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Chou En-lai's Statecraft in Sino-American Rapprochement

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Chou En-lai's Statecraft in Sino-American Rapprochement

Chou En-lai's role in initiating diplomatic contact with the U.S. is widely regarded, particularly in the West, as the crowning achievement of his five decades of leadership and statecraft. Chou was unique in Chinese internal and foreign policy annals, at times eclipsing even Mao Tse-tung as the architect of policies to relate China's revolution to the rest of the world. He was a superb tactician, perhaps even more than a grand strategist. The opening to Washington was largely a tactical move at the time it was accomplished -- a means rather than an end in itself -- despite Chou's efforts over several decades to hold out a hand to America. The timing of this event for Chou was compelled equally by Soviet military pressure and China's internal leadership struggle following the Cultural Revolution, including Lin Piao's pro-Soviet leaning. Henry Kissinger recalls that he and Chou were brought together by "necessity." This conclusion was long in coming to both sides. But when the meeting of minds finally happened, the new grand strategy of "triangular diplomacy" among the U.S., the Soviet Union and China came into full bloom.

The Chou-Kissinger dialogue is a salient example of statecraft and negotiating skills because two remarkably different nations found common ground in a dramatic gesture. The process readjusted world perception of the balance of power in a manner that provided new options to seek peace and stability. Even the Soviet Union could not have been completely unhappy with the outcome, which facilitated improved U.S.-Soviet relations and the summit meeting sought by Moscow. The new Sino-U.S. ties enabled an adjustment in American strategic posture in Asia and eventually helped to reduce Sino-Soviet nuclear tensions. Moscow was temporarily upstaged, but still had top billing.

Kissinger's account of the dramatic events of 1971 is largely a European balance of power interpretation reflecting the geostrategic approach he sought to incorporate into American policy formulation. Limited English language accounts of Chou En-lai's personal perspective indicate that while balance of power was a central Chinese concern, there were also pressing internal political and ideological reasons for readjusting the Middle Kingdom's relationships with the rest of the world. In this, Chou's priorities differed somewhat from Kissinger's. Chou and the Kissinger-Nixon team were grand strategists with the requisite perspective and vision to recognize potential benefits a dialogue would spawn for their respective policies at home and abroad, although neither side wished to appear the supplicant. Kissinger's memoirs note "the necessities that had brought us together would set the direction of our future relationship, provided neither side asked the other to do what its values or interests prohibited." In this respect, at least, the U.S. and China finally met as equals.

Kissinger's 'scope paper' outlined perceived Chinese objectives in initiating a dialogue. The ultimate success of their negotiations implies Chou shared Kissinger's overall assessment of Beijing's foreign policy objectives in opening a dialogue, which were: to enhance China's international standing and undercut Taiwan; present Moscow with new diplomatic complexities; counter Soviet forces along the border and preempt a Soviet attack; prevent a U.S.-Soviet condominium against China; achieve American withdrawal from Vietnam; and to guide U.S. relations with Tokyo toward reducing the competition and threat to Chinese interests from Japan. As they moved toward talks, countering Soviet advances in South Asia became a pressing common issue.

Internationally, China remained isolated from the international fora in which it sought a major power role. Mao, Chou and other leaders saw China encircled by a hostile Soviet Union and its satellites to the north and southwest, and a string of American allies to the west, east and southeast. The Sino-Soviet ideological leadership struggle resulted in deterioration of intra-communist relations and world scrutiny of their differences, which the U.S. sought to exploit. Some accommodation of China in international affairs was necessary because of its entry into the nuclear weapons club and the danger that Sino-Soviet hostilities might escalate to a nuclear exchange.

