

Chairman Mao's Masterplan

Written by Marina Popcov

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Chairman Mao's Masterplan

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/04/08/chairman-mao%E2%80%99s-masterplan/>

MARINA POPCOV, APR 8 2011

Within the antagonism between capitalist and communist ideas in the period of the cold war the Sino-US rapprochement appears as a very out of character phenomenon, culminating in the spectacular visit of president Richard Nixon in 1972, as the first president to enter Chinese Communist soil. An event so sensational for its time that it was even compared with the moon landing of 1969 (Bennett, 2006). However the unusual relationship was not a spontaneous constellation, but embedded in a set of long term political changes and trends. While analyses of the US intentions are based on detailed declassified government documentation, China's motivation to join the liaison with its major enemy lack sufficient reference, due to limited access to historical material.

Nevertheless the following essay will present possible explanations for Mao Zedong decision to enter the "tacit alliance" (Goh, 2005:222-255) with the United States and simultaneously explore the continuous evolution within the Chinese reconstruction of its strategic culture, national interest and identity, which paved the way for Sino US rapprochement. The arguments will conclude to the assumption that chairman Mao instrumentalised the "US card" (Goh, 2005:235) for his goals to enhance China's position in the international arena, secure the country in terms of sovereignty and military and rebuild a positive and unified identity. Three factors which correlated in a cyclical relationship towards Mao's plans of the rise of the People's Republic of China.

Mao was known to have a pragmatic and realist perception of international relations and an account of power, which was not consistent with Marxist Leninist notions. Already Evident and formulated as early as 1940 in his essay "On Policy" justifying cooperation with the Nationalists against Japan. (Yahuda, 1978:page; Xia, 2006:page) By the end of the 1960s after a revolutionary decade and a deepening split with their communist mentor, China found itself outside of the international system, which at that time was lead by the superpower antagonism. The status of a threatened, isolated, aggressive and troubled "modernizer" (Goh, 2005:page) with almost no diplomatic contact to the outside world was a highly disadvantaging position for the Republic's future. Well aware of China's lack of self-sufficiency, Mao saw the bipolar struggle as a chance to get his way back into the "international game" if their contradictions were carefully played to his advantage. (Scott, 2007:page) His analysis of the fluid shifts within global power indicated an imbalance between the politically slightly weakening USA and the allegedly empowered Soviet Union apparently slowly closing the "missile gap" and pursuing expansionist aims. This trend, according to the realist view, could threaten the international power balance and lead to conflict. (Morgenthau, 1985) Conflict was not the object of fear for Mao, since in his zero sum strategic culture political struggles and elimination of the adversary was considered as inevitable. (Yaquing, 2003) However, with the USA being China's major ideological adversary on the one hand and the Soviet Union being China's militant revolutionary rival on the other hand the subsequent conflict would need to be fought on two fronts and Mao was reluctant to fight "with both fists". (Scott, 2007:page) Thus Mao hoped that despite their ideological disagreements opening up to the USA would lift China's position to an inclusive and significant factor within the essential cold war struggle, create a triangular balance and prevent violent conflict.

Beyond the bipolar antagonism Mao was very concerned with the power equilibrium in East Asia. Concluding from the realist account a rising hegemony outbalances the international system and therefore should be contained or prevented. A notion implemented in China's policy and again formulated in the Shanghai Communiqué, confirmed their opposition to hegemony and becoming at superpower itself. (Yahuda, 1978:page) Nevertheless historically China had the tradition of being a key player in the East Asian region, which Mao intended to revive. (Terrill, 2005; Harding, 1978:38) An obstacle to China's reemerging influence in the region was the perception of being encircled by

Chairman Mao's Masterplan

Written by Marina Popcov

their enemies and their enemy's allies, with the Soviet Union and India in the West, North and South and Korea, Vietnam and Japan in the East. Further the rising image of the expansionist Soviet Union as a serious threat and the economic recovery and success of the traditionally expansionist state of Japan were alerting the PRC. A way out strategy of the hostile surrounding was to reach out their diplomatic tentacles all across the region and align itself to either one side of the circle, in which case Mao opted for the East. The process of opening up to the United States involved the American withdrawal from Vietnam, the surrender of Taiwan and a relative normalization of the Sino-Japanese relationship. These steps enabled China to establish cooperation with Indonesia and Pakistan, neutralize Japan and create of a Sino-US-Japanese counterbalance (Harding, 1978:39) in their sphere of influence to any expansionist Soviet efforts or potential perils. The strategy became very evident in the South Asian crisis in 1971, (Goh, 2005:page) when the communist rivals projected their antagonism on the struggle of their allies India and Pakistan.

