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# CHINESE REACTIONS TO THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM KOREA

by

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**O**n 9 March 1977, President Jimmy Carter announced that he intended to withdraw US ground troops from South Korea, thus fulfilling a campaign pledge. He qualified this commitment by stating that the withdrawal schedule would have to be carefully worked out with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and with the full understanding of Japan. He said he would also insure that the ROK was left with adequate ground forces of its own and with American air cover.<sup>1</sup> These qualifications, however, only described the manner of the withdrawal. The commitment to withdraw remained firm.

This study considers Chinese attitudes toward the withdrawal decision. No criticism of the President's policy is intended. Balancing all the military and political factors that bore on the decision clearly exceeds the scope and purpose of this analysis. Instead, the President's stand is understood to be immutable US policy.

The thesis herein is that the People's Republic of China (PRC), despite obligatory statements calling for the withdrawal of US forces from Korea, actually would like to see those forces remain. China believes the US 2d Division is a necessary stabilizing force which offsets Soviet expansion in East Asia and contributes to political tranquility both north and south of the 38th parallel. China fears that withdrawal of those forces might signal a reduction in the US commitment to East Asia and might trigger Soviet efforts to fill the vacuum.

Supporting this thesis is difficult because of information problems which plague every foreigner who studies the affairs of the People's Republic. The outsider cannot

directly observe the attitudes and aims of the Chinese leadership, but must rely on the PRC press and other media. Press statements and accounts are often biased by ideology and propaganda. Nevertheless, the leadership's close control over the media and the emphasis on the media as vehicles for international signaling provide the careful reader with a window on Chinese affairs.

**B**ecause of the information problems, Chinese attitudes toward the troop withdrawal will be examined on two levels of analysis. The first is a conventional, international political view. It draws upon the work of international relations theorists such as Hans Morgenthau, who argue that power, prestige, and national might are the currency of international relations and that national security is a principal concern of governments.<sup>2</sup> This analysis treats China as a power that behaves much like any other large nation. The country's leaders try to manipulate the international environment through the judicious use of political, economic, and military resources to best serve national interests. Chinese decisionmakers are assumed to act rationally to maximize political and security benefits while minimizing costs and risks. By assuming that the nature of interests and concerns is fairly uniform among nations, an external observer can thus look at the international political and military situation faced by the PRC and draw conclusions about likely attitudes.

The second perspective comes from an examination of official statements, signals, and the Chinese press. It will attempt to look

inside the PRC and see what attitudes are actually held. Comments which support or deny the conclusions of the first analysis will be specifically sought. In this way, the theoretical framework of the more traditional international political perspective will be enhanced by checking its validity against the reality of press and other official statements. Conversely, the international analysis will give a view of the world situation which will be useful in interpreting the information found in Chinese sources. The two levels should complement, rather than contrast with, each other.

#### THE FIRST PERSPECTIVE: AN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL VIEW

The People's Republic of China is a world power that possesses a particular set of strengths and weaknesses. These characteristics determine the role of the PRC in the world order and define the nation's interests. China's size insures its place in international relations. With 22 percent of the world's population, China simply cannot be ignored. Size manifests itself through the possession of the world's second largest army and a relatively large defense budget and national product.<sup>3</sup>

There are also severe limitations, however. The national product is not so large when considered on a per capita basis, and the economy is hamstrung by organizational and technical weaknesses. These shortcomings are revealed in international affairs by China's inability to translate its large military forces into effective agents of power beyond its national frontiers. China cannot yet project power by the manipulation of a credible nuclear force or by the deployment of conventional forces because of technical and industrial shortcomings. The same difficulties limit the nation's ability to defend itself against attack.