Internally, China was still reeling from the disasterous Cultural Revolution and ensuing self-imposed isolation which had devastated Beijing's foreign policy credibility. Mao, Chou and other revolutionary leaders were getting old. Their revolution successful, they now faced the difficult problem, as Kissinger put it, of preserving "ideological faith" for the next generation. This was one of Chou's top priorities, which required maintaining ideological consistency while negotiating with Kissinger. A United Nations seat -- which the U.S. tried to deny -- would strengthen validity of the Chinese revolution and bolster its oft-troubled foreign policy, particularly in the Third World. Simultaneously, of course, it would increase U.S. foreign policy options and ways to put pressure on Moscow. Kissinger understatedly termed ties with China as an "advantageous new turn" in international relations.

China and America had been unlikely ideological enemies for two decades, but academic and commercial pressures for rapprochement were growing. Kissinger (and others) saw a "moral and political obligation to strive for coexistence if it was possible," given the threat of thermonuclear war. Chou

and Kissinger both had identified new policy opportunities and implications for thorny issues like Vietnam and Taiwan via rapprochement. Focussed by a "common perceived danger" from Moscow, the innovative challenge was to find a way to play the 'China card' to their mutual advantage. In retrospect, it was fortunate that Kissinger and Chou shared the grand strategy perspective and interpersonal skills necessary to the task at the same time that U.S.-Soviet detente was underway. In strict balance of power terms, China and America both won and Russia lost. In the broader game of world strategy, it proved to be a wise and ultimately a stabilizing move.

Kissinger credits Nixon with the strategic vision to end China's isolation because it was one of the "five great economic superpowers" (with the U.S., U.S.S.R., Western Europe, and Japan). This assessment, reminiscent of George Kennan's world view, virtually dictated that Nixon would be receptive to China's overtures -- which he encouraged. Nixon still saw the United States locked in sustained conflict with the Soviet Union and world communism, including China. But he recognized an exploitable pattern of Chinese behavior beginning with the Sino-Soviet split and moving toward broader ideological, nationalistic, operational and tactical differences between the two communist giants, along with relative moderation in China's actions and rhetoric. China's continued isolation could only serve to complicate the world equation for the U.S., probably to its detriment. As an immediate priority, Nixon and Kissinger sought to disengage the U.S. from the quagmire of Vietnam, but in a way that made clear the U.S. retained vital interests in Asia and would continue to be a player, including upholding security commitments to Japan, Korea, the Philippines and Thailand. These objectives meshed nicely with China's security concerns and Chou's priority for some maneuvering room with Moscow. As secret negotiations to start the talks progressed, the situation in East Pakistan exploded and drew Indo-Soviet relations unexpectedly into the middle of the equation.

As China's Foreign Minister from 1949 to 1957 and principal statesman until his death in 1976, Chou steadfastly advanced Mao Tse-tung's foreign policy principles of proletarian internationalism, or support for the struggle and unity of the oppressed. His principal foreign policy instrument had been to champion people-to-people international relations based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence (mutual respect for integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence). Diplomatic relations with the U.S. had to be achieved in a manner consistent with these principles in Chinese eyes or else would risk negating decades of revolutionary struggle and open divisive strife at home. Chou had long criticized the U.S. for being unwilling to make concessions (principally on the Taiwan issue). The diplomatic breakthrough in 1971 was possible because of strategic tension among China, Russia and the U.S., but it would have failed or been further delayed had Kissinger and Chou not been able to agree on language which was ideologically acceptable to both sides. Chou also saw an opportunity to put aside the Taiwan issue in order to gain immediate strategic benefit. This success was repeated in 1972 with his acceptance of the artful language on Taiwan that birthed the Shanghai Communique.

Few texts are available in English from which to divine firsthand Chou En-lai's personal view of why China should seek ties with America at this juncture, but clearly that became his plan of action. His main tool to enhance China's security and international position was to be the United States. While his strategic assessment closely paralleled Kissinger's, China was under more immediate military and political pressure to act. Like Kissinger, many diplomatic histories stress a triangular balance of power interpretation of Chou's motives. Robert Scalapino, for example, explained that "In its essence, the new Chinese policy relies on a balance of power in which American strength [in the Pacific-Asian area] is a central assumption."