Altogether the pursuit of Sino US rapprochement was embedded in the reconstruction of China's strategic culture, which slowly but steadily shifted from a conflict-based to a cooperation-based account trying to avoid war. Approaching the US was a first step into this direction, indicated by Mao during the public appearance with American journalist Edgar Snow. A trend which significantly improved China's perception, position, role and activity in the international system, bringing Mao closer to his goal of an empowered and reemerging PRC within a balanced international system, ideally not bipolar but in form of a "five pointed star" with US, USSR, EEC, Japan and PRC in an equilibrium at each "point". (Yahuda, 1978)

Due to China's history of instability and fragmentation (Short, 2007) Mao's main aim was the unification, security and subsequent formulation of state interests, which again was a rather nationalist notion drifting away from Marx's global communist revolution idea. His account of national security was not as wide as today's criteria (UNDP, 1994), but a more realist and territory based idea, limited to the essential realms of economic, political and especially military security. The Sino Soviet split, the increase of troop numbers along the Chinese Northern border and the implementation of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Czechoslovakia in 1968 enhanced the prioritization of militaristic safety. Suspicions that the Soviets intended to encircle China were supported by their assistance to Bangladesh, offers to Pakistan, increase of aid to Vietnam and visit to Japan by 1970. Henry Kissinger even noted that Mao and Zhou were obsessed with the Soviet threat, (Goh, 2005: page) thus the containment of the UDSSR dominated the policy-making. This goal proved to be particularly difficult since by the end of the 1960s the Soviet Union was highly superior in economy and warfare to the, at that time, economically devastated and exhausted China. An open war would have resulted in a fight of David against Goliath. A "tacit alliance" to the USA, then considered as the lesser evil, (Goh, 2005:page; Harding, 1978:page) was a method for Mao to avoid ideological self-betrayal and the one hand and increase the diplomatic and non-diplomatic leverage of the PRC against the Russians, which ultimately would secure the country against the worst-case scenario of a Soviet invasion.

Political security ranked second on the priority list and resulted in Mao's goal to give the People's Republic a "face", namely to achieve international recognition and inclusion. (Yaquing, 2003) The USA as a leader in global structural power (Strange, 1994) was a good partner to facilitate China's integration, which was formally sealed by the UN decision to solve the "important question" of Mainland China's representation in 1971. (Coskun, 1979: 41)

Economic security and the ability to realize national economic interests was not the central but still very important concern of Chairman Mao. After the disillusioning experience with the Stalinist economic model and the failure of the self-invented "Great Leap Forward" the 1960s are considered as the "lost ten years" (Harding, 1978:38) in China's economic progress. The collateral damage of the Cultural Revolution and the aftermath of the early reforms demanded for effective innovation and economic rebound. Mao did not intend to open up the Chinese market to foreign trade and investment, since interaction with capitalism was considered to automatically lead to exploitation. However limited cooperation with the USA and Western Europe was a possibility to exchange know-how and lay the path for China's modernization plans.

Generally it can be stated that in the greater process of mutual cognition within the international system China was able to compose and proclaim a more coherent foreign policy and national interests. Hence Mao understood that the security of these interests was dependent on power distribution, (Yaquing, 2003) that the identification of further

Chairman Mao's Masterplan

Written by Marina Popcov

interests dependent on the own international position and that rapprochement with the USA would reinforce this process.

