

# Why was China Receptive to American Overtures during the Early 1970s?

Written by Bleddyn E. Bowen

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BLEDDYN E. BOWEN, MAR 11 2010

Since Mao Zedong took power in 1949, and before rapprochement began in the late 1960s, there had existed little to no diplomatic contact between China and the USA. Beginning in the late 1960s, the trend towards US-Chinese rapprochement was a slow and tentative process on both sides. A long series of communiqués and informal meetings culminated in Nixon's Presidential visit to China in 1972, and subsequently by 1979 the 'normalisation' of US-Chinese relations. The transformation of policy on both sides of the Pacific was to spin China's foreign policy by '180 degrees'. [1] The USA was to turn a 'red menace' into a 'tacit ally'. [2]

As the title warrants, this essay will be concerned with possible Chinese motives for accepting, responding to, and reciprocating American overtures and relatively friendly diplomatic moves. This author believes that the strategic understandings of Chinese motives carry the greatest weight and the more persuasive argument, which will be elaborated upon below. China faced a changing security situation in the 1960s and in that context an improvement in American relations seemed most useful to China. This essay will include one main counter-argument to this compelling view. That is Chen Jian's emphasis on Mao's ideology, namely the effect of the Cultural Revolution on foreign policy and security planning. [3] This argument is thoroughly discussed (and criticised) in Khoo's 2005 *Cold War History* article. [4] Unlike Khoo's article, this essay will not discuss Evelyn Goh's constructivist argument in as great a detail because it is criticised for not dealing with Chinese motives enough. [5] Following a short explanation of the two views below, I will bring the two under the same umbrella. The two views are not mutually exclusive. Rather than agree with Chien's view that the ideological split precipitated rapprochement with the US, this author believes that strategic interests were the priority, and Mao had to justify his turnaround in policy within communist ideology terms to safeguard his seat and legitimise his rule.

To clarify, the major competing views of the argument are thus:

- **Strategic Reasoning:** Mao pursued American rapprochement after 1968 due to the increasing division, distrust, clashes, mutual fear and strategic concerns between China and the Soviet Union. The transformation from an ideological split to a strategic one with the USSR served as the main impetus for Mao to court the USA.
- **Ideological Reasoning:** Mao pursued American rapprochement after 1968 because his status as a revolutionary was fading and needed to legitimise his control through continuous ideological battle with the Soviet Union, even at the cost of employing the help of another 'barbarian'. Mao's ideological reasoning paved the way for rapprochement with the US.

### The Strategic Reasoning

The strategic/geopolitical argument is a very simple, yet compelling, one. Its simplicity does not mitigate its validity. In August 1968 the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia to halt liberal reforms and a divergence in Moscow's communism. This event has been cited as the catalyst for Chinese motives to seek rapprochement with the Americans. [6] Having seen another communist state being invaded by (effectively) Moscow to safeguard what it considered as socialism had raised fears in Beijing of something similar happening to them. This fear was not

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unfounded, since Moscow's criticisms of Beijing had been sharper than they were towards Prague.[7] Beijing had raised sharp criticisms of Moscow in return, on its "armed aggression and military occupation" by the "Soviet revisionist renegade clique".[8] The Brezhnev Doctrine made a mockery of the sovereignty of the Warsaw Pact states, and to a greater extent all communist states (except for Moscow's own sovereignty of course). This included China, which began labelling the USSR as a 'socialist-imperialist' state.[9] Underlying the ideology, the strategic implications of this doctrine was clear. Moscow sought to make its will absolute and final on other states. Having been exploited by the Western colonial imperialists for over one hundred years, it is understandable that Mao was not intending to surrender Beijing's sovereignty to Moscow. Combine the troop and war materiel build-up on the Soviet-Chinese border regions since 1966,[10] the Czechoslovak incident, the border clashes near Soviet railheads[11] and Zhenbou Island, there is little surprise these lead to a large feeling of distrust, fear and uncertainty. Faced with an acute security dilemma,[12] it is no surprise that Mao could have feared a Soviet incursion, and interpreted Soviet action as offensive in nature. Indeed, the fears that led to the call for the Chinese people to "dig tunnels and store grain" was not unfounded.[13] Rapprochement with the USA to a satisfactory level could ease Chinese concerns in its coastal regions – a softer US approach to China could quell much of the 'sustained military standoff' on its coast in regard to the US's allies in the region.[14] Also worthy of noting is China's strategic position with India. After the war in 1962 India would continue to prove a potential threat[15].

