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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

CHINA'S GRAND STRATEGY AND THE STATECRAFT OF ZHOU ENLAI

CORE COURSE ONE ESSAY

WANDA L NESBITT/ CLASS OF 1997
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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE **1997**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-1997 to 00-00-1997**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **China's Grand Strategy and the Statecraft of Zhou EnLai**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT **see report**		
15. SUBJECT TERMS		

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**		**10**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

China's Grand Strategy and the Statecraft of Zhou Enlai

Overview

Communist China's decision to initiate a dialogue with the capitalist, imperialist United States led to the watershed visit to Beijing of President Nixon and changed the dynamics of international politics Zhou Enlai, the statesman entrusted by Chairman Mao with carrying out this extraordinary reversal, guided a risky venture to solid success by employing a strategy which focused on the geopolitical factors pushing the two nations together rather than on the differences separating them Patient, careful diplomacy was the key to Zhou's success in this endeavor, but equally important was his (and Mao's) ability to assess the world in realist terms and craft means of both deterring the threats they perceived and advancing China's overall interests. This paper examines why Chinese leaders decided to end their nation's isolation from the West, the strategy they designed to achieve this goal and the successful methods used to carry it out

Context

Several key developments in the late 1960's persuaded Mao and Zhou that China s self-imposed isolation was no longer a viable policy The first, and most important, was the Soveiet Union's adoption of an increasingly aggressive posture The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the promulgation of the Brezhnev doctrine which "asserted Moscow's right to intervene in Communist countries whose policies deviated from Kremlin standards"[1] convinced the Chinese that the Russians could contemplate an attack on China In March of the following year, the long-standing territorial dispute between China and the Soviet Union escalated when troops stationed along the border clashed This was followed by a "Soviet diplomatic offensive calling for the establishment of a 'system of collective security in Asia' which the Chinese interpreted as a move to

[1] Stanley Karnow *Mao and China A Legacy of Turmoil* 3d ed (New York Penguin Books 1990) p 448

isolate them [2] These events, combined with Soviet actions in Cuba, Africa and elsewhere, heightened Beijing's anxiety about Soviet intentions Furthermore, any ideological symmetry that had once existed was erased by Moscow's inability to tolerate different interpretations of socialist theory The Chinese openly criticized the Soviets for engaging in socialist imperialism and rejected Moscow's theories of 'limited sovereignty', 'international dictatorships' and 'socialist community' [3]

The second factor was China's perception that the United States in the late 60's was losing its dominant position in the world Ronald Keith writes that "Mao and Zhou were fascinated by the growing internal and external contradictions affecting American politics" and cites developments such as the anti-Vietnam war movement, the civil rights movement, and the decline of the dollar as indications that the U S would not be able to sustain its heavy overseas commitments [4] Mao and Zhou were aware of U S efforts to extricate itself militarily from Southeast Asia and were concerned that forces more hostile to China than the U S , either the Soviet Union or a resugent Japan, might fill the resulting power vacuum (The Chinese worried that Japanese militarism was being revived and that Nixon's policies could "generate an insecurity in Japanese society that might feed traditional ultra-nationalism "[5])

The third factor was an implicit recognition of China's military weakness Zhou repeatedly asserted China's rejection of superpower status on ideological grounds, but as Henry Kissinger notes, "It was both true and prudent China needed us precisely because it did not have the strength to balance the Soviet Union by itself "[6] By the same token, China's weak military position made a

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[2] Ronald C Keith *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai* (New York St Martin s Press 1989) pp 187-188
[3] Ibid
[4] Ibid p 186
[5] Ibid p 192
[6] Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston Little Brown, 1979) p 749

U S -Soviet 'condominium' its ultimate nightmare Talk of detente between the U S and Russia only served to fuel Chinese concerns

In sum. Mao and Zhou saw the world balance of power shifting in favor of an increasingly hostile Soviet Union which they could not independently deter. U.S -Soviet collusion could not be ruled out. In this light, isolation no longer seemed sensible

