

Chapter 5

China's Future Role in International Relations: A European View

JOACHIM GLAUBITZ

CHINA'S position within the international system has always been strongly influenced by its relationship with the two superpowers. For the first decade after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, she was allied to the Soviet Union, whereas the United States was considered the main threat to China's security. During the 1960s, Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, and Moscow and Beijing even clashed militarily along a disputed part of their common border. The second decade of the PRC's history was thus characterized by simultaneous confrontation with both superpowers.

With the beginning of the 1970s, China and the United States began to improve their relations. This fundamental change was followed by an improvement in China's relations with almost all allies of the United States. At the same time, however, China continued its anti-Soviet foreign policy; it even called for a united front against Soviet expansionism. This policy was slowly changed at the beginning of the 1980s when China abandoned its hostile attitude towards the Soviet Union and started regular consultations on the normalization of relations.

As a result, China at present has improved state-to-state relations with the Soviet Union as well as a considerable degree of cooperation in various fields with the United States. This situation,

however, should not be interpreted as a policy of equidistance between the superpowers. China's present position is obviously closer to the United States and the other industrialized democracies like Japan and the West European countries than it is to the Soviet Union.

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL MOTIVES BEHIND THE SINO-SOVIET RAPPROCHEMENT

China is engaged in an ambitious policy of modernization. In order to achieve the officially pronounced goal; namely, to quadruple the value of total industrial and agricultural output by the end of this century, it needs the full support and cooperation of the industrialized countries. It needs their technology, capital, and advice. As long as the modernization of the country continues to be the central objective of its policy, China will remain eager to cooperate with the highly developed countries of Western Europe, the United States, and Japan. With these countries China maintains the most extensive, but also increasingly asymmetrical, trade relations. Since autumn 1984, China's trade deficit has increased dramatically: out of a total trade volume of \$69.6 billion in 1985, the deficit reached \$14.9 billion. With Japan alone, the deficit soared to almost \$6 billion. Although this development will constrain the growth of China's trade with the leading industrial countries, the Chinese leaders are well aware that neither the Soviet Union nor its East European allies are able to replace the economic support of the non-socialist countries.

Expanded trade relations and a certain degree of technological cooperation with the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe nevertheless have attractions from the viewpoint of the economic development of the country. Trade with the Soviet Union emerged in 1985 as China's fastest growing trade relationship: the value of bilateral trade reached \$1.9 billion, 61 percent more than in 1984.¹ The Soviet Union has become an important trading partner for China since it needs just those products which China cannot sell in Western or Japanese markets, either because of low quality or trade barriers. Since these goods have to be paid for with Swiss Francs, China, in its trade with the USSR and East European countries, earns much needed foreign currency.

On the other hand, for China the Soviet Union is a major sup-

plier of steel, lumber, machinery, automobiles, and even aircraft. Soviet aircraft accounted for 19 of the 30 China imported in 1984.² In September 1986 it was agreed that 17 Chinese enterprises established in the 1950s with Soviet aid are to be modernized by the Soviet Union. In connection with this project, about 100 Soviet experts will return to China for the first time in 26 years.³

Economic and technological advantages are thus one reason why China has ended the stridently anti-Soviet policy pursued in the 1970s. There are, however, also important political motives that explain China's improved relations with the Soviet Union. One of these motives pertains to Eastern Europe, a second, to Indochina. In both areas the Soviet Union has vital interests.

THE EASTERN EUROPEAN CONNECTION

As long as China and the Soviet Union accused each other of betraying socialism, the East European countries had to support Soviet criticism of China. During the whole period of Sino-Soviet conflict, only Romania managed to maintain close relations with Beijing, even on a party-to-party level. Since the polemics have ceased and Sino-Soviet relations have begun to improve, however, the East European countries have also started to repair their relations with China. Their general position vis-à-vis China is even more favorable than that of the USSR: they do not have territorial disputes with China, nor are they rivals within the Communist world or in the Asia-Pacific region.

