

# The Cold War and Chinese Foreign Policy

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YAFENG XIA, JUL 16 2008

The year 1949 proved pivotal in changing the dynamics of post-World War II international relations. In October 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) replaced the Republic of China (ROC) after the Chinese Communists won a nationwide victory in the civil war and drove the Nationalist government to Taiwan. The collapse of the Nationalist cause shocked the American public, which had idealized "free China" as a democratic ally and valiant protégé. Now, a Communist China, comprising a quarter of the world's population, had inevitably extended the Cold War to East Asia. The PRC's foreign policy during the Cold War went through several distinctive stages.

### **"Lean to One Side" (1949-1959)**

On June 1949, about three months prior to the founding of the PRC, the Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong announced that New China would support the Soviet Union in international affairs. The Truman administration settled on a policy of non-recognition of the PRC. As the United States had been supporting the Chinese Nationalists during the Chinese civil war, and Washington refused to cut off relations with the Nationalist government in Taiwan, the Chinese Communist Party regarded the U.S. as a serious threat to the PRC. Beijing was seeking an alliance with the Soviet Union to offset the U.S. threat. The Chinese and Soviet leaders signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance on February 14, 1950. The alliance was mainly a military agreement, which committed the two sides to come to each other's aid if either were attacked by Japan or the United States.

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 disrupted any possible stabilization of the Sino-American relations. The PRC and the United States would be locked into a deadly three-year war in the Korean peninsula from June 1950 to July 1953. After China entered the Korean War in October 1950, the U.S. would perceive the PRC as a major threat to its key interest in Asia, and to the security of Japan. During the Korean War, the Sino-Soviet alliance worked reasonably well as the Soviet Union provided China with air support, a great deal of military supplies and economic aid. Given China's hostility, Washington took a hard line by toughening the U.S. economic embargo against the PRC, which first started in fall 1950, firming up support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan, blocking the PRC's membership in the UN, and further isolating the PRC politically. The PRC's hostility toward the U.S. and Washington's reciprocation intensified the Cold War in the region.

The PRC's shelling of Jinmen (Quemoy) in 1954 was designed mainly to foil the U.S.-Taiwan security treaty as Beijing worried about the division between mainland China and Taiwan. As tension rose between the United States and China during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1954-55, both Washington and Beijing felt more urgency to maintain communications, even at a higher level and on a more regular footing. The first Taiwan Strait crisis, in a way, launched the Sino-American ambassadorial talks in August 1955. The ambassadorial talks continued throughout the Eisenhower administration without much progress on the issues such as Taiwan, the renunciation of force, U.S. embargo of China, and cultural exchanges.

Meanwhile, in the first half of the 1950s, the Sino-Soviet relationship was cordial and the top priority of the PRC's diplomacy. The contacts between the two governments were frequent, and bilateral negotiations were often conducted between top leaders. But in the second half of the 1950s, the CCP started to disagree with the Soviets on how to evaluate Stalin, and the direction which the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was leading the International Communist movement. The Chinese quarreled with the Soviets over the issue of de-Stalinization, the Soviet proposal

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of building a joint long-wave radio station and nuclear submarine fleet in China, differing interpretations of Marxism-Leninism, Khrushchev's attempt to reach an accommodation with the West, and the USSR's refusal to support China during its conflict with India in the second half of 1959 and early 1960. In July 1960, Moscow announced the abrupt removal of Soviet advisers and technical personnel from China. By the early 1960s, the Sino-Soviet dispute spread from ideology to state-to-state relations. Tensions rose along the Sino-Soviet border. The Sino-Soviet alliance collapsed.

## **Revolutionary Self-Reliance (1960-1969)**

Mao Zedong and his associates began to reassess the changing balance of power between the two opposing blocs in the early 1960s. The perception of threat in relation to the United States tended to be determined by both domestic pressure and international challenges. Beijing was interested in maintaining a communication channel with Washington. The Sino-American ambassadorial talks that took place in Warsaw continued in the 1960s. Although no official diplomatic relations existed between the two countries at that time, these Warsaw talks proved useful in facilitating relations between China and the U.S., offering a ready avenue for information exchange and crisis management.