China's Interests and Goals

The People's Republic of China had existed for less than 25 years in 1970 and Chairman Mao was still in the process of consolidating control It is understandable that Mao and Zhou 's primary interest and first priority was the survival of the Chinese state, or in Mao's terms, maintaining China's unity and independence Indeed, 'independence and self-reliance' seems to have been the mantra of Zhou's generation But these concepts encompassed more than mere survival Independence meant both freedom from physical domination by outsiders, and independence in political thought and action, such as interpreting and applying socialist ideology Self-reliance referred primarily to basic national defense but could also be used to justify non-involvement in conflicts outside China While world revolution and the eventual triumph of socialist ideas were often referred to, these were understood to be goals requiring hundreds, if not thousands, of years to achieve

Mao and Zhou determined that Soviet ambitions were the greatest threat to China's independence Although Foreign Minister Zhou took steps to keep relations with the Soviet Union under control, reliance on Soviet goodwill would have been naive To maintain independence and unity, they would need friends with strong military capabilities Isolation could not accomplish this The United States, Russia s nemesis, was the obvious choice and the election of Richard Nixon gave the Chinese an opportunity which they seized Henry Kissinger writes that ' Mao and

Chou openly expressed their preference for Richard Nixon over the wayward representatives of American liberalism",[7] and Mao is reported to have told a U S Senator that he had been impresed with Nixon's 1967 article in *Foreign Affairs* in which Nixon had "dropped his previous insistence on the domino theory and emphasised the need for 'patience born of realism' in understanding the importance of China's future role in world affairs" [8] Mao and Zhou gambled that this American administration would be less antagonistic to China and offered high-level talks

Closer ties with the U S , if achieved, offered the best guarantee against Soviet aggression Chinese goals were clearly understood by Kissinger who wrote "The Chinese want to relieve themselves of the threat of a two front war, introduce new calculations in Moscow about attacking or leaning on the PRC, and perhaps make the USSR more pliable in its dealings with Peking Specifically, from us they want assurances against U.S -USSR collusion" [9] In addition, the mere fact of U S -China talks was bound to cause a stir in Taiwan and force the Nationalists to reassess their position Finally, despite Zhou's rejection of superpower status, success would clearly boost China's prestige and international standing, and add credence to China's claims to represent the Third World Thus the potential gains were extremely high

The proposed course of action was not without risk, however. China's allies, notably North Vietnam and North Korea could be expected to feel betrayed by the move and see it as an abandonment of China's 'solidarity' with the Third World China ran the risk of finding itself isolated from the socialist world and dependent on the goodwill of the United States Such an outcome would surely have grave consequences for Chinese hopes of regaining Taiwan If

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[7] Ibid p 1089
[8] Keith *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai* p 190
[9] Kissinger *White House Years* p 765

publicly rebuffed by the U S . China might find itself estranged from socialist friends and at the mercy of the USSR

While it is difficult to evaluate domestic factors, Mao and Zhou must have anticipated some opposition, given the Chinese Communists' long history of denouncing the U S for imperialistic motives and behavior, and the emphasis their ideology placed on the class struggle against capitalism The fact that Zhou had recently survived the Cultural Revolution, however, suggests that his star was high, at least for the moment Zhou and Mao evidently calculated that they could thwart whatever domestic opposition arose That they expected some criticism is evident in the justification provided to Chinese Communist party officials for the invitation to President Nixon It cited "Mao's united front writing 'On Policy' that required both unity and independence, and distinctions made between the primary enemy and secondary enemy, and between the temporary allies and indirect allies" [10] This was Mao's "flexible application of principle" policy which, in esence, permitted him to determine when and how to apply socialist ideology and what actions did or did not comport with doctrine

It seems clear that Mao and Zhou carefully considered the pros and cons of an approach to the U S , determined that the potential benefits outweighed the potential losses, and planned means of diluting the anticipated criticism Nevertheless, Zhou had a formidable task as he entered into negotiations with Henry Kissinger For the negotiations to be successful from a Chinese persepective, the outcome would have to be one that 1)ended China's isolation without compromising its independence. 2) identified Soviet aggression as the threat, but did not ignore U S imperialism, 3) allowed for cooperation with the U S without betraying the Third World , 4) upheld China's ideological principles, and 5) did not undermine China's claim to Taiwan

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[10] Keith *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai* p 198

