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# THE US-CHINA DEFENSE RELATIONSHIP

by

MONTE R. BULLARD

The US decision in 1980 to establish a defense relationship with the People's Republic of China was clearly influenced by balance-of-power theory. In the 1970s the Soviet Union's buildup of military forces and her increasingly aggressive foreign policy suggested intentions that went beyond the mere defense of her own borders.<sup>1</sup> In response, the United States and China recognized the desirability of a political demarche that would provide for some form of security cooperation to balance the Soviet threat.<sup>2</sup>

During this same period, the reliability of the United States as an alliance partner was being called into question in some quarters.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even the concept of formal military alliance was being reevaluated.<sup>4</sup> In the eyes of the leaders of many countries, a treaty of alliance implied a degree of dependence on the United States, or, from another perspective, a loss of independence—anathema in the post-colonial world of intense nationalism. It became clear that new forms of defense relationships were needed. The United States therefore began to establish military relationships that were less formal than treaties of alliance but would still be of significance in the event of a war with the Soviet Union. Bilateral security discussions, for example, focused on exchange programs or agreements that would allow temporary access to air bases or ports in times of emergency.<sup>5</sup>

Chinese perceptions of the Soviet Union also changed during the 1970s. Instead of viewing the Soviet policy of aggressive ex-

pansion as merely ideologically revisionist, the Chinese saw that policy as a direct threat to China's security. This perception intensified as China lost the battle with the Soviets for influence over Vietnam and as the Soviets gained further influence in India.<sup>6</sup>

US and Chinese leaders thus recognized that some form of cooperation was in the interest of both the United States and China. Yet it was only after political normalization in January 1979 that an environment was established in which cooperative efforts in the defense field could be discussed.<sup>7</sup> In January 1980, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown traveled to China to publicly begin the security dialogue. Secretary Brown's trip opened the door for the exchange of delegations later that year which included experts in military education, logistics, and science and technology. China's senior military spokesman, Geng Biao, made a return visit to the United States that same year.<sup>8</sup> During these exchange visits, genuinely warm friendships developed between the representatives of both sides, and much of the doubt and misunderstanding fostered by 30 years of isolation was reduced.

One of the principal themes that repeatedly emerged during the visits was the role to be played by China in maintaining a balance of power against the USSR. Often it was the Chinese who brought the topic up, as if to rationalize for the Americans why the United States should support China. The Chinese stressed that they were tying down 50 Soviet divisions along the Sino-Soviet border, divisions that might otherwise be deployed

opposite NATO forces. In 1980 and 1981 the Chinese frequently commented on the desirability of a "united front" in which China, the United States, Japan, and NATO would cooperate to oppose Soviet hegemony. The Chinese did not define that united front in precise terms, but it is clear that they were thinking of a loose coalition designed to balance Soviet power.<sup>9</sup>

The United States had entered into its new political relationship with China with a degree of uncertainty about what would constitute a balance of power. One US school of thought was also thinking in terms of a united front. A contending view favored an equilibrium between China, the United States, and the USSR.<sup>10</sup> The latter school emphasized the advantages of an evenhanded policy that would treat the two communist powers equally and thus maintain an arrangement more characteristic of the classic form of a balance of power. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, however, pushed the United States to adopt a policy that tilted toward China, in line with united-front thinking. The tilt included such moves as giving China most-favored-nation status in the economic sphere and opening the discussions of defense cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

A second major theme to emerge from the discussions was China's role in stabilizing events in Southeast Asia. The Chinese pointed out how their "counterattack" of February 1979 had forced the Vietnamese to deploy main-force units along the Sino-Vietnamese border rather than use them in Kampuchea or even Thailand. Implicitly, the Chinese suggested that by increasing the tension level along the border, they would be able to remind the Vietnamese of the potential costs should the Vietnamese raise the level of activity in Kampuchea.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these two points, the Chinese identified a commonality of US-PRC interests in other parts of the world, based upon mutual opposition to Soviet hegemony. China has been consistent, for example, in its moral support for the Afghan freedom fighters. Indeed, there is a broad range of common US-PRC interests, but there is also disagreement on such issues as Korea, US

support for Israel and South Africa, and the US policy of arms sales to Taiwan.