Chinese attitudes toward the American troops in Korea are influenced by perceptions of the balance of power throughout all of East Asia, since security interests on the peninsula cannot be separated from the general situation. China must consider the confrontation of millions of troops along

both sides of the Sino-Soviet border to be the most important aspect of the Asian power balance. The existence of these military concentrations shows the tension between the two nations. While the buildup may have initially been the result of a "characteristic Soviet overreaction," as some claim, it is clear that the Soviet Union regards China as a real threat and that Chinese hostility toward the USSR has deepened.<sup>4</sup>

The Sino-Soviet confrontation extends throughout Asia and the world in general. China and the USSR compete for influence in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), Vietnam, Cambodia, and several African nations. China has become very concerned as the Soviet involvement in Asia has grown deeper and deeper. The most obvious sign of this involvement is the increased deployment of Soviet naval forces into Southeast Asian waters, but there are economic and political aspects as well. The ideological rift is severe as the nations seek to lead the socialist world and to foster class struggle in the developing nations. Soviet military expansion in East and Southeast Asia also portends encirclement, which could cut off increasingly important trade routes and worsen the Chinese strategic disadvantages.

**K**orea is a focal point both for the Sino-Soviet dispute and for China's general security concerns. The peninsula has strategic significance to the Chinese because of its proximity to the Manchurian industrial heartland and because of its location along the Chinese coast. Hostile moves from Korea could easily threaten China's economic well-being.

The intensity of the competition with Moscow for influence in Pyongyang adds to the area's political significance. China's principal fear is that improved relations between the USSR and the DPRK will lead to an increased Soviet presence in North Korea, thus extending the Soviet encirclement. China's attempts to forestall Soviet-DPRK entente by bettering its own relations with Kim's regime have had little success.

The Chinese also worry about the

confrontation of troops along the 38th parallel. They oppose the renewal of fighting in Korea, since they fear the Soviet Union might exploit a conflict to extend its role in the North. As in the case of the war in Vietnam, China and the USSR would find themselves competing to resupply DPRK forces as a war progressed. China's industrial, technical, and transportation shortcomings would probably put it at a disadvantage. The resulting influx of Soviet arms might then cause the DPRK to lean more toward the USSR and away from the PRC. Beyond these worries, China is apprehensive about the outcome of a new Korean war. Peking could not allow the DPRK to lose and might be faced with a decision to intervene if the North's fortunes deteriorated. If the DPRK succeeded in uniting the peninsula, China would still be uneasy, since it would then be faced with the uncertainties of having a strong, industrialized nation of questionable loyalties on its border.

The Chinese also worry that developments in Korea may have a harmful effect on Japan and on Sino-Japanese relations, as many see a close link between events on the peninsula and Japanese security concerns. Peking and Moscow have contended for influence in Tokyo since the early 1970's. The Chinese feel that a questioning of the US security commitment to East Asia may prompt Japan to seek closer relations with the Soviet Union. Instability on the peninsula might also lead Japan to expand its means for its own defense. The possibility of Japan rearming and turning aggressive once again is an underlying apprehension of the Chinese. They would much rather see the present situation maintained than face the uncertainties that a new military power would bring to Northeast Asia.

The United States, as a third power with interests in the region, is crucial to the East Asian balance. The US maintains economic and defense ties with nations along the periphery of the region and a diplomatic presence throughout the area. The defense ties are particularly important. Originally constructed to contain a monolithic

Communist threat, they now perform several functions. As A. Doak Barnett has pointed out in a recent article, the ties now serve:

... to psychologically reassure U.S. allies and other small nations in the region and help bolster their capacity to deal with international insurrection or local conflicts, to help deter the medium-sized Communist powers from considering reckless military actions, and to create a more stable equilibrium among the major powers in the region.<sup>5</sup>

Since the US-Chinese rapprochement, China undoubtedly sees this last function as the most important. The Chinese Marxist-Leninists must still brand the United States as an ideological enemy. Nevertheless, the US does not pose the same security threat that the Soviet Union poses. Neither US forces nor US interests challenge the PRC in its present territories. Indeed, it may actually be to China's political and military advantage to encourage the American presence in East Asia—except in regard to the Taiwan question, which the Chinese consider a wholly internal affair.

