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FOREIGN STATESMEN AND THEIR STATECRAFT

CHOU EN-LAI

China's opening to the United States in 1972 constituted one of those great contradictions of history that Karl Marx would doubtless have enjoyed analyzing from his quiet vantage point in the British Museum. The Chinese move violated every notion of what should have been in the national interest according to Marxist theory. With the birthplace of communism directly to the north, North Korea firmly in the communist camp and Vietnam putting up staunch resistance to American armed forces, China should have been pleased with the progress made by the international proletariat in Asia.

Instead, in most un-Marxist fashion, China's border with Russia was a source of fear and hostility (for both states) rather than fraternal cooperation. In addition, Beijing viewed with increasing concern the success of the Hanoi government and the U.S.S.R.'s ever greater military involvement in Vietnam. What should, in principle, have been welcomed as the spread of international revolutionary fervor was, in fact, seen as an effort by the Soviets to promote regional hegemony.

The sources of Chinese concern were not economic -- something else that might have bemused Marx. Nor were they rooted in the canon that Russia had deviated from the true path of communism and was progressing along a capitalist road.

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Rather, the Chinese leadership was reacting to what it saw as a serious shift in the balance of power on the continent that threatened its fundamental security. It is a reflection of great statesmanship that Chou and like-minded Chinese leaders were able to subordinate their own dogma to the overriding security needs of the nation. (There are many examples in the history of communism, from collectivisation in Russia to the violence in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, when regimes undertook policies which patently weakened the state and flew in the face of what we in the West would consider self interest.)

In addition to the challenges China faced from erstwhile friends, she had experienced a hostile confrontation with India and could see the economic power of her traditional enemy Japan growing at an unprecedented rate. China was, in the eyes of her leaders, virtually surrounded by real and potential adversaries.

Reasoning, perhaps, along the lines of the old adage that my enemy's enemy is my friend, Chou undertook the initiative with the United States. There was little he could bring with him to interest the Americans beyond the psychological impact (by no means inconsiderable) of establishing dialogue where hitherto there had been fanatic mistrust and animosity. China was neither a military nor economic power of the first rank and exercised little influence over Vietnam. Furthermore, dialogue with the U.S. would raise difficult questions about the status of Taiwan which, Chou must have known, could not be resolved to China's satisfaction in the near term.

The fear of Russian dominance, however, and even outright aggression against China was real and spurred the Chinese on. The Soviets enjoyed overwhelming military superiority over the Chinese, both nuclear and conventional, and shared a long history of border disputes. Russian fears of a Chinese invasion (We have the land they need to relieve their overcrowding, reasoned the Russians.) were equally genuine and neither China nor the U.S. could rule out the possibility of a Soviet preemptive strike against Beijing. After such a strike it would not, presumably, have been difficult for the Soviets to find sympathetic elements within the Chinese leadership to set up a government more amenable to their own outlook. Had not former defense minister Lin Piao been accused of plotting against Mao in favor of closer ties with Moscow?

There were real risks, however, attached to any effort to reach out to the United States. If the U.S. were to reject the initiative out of hand or insist on unrealistic concessions regarding Taiwan, Chou would undoubtedly have lost considerable standing at home, with political opponents quick to criticize him for even thinking of dealing with the capitalist enemy. A rebuff from the U.S. would also presumably have increased China's sense of vulnerability relative to the Soviet Union. Were the failed effort to become known to the Soviets might not those elements in Moscow that favored preemptive action against China feel their hand was strengthened?

It is a tribute to Chou's statesmanship and daring that he was willing to undertake such a sharp departure in Chinese

foreign policy. Fortunately for him, there were a number of factors in U.S. thinking in the 1970's that complemented his own objectives.

One such factor was American fascination with what had come to be known as Red China. Formerly an ally in the war against Japan, China had, since 1948, closed itself off to Western eyes and influence and later directly confronted the U.S. in Korea. It was a nation that, to many Americans, appeared almost to have lost its mental balance, accusing the U.S. of leading an international conspiracy against it and appearing to countenance the use of force to spread the communist gospel. Americans desperately wanted a China they could comprehend. When a team of U.S. ping pong players was invited to play in a tournament in China, America was both stunned and delighted. No qualms were expressed over Chinese human rights abuses, despite the recently-concluded Cultural Revolution, which had claimed thousands of victims. (To be fair, human rights had not really entered the political lexicon of the day, but Americans were keenly aware of communist oppression in Europe and elsewhere. Though information about the Cultural Revolution was sparse, it was nonetheless clear that a wave of considerable violence had swept China.)

