China's Elite Politics & Sino-American Rapprochement

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Introduction & Historical Overview

In the West, there exists a tendency to presume that there were sections within the Communist Party of China which opposed rapprochement with the US. Xia claims the truth is much less complicated: foreign policy was directed entirely by Máo Zédōng and Zhōu Ēnlái with minimal pushback from the Gang of Four.

Before I begin, I must describe the historical landscape in which détente emerged as a policy. The PRC detonated its first nuclear weapon in 1964; the US and the Soviet Union reached nuclear parity in 1969. All three of these elements led to a multi-polar balance of power: three major world powers with three different political ideologies and sets of interests, and all with the means to destroy the world. Even if the US had superior power projection in Eurasia, both communist countries remained formidable adversaries.

Foreign policy-making is centralised in the top echelons of the party-state. The Standing Committee of the Politburo is a group of up to a dozen which makes major political decisions when the full Politburo is not in session (hence the *standing* committee). The chairman of the party plays a strong role in committee-member selection, and since the death of Máo Zédōng the politburo chooses the top leadership of both the party and state. During the Cultural, Zhōu Ēnlái worked as Foreign Minister overseeing day-to-day affairs just as former CCP secretariat members (such as Liú Shàoqí & Dèng Xiǎopíng) were frozen out. Military influence through Lín Biāo also shaped foreign policy.

The Sino-Soviet Split

In 1968, the widening rift between Soviet revisionists and the Hard-line Maoists led to the first Sino-Soviet Border War. Furthermore, the Prague Springs demise at the hands of Soviet troops demonstrated that the Soviets would treat heterodox Marxist ideologies with a heavy hand, leading the CCP to re-evaluate its strategic partnerships.

In April 1969, the first stage of the Cultural Revolution wound down, allowing foreign policy to return to normalcy. The next month, the Four Marshals Study was commissioned to advise the Standing Committee as a skunk-works policy incubator; in typical fashion, their number included four marshals, a foreign service officer, and an intelligence officer. The first suggestions of rapprochement with the US

came from this group. Importantly, the reports of the Four Marshals were known to top CCP officials but weren't beholden to their influence.

Máo feared war with the Soviets just as much as he feared rapprochement between the USSR and the US. At a summit in September 1969, PM Kosygin met with Máo and Zhōu, with each trying to provoke jealousy in the US. Rapprochement interested the US for several reasons: chiefly, the Vietnam War was going very badly and keeping the PRC from joining the Soviets and Hanoi was key to any path towards victory, however slim. Informal communications between the US and the PRC began in Pakistan and Romania before Walter Stoessel, US ambassador to Poland, directly confronted the Chinese delegation in Yugoslavia (by surprise). Thus, Zhōu and Máo could frame the 'Warsaw Channel' as the imperialists approaching them, not vice versa. In truth, Chinese diplomats in Poland had been long watching American Diplomats for any sign that the US wanted to talk.

Zhōu had to appeal directly to Máo for explicit confirmation that talks with the imperialists was ideologically acceptable. Lín Biāo and the rest of the Standing Committee apparently did not object or kept their reservations private, which flies in the face of traditional American narratives.

Ping-Pong Diplomacy

During the initial meetings, the Taiwan Question and the American War in Vietnam were already stumbling blocks. The PRC wanted to focus exclusively on the former topic whereas the US desired a broader agenda addressing the general nature of Sino-US relations.

Following the good-will gesture of releasing US nationals imprisoned in the Mainland, cultural diplomacy through sports began. Ping-pong tournaments played to the Chinese strengths while also demonstrating interest in dialogue. Once again, no historical evidence remains of anyone consulting Lín Biāo, even during the planning for Kissinger's preliminary visit to Běijīng.