Beijing skillfully used this difference to improve its relations with the more important East European countries—Hungary, the GDR and Poland—faster than with Moscow. After having received numerous high-ranking officials from these countries during the last two years, in autumn 1986 (for the first time in three decades), two East European state and party leaders paid official visits to China: Poland's General Jaruzelski and East Germany's Erich Honecker. Although there was no formal statement about restoration of party-to-party relations, both Deng Xiaoping and his guest Honecker reportedly fully agreed that relations between their respective Communist parties did not need to be restored since they had never been interrupted. This proclaimed continuity in fact disguises a substan-

tial change: Sino-East European relations have thus reached a new quality.

This marked change has far-reaching implications in the realm of socialist ideology. China, which has discarded the Soviet socio-economic model, is pursuing bold economic reforms, and has started to discuss a reform of its political structure. It also maintains that the Chinese Communist party (CCP) "does not recognize any so-called leadership or guiding 'centre', or any ready-made 'model' in the international Communist movement. Neither at present nor in the future will our Party act as a 'centre' or create a 'model'. We maintain that only in this way can a new type of relationship between parties be established, characterized by independence and equality as mutual support on a completely voluntary basis."⁴ This position is in obvious contrast with that of the CPSU, which continues to consider itself an active "part of the international Communist movement" and claims to be regarded in practice as the leading communist power.⁵

There is another sensitive ideological area where China deviates from orthodox Soviet understanding of Marxism-Leninism. Although ruled by a communist party, China has explicitly abandoned the basic principle of the so-called partiality ("partinost" or "Parteilichkeit"). According to Communist party doctrine, "All questions of social life have to be approached from the standpoint of the interests of the working class, its struggle for the establishment and consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat . . ."⁶ China, however, characterizes a capitalist economy and society like that of Japan with remarkable objectivity: "The Japanese economy developed very quickly and the people's living standard rose rapidly. Japan's progressive taxation and wage system distribute the nation's wealth more evenly than in most Western countries. Now, most of the Japanese people are well provided for, and the new middle class, representing about 80 percent of the electorate, accepts the present political system in which a balance is maintained among the pivotal Liberal Democratic party and six other parties."⁷

This impartial approach to political phenomena has even become one of the principles of Chinese foreign policy. China charges both superpowers with their arms race and regional as well as global rivalry. The Soviet Union, however, refuses being criticized in the

same way as the "imperialist" United States. Vice Foreign Minister Qian Qichen replied to this: "Some people are critical of the Chinese approach, asserting that class concepts should be applied to each case. We do not agree to this point of view. In our view, whether a particular move or policy in a region is right or wrong cannot simply be determined by judging which social system and ideology the responsible party adheres to, but by judging if the action helps to ease international tension, maintain world peace and promote common prosperity."⁸

Subsequently, Premier Zhao Ziyang summarized this position: "China does not determine its closeness with, or estrangement from, other countries on the basis of their systems and ideologies."⁹ With these statements China implicitly denies the moral superiority of socialist countries. Consequently, Chinese analyses of international as well as of domestic affairs and—still more important—the decisions based upon those analyses are more in accord with China's national interest than with Marxism-Leninism.

The contrast of Chinese and Soviet views on the character of a communist party and its approaches to political problems gives the newly improved Sino-East European relationship a delicate political meaning. China encourages the self-confidence of East European countries by selecting their economies for careful studies. This is the case especially with Hungary, the GDR, and Yugoslavia. The East European countries, or at least some of them, might regard their regained relations with China as a chance to cautiously strengthen their ties with a socialist country which has begun to implement dramatic reforms in its economy and its social structure, calling the policy "socialism with Chinese characteristics." The obvious achievements of the Chinese reforms, which go far beyond what the Hungarians tried to do, implicitly tarnish the Soviet model of managing a socialist economy, foster discussions on different ways of practicing socialism, and strengthen the tendency towards greater national independence in East European countries.

Here Moscow faces a dilemma. Since it is strongly interested in a normalization of relations with Beijing, it has to refrain from openly opposing China's unorthodox views. Although it is too early to evaluate the influence China could exercise on political thinking in Eastern Europe, improved Sino-East European relations will probably not work in favor of Soviet interests in this region. China,

however, obviously favors regional diversity, which works against domination by the Superpowers.

