# CHOU EN LAI

## The Challenge of Pragmatic Policy Adjustment

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In the late 1960s, faced with a rapidly changing balance in the global power structure, the Communist leadership in the People's Republic of China was forced to re-evaluate the threat to national security. The changing world scene created new vulnerabilities for China which had to be dealt with successfully if China was to survive. The leadership, including the venerable Chou En Lai, sought ways to avoid the apparent dangers of the future, hopefully without abandoning the ideological underpinnings of the revolution. After the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution and the "Great Leap Forward" the domestic political situation was delicate, at best. The already weak economy was deteriorating while the internal ideological debates continued to flare up, impeding recovery. The People's Army was also drawn into the turmoil; heavily politicized and greatly weakened in the process. It fell to Chou En Lai, the most pragmatic of the Chinese "Old Guard", to deal with a serious threat to continued national development and, arguably, the existence of the regime in China.

## The Threat

In the eyes of the national leadership the primary threat stemmed from Soviet hegemonism. Starting in the late 1950s, with the failure of the Soviet Union to support the PRC attack on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Formosa Straights and the USSR's refusal to provide nuclear weapons technology

to the PRC, the Sino-Soviet rift had deteriorated into an active hostility with skirmishes along the Ussuri River border between the two countries. Beginning in 1965 the Soviet Union began to mass troops along the border and had signed a treaty with Outer Mongolia, permitting the stationing of Soviet troops along that portion of the border with China as well. By the end of the decade there were 45 Soviet divisions on the border, 1,200 - 1,400 combat aircraft and, over 200 IRBM launchers poised on the Soviet/Chinese frontier. Soviet naval activity in the Sea of Okhotsk was also seen as a direct threat by the Chinese, while the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was interpreted as an illustration of Soviet intentions. In addition, Soviet adventurism in India and South East Asia, particularly with Vietnam and Laos, added to the sense that China was under siege from her former ally and mentor. The tension had become so palpable that the PRC saw it as a vital threat the national survival. The Chinese leadership felt they had to counter the Soviet threat and to do so with scant economic or military resources.

A secondary threat seemed also to be emerging from the growing economic power of Japan and the apparent retreat of the United States, specifically from Indochina and generally from Asia. These trends signaled to China the emergence of a new four power pattern of relationships, a pattern which threatened China but one which could also be exploited to China's advantage. To do so Chou En Lai turned to the West.

Chou was an adherent of Maoist tactical and strategic doctrine, as proclaimed in policy documents first produced in the mid-1940s, which called for "flexible" associations with other powers to create a counterweight in the face of the primary enemy. As each primary enemy was defeated China could turn to the next enemy (even its erstwhile associates) and defeat them in turn. This doctrine permitted the Chinese communists to coordinate with the U.S. and Nationalists during the war in the face of the primary threat from Japan and it would be used by Chou to justify a reopening with the U.S. to balance the Soviet threat. This was balance of power politics at its best!

## China's National Interest

Chou's interest in this situation was straightforward; preservation of the security of China in the face of a perceived Soviet military threat. His objective was to deter the Soviet Union from an expected attack on China until the country had time to develop sufficient resources of its own to block Soviet adventurism, first in Asia and, eventually, worldwide. Since national strategic doctrine approved of the use of associations of convenience in the pursuit of vital national interests there was no fundamental conflict between communist ideology and the opening of relations with the West. However, continued domestic turmoil and the practice of using criticism of foreign policy initiatives in domestic political battles forced Chou to be cautious. The goal was simple, reopen relations with the U.S. (and Japan) and keep the U.S. engaged in Asia, thereby balancing Soviet influence and, secondarily, reducing the chance of Japanese remilitarization. Because of domestic

political concerns, the path to that goal was uncertain. Chou may have known how eager the U.S. was to move to more normal relations in the early Nixon years, an interest which coincided with his own. Nevertheless, the complicated issues remaining between the two countries, especially the treatment of Taiwan (China wished to nip in the bud a growing movement towards a two-China policy), demanded a considered approach and careful negotiation. In addition to the difficulties in dealing with the substantive details of normalization of relations with the U.S., Chou needed to neutralize idealogues in China, many of whom wanted a rapprochement with the USSR. As Scalapino put it, Chinese foreign policy was a balance of three sometimes competing interests; nationalism, emergence and ideology.

## Tactics for Success

Chou used exemplary diplomatic negotiation to achieve his goal. First in secret talks with the U.S. National Security Advisor, Dr. Henry Kissinger, and subsequently with the Department of State and President Nixon, Chou was able to hammer out two documents which signaled to the world (including the Soviet Union) that China was not isolated and alone anymore: the Shanghai Communique, and the announcement of the President's visit to Beijing. Using an open and candid style he worked with Kissinger to establish a mutual understanding of the U.S. and Chinese views of the world scene and the nature of each country's

interests. They jointly found the areas of agreement and jointly admitted to those areas where they disagreed. Having tilled the soil so carefully, they began to plant the seeds of a mutually convenient entente. The U.S. wanted to end the stalemate of over twenty years duration and begin to establish a reliable relationship which would serve the interests of both countries equally. Kissinger recognized that China and the U.S. were entering a marriage of convenience. He admitted that the brilliance of Chou's management of the negotiation made the resulting relationship an emotional one as well as a necessary one.

Chou was not so simple to think that good fellowship, a state banquet or two and commonality of interest were sufficient to bind up the wounds of over twenty years. His personal attention to the details of the relationship, especially with Kissinger, made straight the way for success. He used subtle signs to remind Kissinger of his domestic political vulnerability, hopefully convincing the U.S. of the need to be forthcoming and he used his considerable personal charm to win over the hardest of hearts on the U.S. delegations.

## Measures of Success

The success of the Chinese policy can best be measured by the Soviet reaction. After it became clear that China had succeeded in re-establishing relations with the West, the USSR immediately sought to improve its own relations

with the U.S. to convince Washington that it, too, was a responsible negotiating partner in dealing with global issues of mutual interest. Pressure on the border eased almost immediately as the Soviets faced a new correlation of forces in Asia.

The successful inclusion of an understanding recognizing Taiwan as an integral part of China was another triumph for the Chinese. The nascent movement towards adoption of a "two China" policy in the U.S. was stopped. Finally, China's entry into the U.N. and its recognition by Japan opened new doors for the economic development needed to bolster her domestic power base and strengthen her ability to resist coercive outside influence in the future. All of this was achieved without fundamental cost to the national leadership. In fact, it can be argued that the success of the policy pursued by Chou led to the adoption of more moderate domestic policies as well. The normalization of relations with the west signaled the failure of ideological extremism in domestic policy. The resultant period of domestic growth and prosperity led to the downfall of the "Gang of Four" and the movement, however slow and tentative, towards a more open society.

All of this was accomplished because of the careful, rational analysis of China's fundamental interests in the world and an equally rational pursuit of those interests by a brilliant leader. Chou En Lai correctly identified the threat posed by the Soviet Union. He identified a means to counter the threat and proceeded to obtain and apply that tool in a methodical and effective manner. The fact that the

rapprochement also served the interests of the U.S. made the normalization of relations just that much easier to achieve. This was a classic case of pragmatic considerations overcoming strong but irrelevant (in this context) ideological differences to achieve an understanding of mutual convenience. It served both parties well and created a reliable relationship where none had previously existed. As Kissinger put it, "Reliability is the cement of international order." With the successful rapprochement with the U.S., China, led by Chou En Lai, was able to use the cement of a more reliable relationship with the U.S. to reinforce the foundations of her own policy in dealing with the Soviet Union and the rapidly changing international order.