## The Ideological Reasoning

Chen Jian portrays the strategic argument as *part* of the reasoning behind Mao's decisions in this matter[16]. He maintains that understanding the ideological aspect of Mao's reasoning would make 'better sense' of his strategic decisions. Jian states that Mao's rapprochement was occurring during a time when he was radically changing China's definition of imperialism, then labelling the USSR as a socialist imperialist state. His second point is that Mao had staged subtle 'structural' changes in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideology. According to Jian, Mao's changing of the definition of imperialism didn't change to simply justify altering external relations, but was a consequence of the Cultural Revolution. Mao desired to prevent a Soviet-style "capitalist restoration" which required ideologically targeting the USSR. With the fading Cultural Revolution Mao sought to tighten his domestic control.[17] It could be that Mao's desire to alter Chinese society further demanded calmer international surroundings, and in this context rapprochement with the US indeed was a logical choice. Mao seemed to have attributed an 'ideological fundamentalism' vis-à-vis the USSR, as it had mutually done with the USA.[18]

## Strategic Rebuttal of Ideological Reasoning

However, Khoo writes a compelling rebuttal to Jian's argument. The most compelling logic in his argument is that 'only when the Soviet Union became a strategic... threat did the Chinese communists consider the Soviets to be their number one adversary'.[19] Khoo states that the Chinese had viewed the Soviets as imperialists since the early 1960s. To this author it seems that the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the announcement of the Brezhnev Doctrine became the physical reality of the ideological split. Before it had remained purely rhetorical, then the Soviet Union was *acting* in a perceived offensive manner, new strategic realities emerged that threatened Chinese sovereignty.

## Strategic, Structural and Psychological Superiority

This author believes that this strategic-oriented rebuttal of Jian's ideology-oriented reasoning is very convincing. Evidence clearly shows that the Soviet positions and behaviour on the Chinese border, including positions in Mongolia,[20] were intimidating. This is by no means absolving Chinese behaviour of being completely inoffensive in nature (by accident or design). What is important in this context is how the Chinese perceived and interpreted Soviet actions, which this author believes is important to understand the security dilemma (in Booth and Wheeler's above definition) Mao faced. Unresolvable uncertainty[21] and the 'other minds problem'[22] had become increasingly acute. To further illustrate the point, the Soviets were so concerned about the Chinese problem that a question was asked of the US leadership relating to their reaction to a nuclear strike on China.[23] While it is uncertain if Mao ever knew of this Soviet consideration, it would be no surprise if Mao, being a perspicacious individual and possessing little naivety, had anticipated such planning from the Soviets. Concordantly, from a realist perspective, this strategic

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thinking retrospectively justifies Mao's pursuit of a Chinese nuclear deterrent. This is a clear indicator of how dysfunctional the two socialist giants had become, and their relationship had become a matter of satisfying their own security interests. This author believes that the ideological rhetoric had become a tool to justify the leaderships' actions to their populations.

To justify the previous statement, this author does not mean to denigrate the importance of ideology in domestic matters and the lens through which leaders and people view the world around them. Indeed, the Sino-Soviet split which (to this author) began as Khrushchev spoke of his "peaceful coexistence" with the United States was rooted in ideological differences. However, with Soviet fears of a Chinese leader of world socialism, it is easy to see security interests begin to take hold over ideological spats. Were the People's Republic of China to eclipse the USSR as the dominant and most formidable form of communism on Earth, it was reasonable to fear the loss of Moscow's influence on other socialist states. Mao certainly possessed the more popular version (relative to the minority coup in Russia in 1917 and the relatively more popular rising in China) and the more virulent[24]. What would the Warsaw Pact states think of a successful China? Would they prefer China and her relatively more popular form of communism over the installed communism dictated from Moscow? Strategically, potential Chinese allure could undermine the Soviet security equation.