THE SOUTHEAST ASIAN CONNECTION

The second political motive for China's decision to improve relations with the Soviet Union relates to Vietnam and its Soviet-backed policy in Indochina. When the Soviet Union in the late 1970s repeatedly offered to discuss normalization of relations with China, China reacted coolly and demanded that the Soviet Union had to first remove "three obstacles" and thus fulfill three conditions before a "genuine normalization" could take place: withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, reduce its forces along the Soviet-Chinese border, and give up its support to Vietnam in its aggression against Cambodia.

From the Chinese point of view, the third demand appears to be the most important. China does not accept a Cambodia dominated by Vietnam. It tries to weaken Vietnam at three different fronts at the same time: by supporting the forces of a "Democratic Kampuchea" who have formed a coalition under Prince Sihanouk; by fighting Vietnamese troops at the Sino-Vietnamese border; and by putting pressure on the Soviet Union to give up its support of Vietnam in its aggression against Cambodia.

The last effort is the most intriguing. It is directed against Vietnam as well as against the Soviet Union, which since 1978 has gained a strategically strong position after concluding a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Vietnam. The Vietnamese air and naval bases of Da Nang and Cam Ranh are now permanently used by Soviet forces. In mid-1985 there were five to ten Soviet submarines normally assigned to these bases, as well as six to eight TU-95/TU-142 "Bears," sixteen TU-16 "Badger" medium-range bombers, and fourteen MIG-23s to maintain surveillance in the area between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Vietnam is economically and militarily extensively supported by the Soviet Union; annual Soviet aid to Vietnam at present (1986) comes to about \$3.24 billion, of which \$1.44 billion is military assistance.¹¹

In order to change this situation in its favor, China pursues two strategies. It constantly rejects any Vietnamese offer to negotiate and uncompromisingly demands "that Vietnam must withdraw all its

troops from Kampuchea and also abandon its policy of opposition to China."¹² At the same time, in their negotiations with the Soviets, the Chinese show a readiness to improve relations further—under the condition that the Soviets stop backing Vietnam against Kampuchea. This strategy is aimed at fostering distrust and driving a wedge between Hanoi and Moscow.

Soviet leaders repeatedly stated that a normalization of relations with China must not be reached "at the expense of third countries,"¹³ and for years refused to discuss the problem of Cambodia bilaterally with the Chinese. But during the ninth round of Sino-Soviet talks in October 1986 in Beijing, the Soviets yielded to Chinese demands and for the first time were prepared to at least discuss Cambodia. Still, according to a report by the Beijing correspondent of the Italian Communist party's newspaper *L'Unita*, the differences at those discussions were irreconcilable. China is "not opposed to the USSR's helping in the economic recovery of Vietnam or to a 'special' relationship between Moscow and Hanoi; the point at issue is that of political and military aid to the occupation of Cambodia." On this question, the report continues, the Chinese were expecting a "gesture" from Gorbachev. The Chinese argument was that it should not be so difficult for the present leadership to "take an initiative to get rid of this heavy inherited burden," since the whole problem goes back to Brezhnev.¹⁴

The Soviet position, on the other hand, continues to be that Beijing and Hanoi should negotiate directly. Igor Rogachev, deputy foreign minister, who was the head of the Soviet delegation to Beijing, is reported to have remarked righteously, "We cannot order them to withdraw from Cambodia. Vietnam is a sovereign socialist state. Why should you want us to act as a superpower and give them orders?"¹⁵

Shortly before these talks in Beijing, Deng Xiaoping took up Gorbachev's proposal in his speech in Vladivostok ("The Soviet Union is prepared—any time and at any level—to discuss with China questions of additional measures for creating an atmosphere of good neighbourhood.").¹⁶ Deng declared himself ready "to meet Gorbachev anywhere in the Soviet Union," if the Soviet Union would contribute to the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia. He called the Vietnamese aggression against Cambodia the "main obstacle" (*zhuyao zhang'ai*) in Sino-Soviet relations.¹⁷

One can easily see that the Soviet Union would lose its credibility as an ally if it yielded to Chinese pressure to stop military and political support to Vietnam. If the Soviets would do that, they would probably also have to leave Cam Ranh and Da Nang. They thus would sacrifice key strategic assets in Southeast Asia.