Zhou's Statecraft

Once secret talks were agreed to, personal diplomacy was virtually the only tool Zhou could employ to achieve China's objectives From all indications he was a master of the art. He succeeded in impressing Kissinger, the professor, at their first meeting in July, 1971 by displaying a wealth of knowledge about the American delegation and statements made by the American President, and a keen understanding of the state of world affairs. His willingness to engage in uninterrupted and lengthy discussions with Kissinger indicated the importance the Chinese attached to this endeavor and the respect they held for U S power Zhou's focus on global issues signalled that China's interest was not in resolving areas of disagreement, but in identifying areas where the two could work together. It was fortuitous that Kissinger agreed with and accepted this approach. He writes "Chou and I had both reached the conclusion that the most important result of this first encounter would be comprehension by each side of the fundamental purposes of the other And if we had judged correctly, the necessities that had brought us together would set the direction for our future relationship, provided that neither side asked the other to do what its values or interest prohibited" [11]

Through small but important symbolic gestures, such as offering Kissinger his copy of some Nixon remarks and feigning ignorance of secret U S -North Vietnamese negotiations, Zhou convinced Kissinger that Zhou was a sensitive observer and worthy interlocutor The Chinese negotiating style of quickly arriving at their key positions and then staunchly defending them also commanded Kissinger's respect This approach appears to have advanced Chinese goals by forcing the Americans to consider and accept at least some of their opponent's argument Zhou's tactic of

[11] Kissinger *White House years* p 748

alternating hardline arguments with softer, more reasonable positions helped him gauge the limits within which he could work, and reminded the Americans that he, too, had a domestic audience to satisfy The overall result was to establish the Chinese as equals whose needs had to be respected

Zhou and Mao were sufficiently satisfied with the results of the secret meeting to proceed with the invitation to President Nixon to visit Beijing. Moscow's reaction was a sign that the strategy was having the intended effect A statement published in *Pravda* saying that " . It goes without saying that any designs to use the contacts between Peking and Washington for some "pressure" on the Soviet Union, on the states of the Socialist community, are nothing but the result of a loss of touch with reality"[12] rang hollow Subsequent Soviet actions confirmed their concern. They began almost immediately to exert pressure on the Pakistani government (which had served as China's intermediary with the U S) by concluding a treaty of friendship with India. Later that same summer, they undertook a "war of nerves" with Romania, whose leader also openly supported the Chinese

The Shanghai Communique, which was the culmination of Zhou and Kissinger's talks was, however, the best reflection of Zhou's success Since Zhou had established himself with Kissinger as an astute intellectual, the American could not reject out of hand the unorthodox format Zhou proposed and which forthrightly identified differences between the U S and Chinese positions. Kissinger notes "At first I was taken aback But as I reflected further I began to see that the very novelty of the approach might resolve our perplexities A statement of differences would reassure allies and friends that their interests had been defended. ." This was a critical success for Zhou since this format allowed him to resolve the dilemmas he had faced on entering the negotiations In the process of negotiating this document, Zhou and Kissinger were able to clarify and understand

[12] Ibid p 766

their respective positions and thereby gain clear recognition of each other's limits Mao and Nixon, when they finally met in February of 1972 could confidently sign the document and defend it to key constituencies Kissinger's neutral formula on Taiwan, which he notes particularly pleased Zhou, was probably more than Zhou expected because in failing to explicitly support Taiwan's claim, it could be interpreted as a move towards the PRC position The Communique, in citing opposition to hegemony, was clearly directed at the Soviet Union, but gave China the flexibility to claim opposition to hegemonism by either the U S. or the USSR It allowed China to 'keep face' with its allies and supporters, and may have even advanced China's position with regard to Taiwan.

Conclusions

Mao and Zhou achieved their goals because they made clear, accurate judgments about the world balance of power and took the actions the situation dictated, without sentimentality They did not allow the obvious ideological differences to blind them to the possibility of common interests Instead, they found - or created - the flexibility within their ideology to justify their actions Zhou used diplomatic skills to offset China's military weakness The Chinese were lucky in having realists like Nixon and Kissinger as their counterparts, but they recognized and took advantage of the opportunity

It is difficult to find fault with the strategy Zhou pursued, because it was so successful It did fail, however, to anticipate that a rapprochement with the U S. would inevitably increase contacts between the two nations which were bound to expose weaknesses in the Chinese system They also may have failed to realize that acknowledging a need for political cooperation with the U S would inevitably lead to economic cooperation and the further intrusion of capitalist ideas Nevertheless, they left their successors with a China that was intact and in a stronger international position

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