Several accounts suggest Chou was motivated equally by the anticipated benefits of normalization for internal politics and the leadership succession question, which he did not want to see resolved in favor of a pro-Russian successor to Mao such as Lin Piao. It was critical at this juncture and a top priority for Chou to demonstrate that their revolution had succeeded and that China had achieved world power status. However, balancing the persistent Soviet influence in Chinese internal affairs was equally important. In 1973, Scalapino argued that "the primary concern of men like Mao and Chou today is not the threat of imminent war, but the possibility -- indeed the inevitability -- of the reemergence of the Russian issue in domestic Chinese politics." On the other extreme, Chou equally feared Soviet-U.S. collusion. Not wanting the Soviets on either the Chinese or American sides, Chou was driven toward a triangular balance of power view that required Sino-American cooperation.

Chinese communist ideology was an integral factor in Chou's assessment of the situation in 1971, arguably with restrictive implications for his plan of action. As Scalapino noted, ideology affects fundamental matters including "the patterns of logic and reasoning that are applied to the construction and defense of foreign policy." Beyond concern about Soviet military threats, Chou had to uphold communist principles in the third world and act in a manner consistent with revolutionary ideology. Chinese national interests, in Chou's view, required the ability to act and be respected by both the U.S. and Russia. This was Chou's ultimate objective after reducing the risk of armed conflict.

Kissinger notes Chou's ideological dilemma: "For the Chinese, [our arrival] had to be a personal, intellectual and emotional crisis." China was "acting out an encounter of philosophical contradictions" by conferring with an old enemy with troops still fighting with Vietnam on China's border. Kissinger noted a "moral ambivalence," "occasional schizophrenia," and a

"jagged rhythm" on the Chinese side, but praised Chou's inner serenity which enabled him to handle the difficult task. While the mechanics of the negotiations and subsequent public handling of the meeting may have been difficult for Chou, the talks nonetheless culminated a frustrated lifetime of seeking some form of accommodation with and acceptance by America. The talks were a great personal victory for Chou, who was China's leading pragmatist long before Teng Hsiao-ping commented on the color of cats. Chou had at last caught his mouse, and may indeed have felt somewhat ambivalent about it.

As for "philosophical contradictions," Chou could not afford them any more than Nixon could afford to be seen as growing soft in his anti-communism. Defending the announced decision to meet Nixon as consistent with China's revolutionary objectives, Chou said (William Hinton's quotations are approximate), "Holding talks is struggle. Not holding talks is also struggle." China's policy was "to continue to struggle and to negotiate at the same time." Citing China's willingness to talk with opponents in Taiwan, Moscow, and during the Korean war, Chou said of Nixon's upcoming visit, "Even when Sino-U.S. talks reach the level of heads of state we will never bargain away principles, sell out our friends, or sell out the people of the world. We will not deceive you in this matter. If our friends do not understand this it is because they don't know our history and they don't understand Mao Tse-tung's policy." One commentary on this speech concluded, "Having made clear that negotiations are an aspect of struggle, Chou En-lai went on to demonstrate that China was prepared to defend itself and was thus in a position to negotiate as an equal with the United States, the Soviet Union, or any other country." 1 Chou's emphasis on an ideologically-defensible position reflects the necessity for caution amidst the tense internal situation and leadership struggle which ensued after Lin Biao's death. It also reflects the tactical necessity of using correct revolutionary rhetoric, traditionally an inhibiting factor in negotiations, especially with the U.S.

Accounts of the Kissinger-Chou meetings are exciting history and instructive examples of how to use the tool of negotiation. Arguably, the most important lesson for contemporary American statesmen is to recognize that when strong, visionary leaders are prepared to take a fresh look at how they define their national and common interests, virtually anything can happen. In 1971, two apparent enemies from divergent cultures but facing a common foe independently concluded that to engage in talks would not undermine the ideological strength of either and could yield benefits for both. They proceed boldly and were successful in what history relates as an epic meeting of minds. Today, as we again seek to bridge a great divide with China, the lesson from 1971 is that by identifying mutual interests and squarely facing differences, we can continue to work together without compromising basic principles on either side.