Weakening the Soviet-Vietnamese alliance, destroying Vietnam's dominating position in Indochina, undermining the Soviet military presence in Indochina, and last but not least, tarnishing the Soviet image as a global power are thus the goals China is striving for vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. For Beijing, this strategy is not very costly; China could sustain it for a long time to come and seems determined to do so. China's Premier Zhao recently stated: "As long as Vietnam continues its anti-China activities and its aggression against Kampuchea, China will not change its policy of exerting pressure on Vietnam along the border."¹⁸

The leaders in Beijing can all the more afford to refuse any compromise on the Cambodia issue, the more the Soviet Union continues to show strong interest in the normalization of relations. In May 1986, a *Pravda* commentary stated that "it is unimaginable to achieve a solid security in the Asia-Pacific region without the active participation in this process by the great Chinese people."¹⁹ Then, in Vladivostok, Gorbachev devoted a long, friendly passage of his speech to China, and some of his proposals were clearly made in response to Chinese demands. Even during his visit to India in December 1986, the Soviet party chief encouraged his hosts—much to their surprise—to improve Indo-Chinese relations. Yegor Ligachev, a high-ranking member of the Politbureau of the CPSU, at the Sixth Congress of the Vietnamese Communist party at the end of 1986 in Hanoi, spoke in favor of better relations between Vietnam and China.

THE LIMITS TO A SINO-SOVIET RAPPROCHEMENT

These and other events not only prove that China ranks high in Soviet Asia policy; they also show that Gorbachev is very much interested in a further improvement of relations with the PRC. He has recognized that his initiative to establish an all-Asian forum on security in Asia can only succeed if he can get China's support. So far the Chinese have avoided a positive reaction to Gorbachev's in-

initiative, but they also have not condemned it outright. The Chinese foreign minister called it "mere lip service."²⁰ China has traditionally been suspicious of any Soviet activity in Asia. The realization of Gorbachev's ideas on Asian security would not only strengthen Soviet influence in Asia and in the world but also confine China's rather independent position between both superpowers. The PRC therefore has no reason to support the Soviet initiative for security in Asia. China's policy will probably continue to be directed at maintaining its present independence, since this policy has gained it clear advantages in its foreign relations.

The shift to a more reserved position toward the United States and to improved relations with the Soviet Union helped China enhance the credibility of its claim of being an independent socialist country belonging to the Third World; thus helping China's efforts to foster closer relations with developing countries. Moreover, by giving up its former fiercely anti-Soviet policy, China could avoid entanglement in the deterioration of the American-Soviet relationship. This became clear when President Reagan visited China in 1985. When his speech in Beijing was broadcast, the Chinese excised those passages that denounced the Soviet Union. With the present improvement in Sino-Soviet relations, Moscow at times has tried to create the impression of an increasing understanding with Beijing in certain areas against the United States. Here, too, China has refused to be used. It does not want to serve one superpower as a policy "card" against the other. Independence is one of the basic principles of China's foreign policy.

Keeping in mind that China has shifted for three decades between friendship and hostility, confrontation and cooperation with regard to both global powers, one is tempted to ask whether there could be a return to another period of close friendship with the Soviet Union and reduced relations with the United States. Or, to put it more realistically, what are the limits to the present improvement of relations between China and the Soviet Union?