With all advantages subsequent to both sides of the Sino-US rapprochement one might wonder why the relationship did not evolve earlier. (Goh, 2005:page) At this point it is important to consider not only the theoretical and realist approach, but also the constructivist view and the shifts in the state of mind of the People's Republic of China and its leader. Throughout the 21st century the Communist China's identity was held together by constant antagonist struggle, nationally and internationally. Mao was convinced that it is of essential importance for the people of China to distinguish who were their friends and who were their enemies. (Bennett, 2006) Starting with the nationalists, landlords, rich farmers, bureaucrats continuing with capitalism and the west, later also including the Soviet Union, due to the identification of imperialist and capitalist components in their "revisionist" system (Jian, 2001:page) and ending with the "old China" and communist party build and destroyed by Mao. Thus He used the rebelling forces of young people to regain and increase his personal control over the country. In line with Franz Fanon's idea (1965) Mao argued that there is no reconstruction without destruction. (Short, 2007) However with the end of the Cultural Revolution the national enemy was eliminated and Fanon's tabula rasa, a blank state of identity was established by 1968.

Mao intended to fill that vacuum with his own iconic personality, satisfying the people's spiritual needs and ensuring his own untouchable status. But that alone was not sufficient to raise a country from its knees and meet the hopes and expectations people developed throughout the revolutions. A positive identification (Yaquing, 2003) was necessary for the sovereign and originally very proud China. Mao sensed "new politics" were inevitable and thus stopped talking about the role "tension" could play in stirring up revolutionary spirit, instead he emphasized the consolidating achievements of the Cultural Revolution (Jian, 2001:page) and slowly shifted the nation from conflict to cooperation. His public appearance with Edgar Snow was not only a sight to the Americans, but also to the Chinese audience, as a symbol for change. Not only the US government's perception of the PRC, but also Beijing's perception of itself, shifted from the "red menace" to the "troubled modernizer". A redefinition of the own identity impacts the actor's judgment and subsequently his final actions. Hence the Sino-US rapprochement was possible and attractive for Mao due to a previous and ongoing shift of identity and willingness to an all-dimensional participation in the global community.

In conclusion Chairman Mao did opt for rapprochement with the USA due to the subsequent improvement of China's status and integration in the international system of bipolar cold war struggle and within the East Asian region. Further the alliance would secure the national interests of Beijing in terms of imminent military threats, political sovereignty and economic modernization. Finally the new relationship boosted China's identity and international confidence, this again lead to further adjustment of China's perception of the world community and willingness to participate and pursue interest and so forth. Hence Mao's motivations and strategic intentions cannot be seen separately, since they act parallel, interactive and interdependent in cyclical way. Although Sino-US relations stagnated after Mao's death, the early days of the rapprochement can partly explain the start of a very close economic and strategic coexistence of the PRC and USA, a symbiosis, which Niall Fergusson (2009) mockingly named Chimerica.

References

Bennett, J. (2006) *Chairman Mao- Declassified* BBC Documentary: UK

Coskun, A. (1979) *China at the United Nations – An analysis of the superpower Interaction in the United Nations* University of Hacetepe: Ankara

Fanon, F. (1965) *The Wretched of the Earth* Macgibbon and Kee: United Kingdom

Ferguson, N. (2009) *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* Penguin Books: USA

Goh, E. (2005) *Constructing the U.S. Rapprochement with China, 1964-1974 From "Red Menace" to "Tacit*

Chairman Mao's Masterplan

Written by Marina Popcov

Ally Cambridge University Press: USA

Harding, H. (1987) *China's Second Revolution Reform after Mao* The Brookings Institution: Washington

Jian, C. (2001) *Mao's China and the Cold War* University of North Carolina Press: London p. 238 -277

Morgenthau, H. (1985) 6th edition *Politics Among Nations*, McGraw-Hill: New York

Scott, D. (2007) *China Stands Up – The PRC and the International System* Routledge: New York p. 69-76

Short, P. (2007) *China – Mao Bloody Revolution Revealed* BBC Documentary: UK

Strange, S. (1994) *States and Markets* Continuum: New York

Terrill, R. (Autumn 2005) "What does China want?" *Wilson Quarterly*

United Nations Development Program (1994) *Human Development Report* Oxford University Press: New York

Xia, Y. (Fall 2006) "China's Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969–February 1972," *Journal of Cold War Studies* Vol. 8, No. 4, Pages 3-28

Yaqing, Q. (2003) "National, Identity, Strategic Culture and Security interests: Three hypotheses on the Interaction between China and the international Society" *SIIS Journal* No. 2,

Yahuda, M. B. (1978) *China's Role in World Affairs* Croom Helm: London p. 212-231

—

Written by: Marina Popcov
Written at: Royal Holloway University of London
Written for: Michael Williams
Date written: March/2011