According to Kissinger the border clashes (amongst other related factors) moved Nixon to endorse a 'triangle of relations'. [25] Khoo states that this is no surprise if the theory of structural realism is to be believed. [26] This strategic argument is further enhanced when considering neoclassical realism as Khoo describes it – the importance of state leaders and their perceptions. [27] This in turn lends itself to the security dilemma theory, the importance of the fear of uncertainty on the individual and how that individual would react to it. Ideology in this instance would have little bearing on Mao's response once his dilemma of interpretation had been solved. Mao's psychology would be a large factor in decision-making. This is not to absolve the USA of creating fear and uncertainty for Mao. While the United States performed in a similar function in Mao's security dilemma thinking, the USSR had given much more cause for alarm and suspecting malevolent intent. This overrides the ideological argument.

To illustrate this point, some speculation and counterfactual history is required. Although brief and perhaps simplistic, it is worthy of consideration. Ideology may have been the root cause of the Sino-Soviet split, but as aforementioned, only after dubious physical troop and materiel positioning by the Soviets did rapprochement with the US become a reality. If we were to reverse the Soviet troop deployments from the border regions and Mongolia, would there have been such an immediate impetus for Mao to connect with the Americans? Mao would not have been staring at the barrel of a cocked Soviet rifle. Mao would still be facing his 'fading revolution', and could still demonise the USSR for its Brezhnev Doctrine. Mao would have been able to concentrate on his domestic front rather than divert his attention and resources to the northern borders. The status quo could have persisted vis-à-vis the USA.

## Ideological Contradictions

Mao was no stranger to strategic necessities that would override ideological imperatives. Although he criticised Khrushchev for seeking "peaceful coexistence" with the USA on ideological grounds, Mao pursued effectively the same principle in the late 1960s and early 1970s. How can we account for this ideological double standard? This author believes that Mao saw the value and expediency in somewhat securing China's relations with the USA to concentrate on the larger threat from the Soviets. The USA would also prove to be a valuable economic opportunity. [28] Mao actively kept a strategic relationship with Pakistan to check Indian military preoccupations, especially after the war of 1962. China could not manage even a normal relationship with the strongest communist state in the world, yet it could work with an Islamic state. China's nuclear program was a strategic necessity after a consistent lack of Soviet commitment (both nuclear and conventional) to Chinese security during the several crises, such as the Quemoy-Matsu incidents and the Taiwan issue. The USA and rapprochement with it became yet another strategic necessity. Of course, as with everything in a state driven by ideology, it had to be justified in that ideology's terms. This author's assumption would lead that if ideology was a driving force in foreign policy, that state would align (or seek normal relations) with those states similar to itself because of a shared (or similar) world view. Of course, this was not the case.

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## Concluding Remarks

In conclusion this author believes he has only added to the strengths the strategic argument has over the explanation of Sino-US rapprochement in the early 1970s. Chen Jian is wholly correct in raising the issues of ideology when attempting to understand Mao's foreign policy thinking, as ideological fundamentalism frames the world in a specific view. However, underlying the ideological elements was the core necessity of security.

As for Jian's claim that understanding the ideological aspects would make 'better sense' of Mao's decisions, this author disagrees. The strategic point of view shows effective logic on Mao's answer to the Soviet problem. The understanding of the ideological reasoning is effective when understanding how Mao justified his change in policy and managed his domestic politics, for better or worse. The events of 1968 compelled Mao to act as he did.[29] When acting in solely ideological interests the logic is fraught with contradictions, akin to religions. Mao actively picked and selected from Marxism-Leninism to what better suited himself and his state. To a certain extent his adjusted ideological beliefs before and after the disastrous Cultural Revolution was designed to consolidate Mao's and his party's control. When asked in 1936 whether Chinese and Russian governments could merge to form a commune in the event of a communist victory, Mao reportedly replied feverously "We are not fighting for an emancipated China in order to turn the country over to Moscow!"[30] This nationalist outburst is in contradiction with Marx's views on nationalism. Mao had strong nationalistic tendencies, and was actively incorporating Chinese traditions and culture into his own communist dialectic.[31] Understanding Mao's nationalistic tendencies helps the strategic case of explaining rapprochement on the Chinese side. Nationalistic leaders tend to take courses of action that most benefits their nation-state.[32] Given the reasons above, this is exactly what Mao did, and what most leaders do when faced with the security dilemma and a lack of diplomatic solutions. Using triangular politics, Mao intended to use the USA as a counterweight against the greater and more prevalent Soviet threat, especially since the each side initiated rapprochement in a low-risk manner to each other.[33]