Chinese politicians have often stated that there could be no return to a relationship similar to that of the 1950s, even if the Soviets would remove the "obstacles." Vice Premier Li Peng said recently: "We hope that both China and the Soviet Union will become good neighbors. But they will not become allies."²¹

One does not need to believe too fervently in statements of politi-

cians to consider it highly improbable that China, even after Deng Xiaoping, would again engage in joint actions in foreign policy or even in military cooperation with the Soviet Union. The Chinese leaders are aware that any development of that kind would have serious international repercussions. It would compel the West, or at least the United States, to reduce drastically its technological and financial support for China's modernization. Moreover, the renewal of a close Sino-Soviet relationship would have a particularly strong impact on Japan. It could be perceived as a serious threat to Japan's security and would thus reduce Japan's willingness to assist China with its modernization. It might even change Japan's present reluctance to rearm the country on a large scale. Thirdly, close political or military cooperation between China and the Soviet Union would probably reinforce the still existing ties between the United States and Taiwan and thus diminish the prospects for a reunification with the mainland. And fourth, such a development would have an impact on the situation in Hong Kong, destroying any confidence in the future of this economically important door to the world economy under the negotiated transfer to communist rule.

It is doubtful whether Chinese leaders would allow things to drift in this direction. More likely they will carefully limit the improvement of their relations with the Soviet Union to a level that neither creates problems with Japan, nor complicates Sino-American relations, the Taiwan and Hong Kong issues, or other areas of relations with the West. Finally, the Chinese leaders are full of national pride. They probably will not pursue a policy which would again lead their country into dependency upon the militarily superior Soviet Union.

It goes without saying that the West European countries, too, would not welcome more than limited improvement of Sino-Soviet relations. The West should thus try to keep China interested in cooperating with market-oriented economies. In this respect, Western Europe, Japan and the United States share the same interest. If they succeed in engaging China in as many areas of cooperation with the West as possible, they would not only support the modernization of this country but also help to shape this very process and thus stabilize China's opening to the Western world. Whether this assistance will be successful, will depend very much upon China's internal stability. Barring any major internal unrest, China's role in international relations will definitely become stronger, but will

chiefly remain confined to regional issues. The Soviet Union and the United States, in their sharpening rivalry in the Asia-Pacific, region will thus increasingly have to take into consideration China's interests and policies there.

NOTES

1. In 1984 Sino-Soviet trade accounted for 2.4 percent of China's total foreign trade, far behind Japan (25.6 percent) and the United States (12 percent).
2. *China Trade Report*, vol. 24 (Hong Kong, April 1986), 14; *Beijing Review*, no. 41 (October 13, 1986), 33.
3. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, September 17, 1986.
4. *China Trade Report*, *ibid.*
5. Cf. Heinz Timmermann, ed., "Kommunistische Weltbewegung heute. Divergierend Positionen repräsentativer Parteien," *Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien*, no. 40 (Köln, 1986), 107.
6. *Kleines Politisches Wörterbuch*, 3 (überarb. Auflage, Dietz Verlag Berlin, 1978), 679.
7. *Beijing Review*, no. 10 (March 11, 1985), 11.
8. *Ibid.*, no. 1 (January 6, 1986), 14.
9. *Ibid.*, no. 16 (April 21, 1986), xviii.
10. *Asian Security 1984* (Tokyo, 1984), 46-47; *Defense of Japan 1985* (Tokyo, 1985), 46.
11. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, November 6, 1986, according to "Indochina Report," Singapore, 1986.
12. *Beijing Review*, no. 49 (December 8, 1986), 5.
13. *Pravda*, March 6, 1986.
14. "How the Sino-Soviet Talks Went: L'Unita Revelations," Munich, October 29, 1986, RAD/Devlin, Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Gorbachev speech, APN Novosti Press Agency, London, Press Release (July 29, 1986), 22; *Pravda*, July 29, 1986.
17. *Renmin Ribao* (September 8, 1986), 1; *Summary of World Broadcasts, The Far East*, no. 8358/C1/1 (September 8, 1986).
18. *Beijing Review*, no. 49 (December 8, 1986), 5.
19. *Pravda*, May 12, 1986.
20. *Summary of World Broadcasts, The Far East*, no. 8234 (April 16, 1986), quoted from *Xinhua*, April 14, 1986.
21. *Beijing Review*, no. 17 (April 28, 1986), 8.