Although PRC leaders recognize the advantages of a good US-China security relationship, they began to reduce the closeness of that relationship in late 1981 and early 1982, primarily because of US handling of the Taiwan arms sales issue. A compromise was finally reached on the issue after a long period of discussion in Beijing between PRC leaders and US officials, and on 17 August 1982 a joint communique was published. In that communique the United States agreed to gradually reduce the sale of arms to Taiwan. Since then, however, PRC leaders have reevaluated the US-PRC relationship and have expressed concern that the United States may not have interpreted the communique correctly.<sup>13</sup> In an October statement to a visiting Japanese politician, Deng Xiaoping commented that he is suspicious about the pace of reduction of those arms sales.<sup>14</sup>

## THE ISSUES

The scope and pace of the US-China defense relationship and the exact path it is likely to follow are yet to be defined. Eight factors will influence further development of that relationship: the Taiwan issue; the PRC domestic economic situation; the PRC capacity to absorb advanced technology; the military doctrine of the Chinese People's Liberation Army; perceptions of US allies; the US-Soviet relationship, particularly as manifested in the START discussions; the Sino-Soviet relationship; and long-range

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ideological compatibility. Each of these issues will be addressed separately.

• *The Taiwan Issue.* The level of US arms sales to Taiwan is clearly the most important issue currently influencing the US-China defense relationship. PRC leaders feel a strong sense of urgency to reunify the mainland and Taiwan.<sup>15</sup> (Note that current rhetoric increasingly uses the term "reunify" and avoids the term "liberate.") In 1980 the Chinese intensified their efforts to bring about a peaceful reunification, with suggestions for the opening of postal, transportation, and communications routes. They also began to allow Taiwanese consumer goods (TVs and textiles) to be sold openly in mainland stores. The total amount of known trade in 1980 equaled about \$320 million, most of which was arranged through middlemen in Hong Kong.

PRC leaders have offered a number of concessions in an attempt to persuade Taiwanese leaders to join in finding an accommodation formula. They have offered to allow Taiwan to maintain its own social, political, economic, and even military systems. They have also suggested that Taiwan could be allowed to handle its own foreign relations, albeit within some constraints. It was even reported that Deng Xiaoping has offered Taiwan's political elite a share in the PRC leadership in Beijing.<sup>16</sup> On 1 October 1980, China's national day, Ye Jianying, Chairman of the PRC's National People's Congress, formalized PRC policy concerning Taiwan into a nine-point proposal. The essence of the proposal was to offer Taiwan a high degree of autonomy and recognize the legitimacy of the Kuomintang political party—at least for the purpose of conducting negotiations on reunification.<sup>17</sup>

The PRC is now working on adjustments to its view of history and to its ideology in order to accommodate a reunification. In October 1980 it was announced that in 1981 the PRC would celebrate October 10th (Double Ten), the anniversary of the 1911 revolution headed by Sun Yat-sen and the date celebrated annually as a national day by the Kuomintang in Taiwan. On May Day and Double Ten in 1981, Sun Yat-sen's picture

was placed in Tiananmen Square in Beijing for three days. In addition, statues of Sun are being restored around the country.<sup>18</sup>

The only demands to be placed on Taiwan would be to change the name of the Republic of China and refrain from using the Kuomintang national anthem and flag.<sup>19</sup> There have been rumors, however, that the PRC might be willing to change its own flag and national anthem at the same time to a flag and anthem that would be agreeable to leaders on both sides of the straits. Finally, there have been rumors that the communists are also prepared to reevaluate Chiang Kai-shek's role in history to make him a patriotic nationalist who, like Mao, made some mistakes.