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[1] Holdridge, J.H. *Crossing the Divide: An Insider's Account of the Normalization of U.S.-China Relations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997) pp. 26

[2] Goh, E. *Constructing the US rapprochement with China, 1961-1974: From red menace to tacit ally* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) cited in: Khoo, N. (2005) 'Realism Redux: Investigating the Causes and Effects of Sino-US Rapprochement', *Cold War History*, 5:4 pp. 529-549

[3] Jian, C. *Mao's China and the Cold War* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) pp. 242-245

[4] Khoo, N. (2005) 'Realism Redux: Investigating the Causes and Effects of Sino-US Rapprochement', *Cold War History*, 5:4 pp. 529-549

[5] Khoo, N. (2005) 'Book Reviews' *International Affairs* 81:3 pp. 647-648

[6] Holdridge, J. *Crossing the Divide...* pp. 23

[7] Kissinger, H. A. *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1979) pp. 164-165

[8] Ibid., pp. 166

[9] Jian, C. *Mao's China...* pp. 242

[10] Kissinger, H. *The White House Years* pp. 167

[11] Ibid pp.177

[12] Booth, K. and Wheeler, N. *The Security Dilemma* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) pp. 4-5. Note Booth and Wheeler's definition of the security dilemma – a state's dilemma of interpretation posed by another state's actions and the dilemma of response to those actions.

[13] Holdridge, J. *Crossing the Divide...* pp. 26

[14] Jian, C. *Mao's China...* pp. 240

[15] Ibid.,

[16] Ibid., pp. 239

[17] Ibid., pp. 242-244

[18] Booth, K. and Wheeler, N. *The Security Dilemma...* pp. 64-67

[19] Khoo, N. 'Realism Redux...' pp. 538

[20] Kissinger, H. *The White House Years* pp.167

[21] Wheeler, N. and Booth, K. 'Minimum Deterrence and Nuclear Abolition', in R. Cowen-Karp (ed.) *Security Without Nuclear Weapons: Different Perspectives on Non-Nuclear Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for SIPRI, 1992) p. 250-280. Cited in Booth and Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma*, pp.5

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[22] Butterfield, H. *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951) pp.21

[23] Kissinger, H. *The White House Years* pp. 183

[24] Holdridge, J. *Crossing the Divide...* pp. 24. Holdridge notes Mao's acceptance that socialist revolution must accommodate to the particular circumstances of the target state. This author takes the term virulent in this context to mean the most exportable kind of revolution since it is allowed to adapt to local conditions.

[25] Kissinger, H. *The White House Years* pp. 165

[26] Khoo, N. 'Realsim Redux...' pp. 535-536

[27] Khoo, N. pp. 537

[28] Craig, C. and Logevall, F. *America's Cold War: The Politics of Insecurity* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009) pp. 265

[29] Burr, W. (2001) 'Sino-American relations, 1969: the Sino-Soviet border war and steps toward rapprochement', *Cold War History*, 1:3 pp. 76

[30] Schram, S.R. *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-Tung* (New York: Praeger, 1969) Cited in: Twitchett, D. and Fairbank, J.K. *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) Volume 15, pp. 54-55

[31] Twitchett, D. and Fairbank, J. K. *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) Volume 15, pp. 2

[32] Stalin and Trotsky had opposing interpretations of true communism, which ultimately was about the strategic direction of the USSR after Lenin's death.

[33] Burr, W. 'Sino-American relations, 1969...' pp. 78-79

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