Also in China's favor was the style of the Nixon presidency (with its predilection for secrecy) and the Nixon/Kissinger approach to security issues in traditional balance-of-power (Kissinger preferred the word geopolitical) terms. Kissinger states frankly in his memoirs that he and Chou En-Lai shared

many common views in their assessment of the international balance of power and that Chou was one of the few foreign leaders he ever met with a truly global grasp of international politics.

Most important, of course, was the simple fact that the U.S. shared an overriding objective with China: to give the Soviets serious pause in their calculations of what they could and could not hope to accomplish in Asia, particularly in regard to their ongoing confrontation with China. The thought of Soviet troops moving across the border into China was no more popular in Washington than it was in Beijing.

To be sure, there were differences in how the U.S. and China viewed the balance of power in Asia. Kissinger notes that he went to great lengths to persuade Chou that Japan would not constitute a threat to China as long as the Japanese remained closely linked to western economies and values. A U.S. presence in Asia, he argued, would, therefore, be useful not only as a counterweight to the Soviets, but also as a steadying hand with the Japanese.

It is clear from the readings, however, that once the two sides realized that they were motivated by a common concern and common objective that each considered to be of the highest importance, obstacles to agreement quickly fell by the wayside. The problem of U.S. recognition of Taiwan (Nationalist China in the vocabulary of the cold war), for example, did not prevent China from moving ahead with the dialogue, and neither side allowed considerations of ideology or domestic political values to interfere with progress.

To say that the China initiative was a success would be an understatement. Not only did it effectively redraw the world geopolitical map, it paved the way for such dramatic developments as formal U.S. diplomatic recognition of China and China's replacing Taiwan on the U.N. Security Council. Over time the ensuing dialogue brought Chinese leaders to the United States and exercised considerable influence over their decision to free certain elements of their economy from the rigid strictures of communist theology. Any disappointment on the Chinese side probably arose over the U.S.'s inability to maintain a foothold in Vietnam and act as a counter to Soviet influence there.

Despite the undoubted successes of the China initiative, U.S.-Chinese relations in 1992 are not good, and much has changed in the 20 years since Kissinger and Chou first met. China's economy is booming, but its society is not at peace with itself. The killings in Tien An Men square were a stark reminder of the fact that political reform has not kept pace with economic change in China. (Ironically, Mikhail Gorbachev is often criticized in Russia for having attempted political change without preparing the proper economic groundwork in advance. The result, say his critics, is that people remember the good old days of Brezhnevian abundance and regret what they see as directionless democracy bordering on anarchy. Looking at China's experience with student protests Gorbachev seems less open to criticism. It is probably more accurate to say that there simply was no risk-free way to start the transition from a system that had no economic or democratic rationale behind it to one that

could better serve the interests of the peoples concerned.)

The underlying rationale of the U.S.-China rapprochement is now gone -- the need to counter Soviet influence in Asia. The Soviet Union no longer exists and even Vietnam is courting Western investment. The U.S. feels free to sell Taiwan 150 F-16 aircraft, a move that reverses our policy of the last ten years that arms sales to Taiwan "will not exceed, either in quantitative or qualitative terms, the level of those supplied in recent years."¹ Congress agonizes over whether to renew China's most-favored-nation trade status in the aftermath of Tien An Men.

The situation stands in sharp contrast to that of 20 years ago. If Nixon and Kissinger had had to confront an American public angry over the bloodshed of the Cultural Revolution would they have enjoyed the same latitude to negotiate with the Chinese? If they had not shared Chinese concerns that the U.S.S.R. was actively trying to expand its influence in Asia would they have been interested in opening a dialogue with the communist enemy? Would they have been as willing to break relations with Taiwan?

Developments in U.S.-Chinese relations since 1972 are illustrative of how dramatically the balance of power and resulting national interests can change. They also provide a useful case study in the importance of the domestic context

1. From the Shanghai communique of 1982, quoted in The Economist, Sept. 12 - 18, 1992, p. 35.

of foreign policy. American public perception of China in 1972 was such that the government essentially had a freehand in shaping policy. That is no longer the case in 1992.

For the purposes of this exercise, an examination of the process involved in the opening of U.S.-Chinese contacts and the changes of the last twenty years helps highlight essential elements of statesmanship. Part of Chou's genius lay precisely in his ability to assess the political realities of the time (N.B. unfettered by communist dogma) and conclude that an opening to the U.S., risky though it might be, would be both useful and possible. Another element of genius lay in his ability to maneuver this policy within his own government once he had made his decision. It is by no means clear whether in the 1990's we have either the geopolitical conditions or the human genius to move the relationship significantly closer.