The Kuomintang leaders, in response, have been intransigent. They have refused the offers of postal, transportation, and communications connections and have also refused to enter into a dialogue with the PRC leadership.<sup>20</sup> The memories of their earlier experiences with the Communist Party in forming united fronts are still vivid. They point to how the communists took advantage of the periods of peaceful coexistence to infiltrate and subvert Kuomintang organizations. They also recall unfulfilled promises of autonomy to Shanghai businessmen and Tibetan leaders in 1949.<sup>21</sup> While the Taiwan leadership's intransigence is understandable, one notes that Taiwan has not offered any alternative peaceful formula for reunification except for statements that any discussions will have to be based on Sun Yat-sen's "Three Principles of the People."<sup>22</sup>

The Chinese communicated the urgency and intensity of their feelings on this issue to Americans at all levels in the summer of 1981. Especially frank discussions were held with Senator John Glenn and former President Jimmy Carter during their visits to China. The Chinese made it clear that the Taiwan issue has a higher priority for them than their own defense modernization. It seems clear that they see the threat to their own security more in terms of ideology than weapons balances. More specifically, they believe that Taiwan represents an increasingly successful noncommunist Chinese alternative to their

system. The Chinese have stated unequivocally that any qualitative or quantitative increase in US-manufactured weapons in the hands of Taiwan would negate the US-China defense relationship. They have also indicated that even a mere continuation of US military support to Taiwan would slow progress in the developing defense relationship with the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Clearly, Taiwan will continue to be the dominant concern in the overall US-China relationship and, more specifically, in determining the scope and pace of defense ties.

• *Economic Readjustment.* Recent PRC domestic economic problems have forced China to slow the pace of its modernization efforts after the late 1970s had seen the drive for modernization begin to speed up to the point of recklessness. The Third Plenum of the December 1978 Eleventh Party Central Committee validated modernization as the principal societal task;<sup>24</sup> however, by 1979 the party recognized that spending on industrial construction projects had been poorly planned and that the quality of life of China's people was still being neglected. As a result, the leaders decided to consolidate their economic position and make sure that economic development was readjusted to proceed in accordance with more logically structured plans. At the same time, the percentage of investment in heavy industry was reduced in favor of light industry to allow for more consumer goods, which would in turn contribute to the motivation of the workers and stimulate the total economy.<sup>25</sup> Before the economic readjustment, workers had little incentive; even if they earned more money, there were too few consumer items available for purchase. The results of the changes are already obvious in department stores and shops throughout China. Today, consumer goods are available in much greater quantity and variety than a few years ago.

The effect of economic readjustment on defense modernization was clear from the start. There would be no money available for major weapons purchases from other nations. But that prospect did not really

conflict with the concepts of Chinese military leaders on how defense modernization should be achieved. Most of them agreed—especially in light of their experience with the withdrawal of Soviet support in the early 1960s—that defense modernization was best served without outside assistance. They would not have to tolerate dependence on other nations for spare parts or other logistical needs. The approach, instead, would be to develop their own capability as a by-product of total national industrialization. Chinese military leaders believed that if national industry were developed under a new coordinated plan, defense modernization would follow automatically. Although they were quite aware of the strong links between basic industry and military industry, they agreed to take a temporary cut in the defense budget and to focus on technology transfer that would support the total national modernization effort, rather than seek the quick fix of immediate weapon systems purchases. This philosophy of self-sufficiency and close coordination with national economic development schemes continues to prevail.<sup>26</sup>

People's Liberation Army planners must continuously take into account the state of the Chinese economy. Yet, while it is clear that the budget makes no provision for major weapons purchases, there is also evidence that if a serious weakness were identified, the money would be found to make a purchase of significant size. That is to say, the economy alone would not determine the scope of purchases from abroad.