In the 1960s, although Washington believed that the Soviet threat was still the predominant one, the Third World became a major battleground for the great power contention. The rise of nationalism as a result of Communist infiltration seemed to have posed an increasing threat to the United States and "Free World." It was within this area that China stood out as the world's leading revolutionary state, threatening not only Western democracy, but also Moscow's claim to a leadership role within the Socialist bloc.

Since its founding in 1949, the PRC had given high priority to its relations with the Third World. Mao pointed out that a strong coalition of countries in the Third World could be decisive in Cold War confrontations. China's first effort to assume influence in the Third World came in April 1955, when it attended the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states. China's strategy emphasized building political coalitions in the Third World at two different levels. First, China supported "national liberation struggle" both to force out the remaining colonial regimes and to overthrow those independent Third World governments that were most closely allied with the West. Second, China attempted to build close cooperative relations with the rest of the independent Third World governments, urging them to reject the West. As China could offer very little in the way of economic assistance or advanced military equipment, its effort during the 1960s and 1970s to shape the Third World into a third force in international politics opposed to both the two superpowers largely failed.

## **Triangular Diplomacy (1970-1989)**

The perception of grave threat from the Soviet Union pushed Mao Zedong to lift existing conceptual restrictions in order to improve relations with the United States in early 1970s.

Nixon's high-profile summit meetings in February 1972 with the Chinese leaders, in effect, replicated Henry Kissinger's earlier visits to Beijing in July and October 1971. Determined to move ahead but firm on principal issues, the leaders of both sides proved worthy negotiation opponents. At the core of the U.S.-China summit diplomacy were the common concerns over the Soviet threat; each side aspired to utilize the other to balance that threat. This was the beginning of U.S.-China-Soviet triangular diplomacy during the Cold War. But Mao did not follow the policy of détente with the U.S. to its fullest extent. Throughout his life, Mao had a constant and consistent goal: China was the model for the "liberation" of all the oppressed nations and peoples of the world.

After a brief power struggle following Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping became China's de facto leader in the late 1970s over Mao's own anointed successor, Hua Guofeng. Deng charted a course for China's rapid economic development that combined successful reform and openness to capitalistic international economy with the continued one-party rule of the CCP. In foreign policy, Deng shared Mao's goal to strive for China's equality and to restore China's lost glory. He was the architect of China's foreign policy from 1978 until the early 1990s. Deng virtually brought to an end China's remaining practical support for revolutionary movements abroad and significantly reduced

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China's aid to the Third World. China carried on a foreign policy more balanced between the two superpowers, which was called "an independent foreign policy" at the 12th National Congress of the CCP in 1982. Under Deng's leadership, Communist rule in China survived the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe and the disintegration of the Soviet Union—the motherland of Communism. The PRC weathered the end of the Cold War. As the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the Soviet bloc quickly disintegrated, China gradually emerged as a nascent superpower.

## Ideology

The Cold War was originally a confrontation between two contending ideologies — Communism and liberal democracy. The Chinese leaders persisted in proclaiming "Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought" as the ideological foundation of China during the Cold War. Many scholars have contended that the primary causes of the Sino-Soviet split stemmed from their conflicting national interests, which overwhelmed their shared ideological beliefs. The historian Chen Jian contends that ideology, while it played a decisive role in bringing Communist countries together, also contributed to driving them apart.

From a geopolitical perspective, China was neither in the vital area that both superpowers vied for—West and East Europe—nor was it on the periphery of the Cold War, like many other "Third World" countries. China's influence sprang mainly from its huge population and territory. In the words of Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, "During the Cold War, China was the only major country that stood at the intersection of the two superpower camps, a target of influence and enmity for both." Despite its confrontations with the United States in the Korean peninsula, the Taiwan Strait, and Vietnam, by the early 1970s, Sino-American rapprochement helped to create the conditions that led to the limited détente of the 1970s. Ironically, the great Sino-Soviet rivalry not only led to the collapse of the Communist bloc, but contributed to the end of the Cold War as well.

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