

by James Gagnon, September 20, 1991

The Communist victory over Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime in 1948 ushered in a period of intense hostility between the United States and China. So deep was the enmity between the two countries that for over twenty-five years diplomatic contact virtually ceased. However, when Soviet threats to Chinese sovereignty in the late 1960's became more ominous, China's leadership made a calculated decision to turn to the United States to reestablish the balance of power in the region. Below is a brief description and analysis of the events which led Chinese Premier Chou En-lai to seek a normalization of relations with the United States. In this paper, we also will look at the national interests, goals and objectives which influenced Chou's initiative and the approach he used to implement it.

Chinese National Interests

Chinese national interests during the post-World War II period consisted of the following:

- A. Security:
- B. Ideology:
- C. Prestige: and
- D. Economic Development

In his article "China and the Balance of Power," Robert Scalapino states that security was China's foremost national interest in the 1960's and 70's; the immediate cause of Chinese concern was the Soviet

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Union. The Chinese leadership's preoccupation with the Soviet security threat, Scalapino explains, was fueled by Brezhnev's warning that the USSR would not limit its response to future Chinese border incursions to conventional weapons. The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Brezhnev Doctrine further underscored the "vital" nature of the "Soviet threat". In his book "The White House Years" Kissinger concurs with Scalapino's conclusion, citing Soviet actions in the Indo-Pakistan War and growing Soviet influence in Viet Nam as additional reasons for Chinese uneasiness.

Although security occupied the top rung of China's national interests, ideology, prestige and economic development (albeit on the Marxist model) also were of great importance to the Chinese leadership. During the Cultural Revolution, the Communist regime saw the promotion of Marxist values worldwide as serving an important dual purpose: the forging of the country's sense of ideological mission both domestically and internationally; and the boosting of Chinese prestige abroad, particularly among the developing countries. In fact, a key ideological/prestige objective of the regime during the Cultural Revolution was to seize the leadership of the global Marxist-Leninist movement from the Soviet Union. Scalapino notes that another indication of the importance of ideology was the regime's insistence that all foreign and domestic policies be rationalized with Marxist-Leninist theory.

Chou's decision to seek a normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States, however, suggests the Chinese had begun to downgrade the importance of ideology/prestige to their national interests soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese leadership appears to have made a conscious decision to restrict "ideological competition" with the Soviet Union to purely political initiatives. Chinese actions, therefore, indicate that while ideology/prestige was a major national interest it was never a vital national interest (i.e. ideology/prestige were important but not at the risk of war).

Given the economic hardships which have historically plagued China, economic development must rank as a major national interest. In the period immediately following the Communists' seizure of power, China made impressive gains in eliminating hunger and meeting basic human needs. However, the implementation of ill-advised economic programs during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution severely undermined the economy and left the country even further behind its regional competitors technologically. Government indecision regarding the role of private enterprise in the economy also hurt economic performance.

China's Security Goals and Objectives

The Chinese leadership's principal goal for addressing its security concerns with the Soviet Union was to reestablish the "balance of power" in the Asia region. Scalapino believes that Chou focused so

intensely on the balance of power, because China could not hope to achieve military parity with the Soviet Union. (N.B.: It is for this reason that I did not include "power" as one of China's national interests. Power, of course, is closely linked to security, but Chou saw clearly that any attempt by China to match the power of the Soviet Union would be futile. Consequently, his only alternative was to reestablish the balance of power in Asia.) To accomplish this goal, Chou was forced to turn to the only country with sufficient political, military, and economic power to counter the Soviet Union -- the United States. Scalapino observes that the goal of achieving a superpower balance of power in Asia was so important to China that one of Mao and Chou's principal objectives was to discourage wherever possible detente between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

Kissinger also expresses the view that Chinese military weakness was the rationale behind Chou's obsession with the region's balance of power. He writes that in the late 1960's the Chinese needed the United States to help preserve the balance, because China alone did not have the power to counterbalance the Soviet Union. Chou, therefore, concluded that if China's goal of checking Soviet expansion and reestablishing the balance of power was to be accomplished he would have to seek a political rapprochement with the United States.