China's overriding security concern is with the Soviet Union; the US military posture in the Western Pacific benefits China by counterbalancing the USSR. US forces help deter Soviet expansion by adding the possibility of great power confrontation to any Soviet calculations. Also, the

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American presence may reduce chances of a Sino-Soviet war, since the uncertainty of whether the US will participate on the Chinese side is ever present. US nuclear forces in East Asia play a particularly important deterrent role by helping to balance the Soviet Union's tactical nuclear capability in Siberia, which China cannot otherwise match.<sup>6</sup>

China fears that any withdrawal of US forces from East Asia may be part of a general retrenchment and may signal a reduced commitment to regional security. This would broaden the Soviet Union's freedom of action throughout Asia, since the risk of direct US opposition would lessen. It would also permit the USSR to gain influence with smaller nations in the region as the influence of the United States recedes. As one article has observed:

To the Chinese, who are almost paranoid on the subject of the Soviet threat, any removal of the U.S. presence is a temptation to their old Russian allies to break the peace.<sup>7</sup>

These views certainly apply to US forces in Korea. The troops constitute the front line of the American security commitment in the Western Pacific and are the last significant US forces stationed on the Asian mainland. China must feel that the military presence is a necessary sign to the Soviets of the US willingness to defend its interests in Asia.

The US forces in Korea further support Chinese interests by helping to maintain the status quo among the ROK, the DPRK, and Japan. In the first place, the forces moderate the actions of the unpredictable Kim Il Sung. A Pyongyang attack on the South is probably deterred by the threat of US participation in the fighting. Other rash acts are also deterred, since the US forces pose the continual threat of retaliation. The Chinese can also find comfort in the fact that the US presence may have a similar moderating effect on the Park Chung Hee regime in the South. Park is constrained from making any military moves that might upset stability so long as the US plays the key role in the ROK's command structure. Also, the US presence

reduces Park's incentives for acquiring nuclear weapons and thus helps prevent a fundamental change in the local military balance that could easily touch off a regional arms race. Finally, the forces in Korea quiet Japanese security concerns. They place the front line outside the Home Islands and lessen Tokyo's need to seek new security alignments or its own means of defense.

For these reasons, the Chinese leadership would oppose the withdrawal of US forces from Korea. The forces counterpoise the Soviet Union and help stabilize the region. China fears that a withdrawal from Korea might presage a general American withdrawal from the Western Pacific and that the USSR might move to fill a real, or imagined, vacuum. Chinese security interests are better filled if US forces remain in Korea. The withdrawal of those forces will bring too many uncertainties and too many possible problems.

#### **THE SECOND PERSPECTIVE: THE CHINESE PRESS AND OFFICIAL SIGNALS**

The preceding analysis was based on some assumptions about the Chinese leadership's concern for national security and data about the current military situation in East Asia. That section described what the Chinese leaders ought to be thinking about the American withdrawal, if the stated assumptions are valid. The question of what attitudes are actually held remains to be discussed. Information problems do not allow the formulation of a definite answer. Instead, one must rely upon indicators and hints which may reveal true outlooks.

A cursory examination of Chinese press and official statements leads to the conclusion that the Chinese staunchly desire the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. Demands for a withdrawal have been frequently published in past years. For example, a March 1974 *People's Daily* article said:

The withdrawal of foreign troops from South Korea and realization of the country's

independent reunification by the Korean people themselves are the key to the settlement of the Korean question. . . . The U.S. Government should . . . pull out lock, stock, and barrel, together with its arms and equipment.<sup>8</sup>

Many DPRK statements on troop withdrawal are also quoted with approval. Virtually every article on the issue discusses the need for "independent reunification" of Korea.<sup>9</sup>

A closer examination of statements on US forces in Korea shows that the Chinese might be more flexible than they at first seem. Recent articles do not make direct demands for a US withdrawal, but talk of the "voice of the world's people" favoring the removal of the forces. President Park, rather than the US, is portrayed as the chief villain who is conspiring to keep foreign troops in the ROK.<sup>10</sup> Also, there have been no statements that approve of President Carter's withdrawal announcement. Even Hua Kuo-feng's birthday greetings to Kim Il Sung in April 1977 do not mention the policy.<sup>11</sup> Politics and ideology prevent China from publicly advocating the retention of US forces in Korea. Nevertheless, a decline in the enthusiasm with which the withdrawal is pressed may be an important indicator.

