countered Soviet influence and mitigated Chinese fears of resurgent Japanese militarism. In fact, the Chinese and Japanese signed a friendship treaty in 1978. As Soviet-American détente reached its zenith in 1975, the Chinese were undoubtedly very gratified to see the relationship worsen as the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and broke relations with Taiwan. In 1980 the United States granted Most Favored Nation trading status to China.

VII. CONCLUSION

Chou Enlai's realist perspective and skilled negotiating ability illustrate a clear example of the balance of power approach to national security, and proper perspective in setting priorities in achieving national interests. The success of Chou's efforts are likewise supported by Kissinger:

"To understand the contribution of the China initiative to international stability, we merely need to ask ourselves what the world would have been like if Chinese pressures in Asia had been added to Soviet global adventurism during the Vietnam war and afterward."¹¹

With just modest concessions made during negotiations, Chinese and US leaders converted their geopolitical liabilities into assets with far reaching implications for the balance of power between the superpowers.

¹¹ Kissinger, p. 1074.

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