Formal Plans

Zhōu presented the Politburo with his analysis of the US strategic position after Nixon accepted the formal invitation to visit. His thesis was that the US was most likely to begin off-shoring rebalancing, to use the parlance of our times, and this presented an opportunity for the PRC. Zhōu outlined *eight basic principles* of Chinese US-Policy:

1. American military withdrawal from Taiwan and the Strait (non-negotiable)
2. The One China Principle
3. A peaceful resolution of the Taiwan Question is preferred
4. Recognition of Taiwan is a red-line issue

5. If normal relations are out of the question, liaison offices can be established in each capitol.
6. China's seat at the UN is not to be discussed, only the 1CP.
7. American withdrawal from Taiwan is a precondition to trade talks.
8. Furthermore, the US should withdraw from Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Korea, Japan, and the Philippines.

Obviously, only a handful of these principles survive into our present day. Noteworthy, however, is that the Zhōu does not demand the severing of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, only that the US not recognise Taiwan as either independent or the sovereign of the Mainland. This allowed more flexible negotiations while reassuring the party that the basic security of the PRC was not being negotiated away. Zhōu was also cognisant of the political assistant that he was at liberty to give to either Nixon or to Democrats in the next election, allowing him more leverage than the US had against him and Máo. Rhetorically, Zhōu's report employed anti-imperialist rhetoric to pitch the visit in a "heads I win, tails you lose" sense. If the visit succeeded, then they had the capitalists cornered; if it failed, then they were merely doubling down in the class struggle against the global proletariat.

After Lín Biāo and his family met their end under suspicious circumstances, Zhōu's position in the hierarchy improved. Not only were there fewer players in Politburo power politics, but Máo realised that even his groomed successor was not as reliable as he thought. Thus, overtures to the Americans further consolidated his authority and indispensability within the party.

Alexander Haig, infamous for other deeds, was the one who confirmed the US commitment to a Nixon visit and to the 1CP. Haig also inadvertently insulted Máo by insinuating that the viability of the PRC ought to be maintained through US action, not through Chinese self-reliance. On the whole, Haig was a poor diplomat and only through personal intervention of the Chairman did the visit not end on a sour note.

The 1972 Shanghai Communiqué ruffled feathers in the State Department, who worried that warhawks in Congress might liken the abandonment of Taiwan to South Korea. Kissinger pressed Vice Foreign Minister Qiáo Guānhuá to amend the statement, and a compromise was met after consultation with Zhōu and Máo: any mention of defence commitments in East Asia would be omitted entirely, sidestepping the problem.

Concluding Thoughts

It is often remarked that only Nixon could have gone to China, but it is just as true that only Máo could have welcomed him. Only at the fever pitch of Cultural Revolution could Máo have commanded the authority to make nice with the imperialists and silence any dissent. Whence the Western narrative, then, that there were Elites within the CCP who opposed rapprochement? Because it's a convenient

myth for the Americans – it forces everyone, from hardline McCarthyists to doves, to take the relationship seriously. In the two-level game theory which Putnam developed, if the other side isn't even negotiating amongst themselves, that changes how our side negotiates with itself.

Had there been significant pushback to rapprochement from radical leftists in the CCP, that evidence would have been produced or fabricated to buttress Máo's authority. No such evidence has been revealed or fabrications invented. No doubt that this was because the legitimacy of radical leftism during the Cultural Revolution stemmed from Máo himself, nullifying its logic. Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that Lín had gone rogue by the time he met his end, no matter how strange the circumstances. Lín's domain was military policy, not diplomacy, and he was keenly aware of that fact. He disliked interacting with foreigners and deferred to Máo at every point. Rather than feeling alienated by being cut-out of foreign policy, personal testimonies from those who knew Lín best suggests that this was was his preference.

Xià argues that this historically unsubstantiated narrative arises from a misapplication of Western political models to Chinese politics. Collective decision making has always been acknowledge as an effective practice in Chinese politics, acknowledged even by internal CIA and state department memoranda. The sectarian rhetoric of the Cultural Revolution was most likely nothing more than rhetoric, at least with regard to foreign policy.