A more complete assessment of the Chinese frame of mind on forces in Korea can be gained by looking beyond statements about Korea itself to statements on general national security concerns. Here, statements on the Soviet Union are particularly telling. The evolution of Chinese attitudes toward the USSR shows up in a collection of Mao Tse-tung's speeches compiled in 1969 and analyzed by Kenneth Lieberthal for the Rand Corporation. Good relations in the 1950's rapidly deteriorated as security issues came to the fore. By 1960, Mao felt "that the Soviets were not allies in the international scene and [he] regarded the Soviets, indeed, as possible enemies."<sup>12</sup> By 1964, it was clearly recognized that the Soviet Union posed a security threat to the PRC. After the Cultural Revolution, fear of Soviet attack dominated China's foreign policy. In 1968, the Chinese

media were branding the USSR, rather than the United States, as China's principal enemy.<sup>13</sup>

There have been no changes in this mood since Mao's death. The Japanese press, which presents very knowledgeable analyses of internal Chinese politics, has stated that Hua Kuo-feng is following a tough policy line toward the Soviet Union. As one article said:

China rejected the Soviet calls for improvement of relations, which calls were made time and again. Recently, the Soviet Union started criticizing the Hua Kuo-feng structure. Thus Sino-Soviet relations are steadily worsening.<sup>14</sup>

One can see China's pervasive fear of the Soviet Union in the continual publication of articles condemning Soviet aggressiveness and expansionism. An article in August 1977 flatly stated that "Soviet social-imperialism . . . has become the most dangerous source of a new world war."<sup>15</sup> A *Red Flag* essay appearing in July of the same year shows the Chinese belief in the reality of Soviet hostility. The USSR is characterized as an imperialist power in the full Leninist sense of the term. The authors charge that the Soviet Union is striving for maximum profit both through the exploitation of the Russian people and through a program of "ruthless colonial plunder abroad." The USSR is pursuing policies of neocolonialism with military and political initiatives. It seeks a redivision of the world into spheres of influence that more accurately reflect Soviet power.<sup>16</sup> As *People's Daily* says, "The Soviet revisionists, burning with ambition, are pushing a counterrevolutionary global strategy for world hegemony."<sup>17</sup>

The theme of Soviet expansion is carried through to discussions of US-Soviet relations. The PRC often criticizes detente and the SALT agreements. SALT is called a "superficial compromise and ease-off [which] only served to prepare for a new fight."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese feel that the global military balance has swung to

favor the USSR. A *People's Daily* article concluded that "The Soviet Union is on the offensive while the United States is on the defensive in their contention for world hegemony."<sup>19</sup>

Apprehension that US influence is being challenged and slowly replaced throughout the world by an aggressive Soviet Union often recurs in Chinese assessments of Soviet-American affairs. The Chinese are particularly worried when the dispute for hegemony takes place in the Western Pacific. A *Red Flag* article observed:

In their bid for world domination, the Soviet revisionists have in Asia highhandedly insisted on their occupation of Japan's Northern Territories. They have also massed a million troops along the China border with the spearhead first and foremost directed at the United States and Japan and posing a serious threat to China's security as well. They dream of control over the whole of Asia through a rigged up 'Asian security system.'<sup>20</sup>

China is trying to counter these Soviet moves by building a new order in East Asia based on the avowed determination to "resist hegemony." China has sought, and usually gained, antihegemonic pledges from SEATO members and other Pacific nations including the US, France, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> This shows a concrete Chinese attempt to gain foreign—and even capitalist—support in their opposition to the Soviet Union.