• *Absorptive Capacity.* Very early in the defense modernization process, PLA leaders realized that their ability to absorb technology was extremely limited. The Cultural Revolution had decimated the pool of young people available for training in technical skills. Military leaders acknowledged that even if the United States were to give modern weapon systems to China, the PLA did not have enough qualified personnel to handle them.<sup>27</sup> The problem was even more acute in research and development and in engineering production, fields in which China's technology generally lagged behind the USSR and the United States by more than

20 years. While the Chinese did have enough competent scientists and engineers to build nuclear weapons, ballistic missile systems (including the recently launched SLBM), and satellites, they did not have enough for full-scale defense modernization. In many cases the transition from prototype to production on a large scale was impossible.<sup>28</sup>

The result of the PLA assessment of its absorptive capacity was an emphasis on education and training. Military and civilian high schools and colleges were rehabilitated, and examinations were made more important as a factor for promotion. Many engineers were sent to the United States, Japan, and Western Europe for training. There are about 8000 PRC-sponsored students now studying in the United States; many will return to defense-related industries. China also turned to the United States for help in improving educational and logistical systems and processes, as well as for support in dual-use technology, which will be required to build the infrastructure to support a domestic defense modernization effort.

• *PLA Military Doctrine.* PLA leaders are confident that they can effectively defend against any invasion of China by the Soviet Union. They also believe, as do the Soviets, that China has a credible second-strike nuclear capability and that the probability that nuclear weapons would be used in any confrontation is extremely low. They recognize that any Soviet attack using modern conventional weapons would inflict great losses in lives and materiel on the PRC, but they are convinced that they could bog down the Soviets, after which their People's War doctrine would prevail. Their beliefs have been reinforced by Soviet inability to control the situation in Afghanistan, where People's War is being successfully waged by relatively inexperienced, poorly organized guerrillas.<sup>29</sup>

This confidence in People's War partially explains why PLA leaders feel no sense of urgency in modernizing the PLA. Modernization to them simply means improving the effectiveness of People's War so that less sacrifice would be required and the war could be shortened. It does not mean the

building of a military in the image of NATO or Warsaw Pact forces. There is no doubt that their doctrine of People's War is defensive in nature; nor is there any doubt that they believe, correctly or not, that it is an adequate doctrine for the defense of China.

• *Perceptions of US Allies.* European allies of the United States have not expressed concern about the US-China defense relationship in any terms other than as friendly competitors in the race to sell technology.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the only allies whose sensitivities must be taken into account are Japan and the ASEAN nations.

Japan generally favors US support for Chinese defense modernization as long as the support does not include weapon systems that could threaten Japan. Japanese leaders recognize that a strong, stable China is in their interests and that a Sino-Soviet clash could involve them militarily or, more likely, affect them indirectly by destroying what Japan now perceives to be a potentially lucrative market and a source of natural resources. Japan therefore supports the United States' providing China with an increased defensive capability, but the Japanese are not likely to sell weapons to China themselves.<sup>31</sup>

The ASEAN countries are a bit more uneasy about a US-China defense relationship, but even they are beginning to acknowledge the advantages of a strong, stable China. China's Premier, Zhao Ziyang, made a trip to Southeast Asia in August 1981 to assure the region's states that China had no aggressive intent in the area and that China's principal concern was to resist Soviet expansionism. While ASEAN leaders were not convinced that China would stop supporting local communist subversive groups, they did seem to recognize a potential for China's support in stabilizing the region and in helping to prevent Soviet intervention.<sup>32</sup> The problem of ASEAN sensitivities can be monitored by taking note of statements and reactions to the Kampuchean problem. While there is currently little opposition by ASEAN members to US support for the improvement of PRC defensive capabilities, their sensitivities should be of continuous concern to

US decision-makers involved in defining the limits of US-PRC defense cooperation.