Policy Environment and Determinants

Scalapino indicates that China's security concerns with the Soviet Union were heavily influenced by the historical, geographic, and cultural environments of the two countries. Specifically, he points to the absence of any buffer states along the borders of the two nations and the high degree of xenophobia and racial consciousness which pervades both societies. Add to these factors a legacy of countless invasions from west to east (and vice versa) and it is easy to understand why security paranoia dominated the thinking of senior Soviet and Chinese decision-makers. Aside from these environmental factors, Scalapino notes that there were a number of immediate developments which influenced the timing of the Chinese leadership's decision to seek diplomatic relations with the United States. The most compelling incentive, of course, was the Soviet Union's increasingly threatening posture toward China. Scalapino, however, suggests that besides the Soviet threat there were circumstances in the region which Chou might have seen as foreign policy opportunities -- opportunities which might be enhanced by rapprochement with the United States.

First, the United States was beginning a phased withdrawal from Viet Nam but not from the Asia-Pacific region: the United States, therefore, would cease to be an immediate security threat to China but would continue to remain a credible balancing force in the region.

Second, although Japan had made impressive economic advances, its foreign policy was still in a formative stage: China, therefore, might have a unique opportunity to influence future Japanese diplomacy and even create political divisions between Japan and the United States. Finally, Chou concluded that after years of isolation the time was right for China to begin to assert its political and economic interests in the region. Scalapino observes that the key assumption in Chou's deliberations was that the United States would continue to be a power in the region (if the United States ceased to be a force in the region, normalization would not be in China's interest).

Costs and Risks

Kissinger credits Chou En-lai's international background and his impressive negotiating skills as being key factors in bridging the differences between the China and the United States. (Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the negotiations with the United States would have succeeded if they had been entrusted to an ideologue such as Jiang Qing.) Scalapino concurs but suggests that Chou's ability to garner support for the initiative within the Communist party was perhaps even more crucial to the success of the negotiations. Given China's volatile domestic political situation and the ideological fervor of the party cadre, Chou's "heretical" proposal to seek rapprochement with the United States carried with it some very real political risks. Scalapino writes that Mao and Chou were particularly concerned that in the wake of a successful negotiation, normalization

would reemerge as an ideological debate within the party. He also observes that China's uneasy relationship with the Soviet Union was characterized by fierce ideological arguments/competition over communist dogma. Consequently, both Mao and Chou were very worried that the Soviets might try to use the normalization controversy to drive internal political divisions within the ranks of the party. Normalization with the United States also risked diminishing Chinese prestige and ideological influence abroad. Notwithstanding, Chou determined that China's vital security interests demanded that he take the risks in order to counter the growing Soviet threat.

Instruments of Statecraft/Grand Strategic Thinking

Chou achieved his goal of normalizing diplomatic relations with the United States through negotiation. From the start of the talks, it was readily apparent that the U.S. and China had a mutual interest in checking Soviet advances in the region. Chou and Kissinger recognized this commonality of interest early on, because both men were experienced practitioners in the art of power politics. In short, they were speaking the same language. Chou and Kissinger had such a clear understanding of each others position that if the two had reversed places the outcome of the negotiations would likely have been the same. On the other hand if one or the other had not been a party to the negotiations, the chances for a successful conclusion might have been in doubt. Chou's complaints notwithstanding, I suspect that both

men preferred the secrecy which surrounded the talks. The private setting gave Chou and Kissinger time to overcome the legacy of hostility and mistrust which had characterized the U.S.-China relationship for over twenty-five years: to develop the mutual confidence needed to see the normalization process through.

Chou's handling of the normalization issue from inception to implementation is a text book study in grand strategic thinking. As a master in the art of power politics, Chou sought to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States, because ensuring China's security interests required that he reestablish the balance of power in the region. In reaching this decision, Chou determined that China's inability to achieve military parity with the Soviet Union left him no alternative but to seek political rapprochement with the United States. U.S. withdrawal from Viet Nam made Chou's decision somewhat more palatable, because once the United States left Indochina it would no longer pose an immediate security threat to China's southern flank. However, before initiating negotiations with the United States. Chou had to be certain that the United States would continue to be a sufficiently powerful force in the Asia-Pacific region (i.e. that the United States would remain a credible counterbalance to Soviet power). Chou also saw in normalization an opportunity to further reorder the balance of power in the region by creating divisions between the two major economic powers of the region -- Japan and the United States.

It is ironic that in Henry Kissinger Chou found a man who shared his outlook on power politics and who recognized that reordering the balance of power in Asia was in the mutual interest of the U.S. as well as China. Both Chou and Kissinger were well aware that on other bilateral issues there would likely be a divergence of views. However in a classic example of power politics, they purposely subordinated these secondary concerns to achieve a goal that was vital to the national interests of both their nations.