Beyond serving as one of the classic twentieth century examples of geostrategic balance of power analysis, accounts of the Chou-Kissinger talks contain several instructive points for the study of statecraft as a practitioner's art. Foremost is the importance of understanding the opponent's position and reaching a mutual assessment of what each side might get out of the talks. Abundantly clear is that personalities play a dominant role in negotiations and implementing foreign policy. Whether an issue is driven by 'balance of power' or 'international interdependence' considerations, inevitably it will have wide-ranging implications, both anticipated and unforeseen, for other national interests in diverse spheres. Good statecraft is a balancing act with new factors constantly being introduced as a situation evolves. Flexibility is required, but accommodating to new situations must be done in a manner consistent with one's principles or else the policy will fail from within.

The essence of a being great statesman (or great strategic thinker or influential commentator) as exhibited by Chou and Kissinger lies primarily in the ability to understand the interrelationship of events and to see the potential for even unlikely new developments to shape the future. It is equally important to foresee implications of actions to ensure that pursuing a policy does not lead to unwanted consequences. Grand strategy requires articulation within some intellectual or conceptual framework before it can influence the thinking and decision-making of world leaders, including one's opponents. In the contemporary world, ideas must also be defended or at least made palatable to public opinion and internal politics. Nevertheless -- and in spite of our passion for public scrutiny of foreign policy -- the total secrecy in which the Chou-Kissinger talks were conducted without question was the single most important diplomatic tool employed by both sides apart from the extraordinary complementary personalities of the two statesmen. Secrecy and the candor it encouraged permitted Chou and Kissinger to examine openly the full extent of their differences and options, then to proceed on the basis of the consensus and compromise they had achieved.

Even though Kissinger's trip was kept secret (even from the State Department), news of Nixon's planned trip was well received by the historically pro-Chinese American public. An important part of statecraft is to know what will sell at home. Americans welcomed -- some groups had actively campaigned for -- improved ties with China despite its communist government. China was generally seen as less threatening to U.S. interests than Moscow. Besides, China was a widely regarded (incorrectly, time has shown) as a huge potential market for U.S. goods. Public opinion in China also mattered, but not as much as the implications of the news for China's leadership cliques. Chou had to prepare the ground carefully at home, particularly in ideological terms, in order to gain support for his initiative.

Balance of power is an outwardly simple but frustratingly complex analytic tool. While it is most frequently cast in terms of playing off the military capabilities of one nation or coalition against others, arriving at the tactics by which such advantage can be realized involves complex and progressive analysis of intertwined domestic and international factors which remain constantly in flux. The hallmark of a grand strategist is the ability to analyze a situation, conceptualize where to go and how to proceed, and to guide negotiations and actions while garnering public support along the way. Each generation produces only a handful of individuals with the ability to perform successfully in all these areas. Chou En-lai, who throughout his distinguished career never completely held back the hand of friendship to the West, was a consummate, world-class grand strategist. He never lost sight of Chinese objectives, was true to his ideology and principles, but remained carefully attuned to the art of compromise. Most important of all, he was willing to talk to his opponent.

Today, Chinese and American political systems and national values remain as diverse and potentially adversarial as they were when Henry Kissinger and Chou En-lai met. Failure to talk deprives each side of valuable options and may lead to unnecessary conflict. The most important national interest, which must constantly be defended in our current interdependent world, is the ability to keep open lines of communication with all nations. We ignore this principle, for example with Libya, at our own risk. It is seldom a sign of weakness, nor is it necessary to abandon one's principles in order to engage in a dialogue. Failure to do so simply eliminates the one peaceful option which lies at the heart, if not the very soul, of diplomacy and statecraft.

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