China has insisted that an antihegemonic pledge be included in the Sino-Japanese peace and friendship treaty, which is important to expanding relations between the two nations, and the same theme appears in some other aspects of Chinese relations with Japan. The Chinese press gives much attention to Japanese dealings with the Soviet Union. Soviet intransigence on the Northern Territories, fishing rights, and territorial waters are often cited as examples of hegemonism.<sup>22</sup> The press invariably exhorts the Japanese Government to firmly resist Moscow's demands. Another important

signal is the inviting of retired Japanese defense officials, who until very recently were being condemned as militarists, to visit the PRC. The officials have been received with great ceremony and respect. The invitations are probably an attempt to spread discussion within Japan on the need for defense against the USSR and on the value of regarding China as a quasi-ally.<sup>23</sup> China's worries are so serious that one high Chinese official was moved to advise a Japanese correspondent that Japan should "make preparations" for a future war instigated by the Soviet Union.<sup>24</sup>

**M**ilitary and political moves against the Soviet Union by other nations in East Asia have been lauded by the Chinese press, again showing a willingness to accept support from pro-Western nations. One article roundly condemned Soviet naval expansion into the Western Pacific and approved of Australia's and New Zealand's resistance. The article went on to describe calls by the two nations for greater Western vigilance within the framework of detente, and it praised their efforts "to strengthen defenses to safeguard their national independence and security" from the Soviet threat.<sup>25</sup>

China has repeatedly signaled its approval of the US role in the Western Pacific. The PRC privately asked several nations in the region to retain their military ties with the United States.<sup>26</sup> Another very interesting and subtle sign is contained in the attention China has paid to the Committee on the Immediate Danger, a private American group which argues that the Soviet military buildup is a serious threat to the West and that countermoves must be taken by the US and its allies. The committee has been commended in a New China News Agency report, and it has been discussed with Japanese visitors.<sup>27</sup>

A few Chinese signals specifically address the issue of US involvement in Korea, albeit guardedly for fear of offending the DPRK. When Cyrus Vance visited China as a private citizen in 1975, he received a rather ambiguous warning from Teng Hsiao-p'ing

that the US must "be careful and prudent on such issues as Korea."<sup>28</sup> According to some members of the Ford Administration, the Chinese expressed concern about earlier proposals for US troop withdrawals. The Chinese, it was said, did not want the US to withdraw its last significant troops from the mainland and feared that the Soviet Union might try to exploit any power vacuum that developed.<sup>29</sup>

There seems, therefore, to be a good deal of evidence supporting the argument that China wants the US forces to remain in Korea because they act as a counter to the Soviet Union. A more limited amount of evidence shows that China is also very concerned about the American contribution to stability within the peninsula. The recent articles attacking Park but not the United States indicate a feeling that local leaders pose more of a threat to stability than do outside actors. Peking never publishes calls for military action by the DPRK against the South. Only peaceful reunification is discussed, indicating that stability may be at least as important to the Chinese as Korean unity.

The concern for peace in the region is also seen in Chinese reactions to the Carter withdrawal proposal. Japanese sources reported that China would view the withdrawal as amenable to their interests only if extreme care were taken not to upset local stability. China, it was said, kept a close watch on the development of US agreements with Seoul and Tokyo on the withdrawal. The principal concern is that US actions might be precipitate.<sup>30</sup>

### THE PERSPECTIVES IN PERSPECTIVE

The balance of power assessment in the first section of this article and the analysis of media and other signals in the second are in general agreement. The Chinese are very concerned about the Soviet threat, and they want US forces to remain in the Western Pacific to deter that threat. Private signals to other governments and to foreign visitors show that China is apprehensive about any reduction of the US commitment to East Asian security.

Signals and statements indicate that this view extends to the issue of the withdrawal of American troops from Korea. The last American ground troops on the Asian mainland have great symbolic value for China. While Americans will argue that the withdrawal of these troops does not affect the US commitment to defend South Korea, the Chinese are undoubtedly reassured by their presence, especially since they also believe the troops help maintain local tranquility.

China cannot overtly support the US presence in Korea. It must couch its arguments in terms of opposing Soviet social-imperialism for fear of driving the Stalinist DPRK leadership closer to Moscow. Nevertheless, security needs have caused the PRC to signal approval of Western defense stands. The People's Republic of China believes the contribution to regional stability made by US forces in the ROK is more important than ideological requirements to oppose capitalist imperialism. Peking would like to see those forces remain.

### NOTES

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