• *The US-Soviet Relationship.* The current Soviet perception is that the United States is not likely to supply China with anything that would be an immediate threat to the Soviet Union. The Soviets are more concerned with political rather than military implications. They know how far China is behind technologically, and they understand the absorptive capacity problem. As China becomes stronger, however, the Soviets will probably begin to insist that China be considered a factor in START calculations. They are particularly concerned because China's doctrine emphasizes post-nuclear-exchange plans. Because of these plans and China's sheer numbers, the Soviets believe that they would have to be prepared to deal with China after any nuclear exchange with the United States. This concern causes the Soviets to be very much occupied with the question of the total number of strategic weapons believed necessary for their security.<sup>33</sup>

Another aspect of US-Soviet affairs that influences the US-China defense relationship is Washington's ability to create a direct linkage of US support to China with aggressive Soviet actions elsewhere in the world. It is possible that such a linkage could cause the Soviets to escalate the arms race rather than allow themselves to be intimidated by a stronger China. This possibility might suggest the need, instead, for an evenly paced development of the US-China defense relationship, with assurances that the improvements in the PLA are defensive in nature.

• *The Sino-Soviet Relationship.* In October 1982, the PRC and the Soviet Union began a series of talks, sitting down together for the first time since the Afghanistan invasion in December 1979.<sup>34</sup> The talks were initiated by the Soviets and were designed to reduce tensions between the two communist powers. While both sides have stated that they have low expectations for the outcome, the fact that the talks have even occurred is important. The talks will continue, rotating between Beijing and Moscow, suggesting that both sides are interested in reaching some form of limited accommodation. Although

the level of any such accommodation is not likely to reach that of the 1950s, even incremental improvements in the relationship could have a significant effect on the US-China defense relationship.

China's decision to enter into these talks came at a time when the Chinese were making known their dissatisfaction with the United States over the Taiwan arms sales issue and the relative slowness of the technology-transfer process. The Chinese have also been concerned about the potential harm of the ideological influence that has penetrated China as a by-product of the last few years of contact with the West. Indeed, some Chinese leaders believe that accommodation with the Soviets could bring access to Soviet and East European technology and that, considering its source, it would necessarily come without the attendant bourgeois capitalist contamination.

While Chinese accommodation with the Soviets is unlikely to go very far, it is another factor that should be monitored closely.

• *The Ideological Factor.* The exact role of ideology in the developing US-China relationship is not clear because China's communist ideology is evolving so rapidly. While Marxist-Leninist rhetoric is still extremely strong, many of the actual governmental policies are pragmatically formulated to fit conditions that are unique to China. Some capitalistic and democratic practices are creeping into the system. Even in periods of ideological "tightening," such practices have continued to survive and develop.

The internal debate over ideological direction and the future role of the Communist Party clearly requires close examination. Because of China's highly centralized system, a return to ideological orthodoxy is always possible. A failure of the current economic reforms could easily result in calls to discard Deng Xiaoping's relatively pragmatic approach to economic development and return to strict Marxist-Leninist guidelines.

## CONCLUSIONS

The US-China security relationship has evolved gradually over the past three years.

The initial justification for establishing the relationship after 30 years of enmity was rooted in balance-of-power theory. During the Carter Administration, however, US leaders began to think more in bilateral and united-front terms than in terms of a balance of power. Now, early in the fourth year of the relationship, it appears that a return to balance-of-power considerations is likely.

All indications are that China's leaders have gone through a similar thought process and have decided to adopt a strategic posture equidistant from the United States and the USSR. If so, China will increase its political distance from the United States and get closer to the Soviet Union. Under these circumstances, China would no longer advocate a united-front strategy but, rather, would insist on a strategy more consistent with the classic form of a balance of power. While the PRC would have to grow stronger to become a significant actor in the balance, it now seems clear that China cannot align too closely with either the United States or the USSR in its military modernization process without eventually upsetting the balance.

Even should the PRC move away from the United States and toward the USSR, however, there is no doubt that the Chinese would retain total independence. There are strong forces at work that would prevent the PRC from returning to a 1950s-style communist alliance with the Soviet Union. There are also forces at work that will prevent too close an alignment with the United States.

The eight factors discussed in this article all suggest the need for a deliberate and coordinated US approach to the defense relationship with China. US leaders will have to examine the US-China defense relationship in the context of these factors, some of which the United States cannot influence. They will also have to consider the relationship in global strategic terms and decide between a balance-of-power strategic approach and a united-front approach. Indeed, perhaps the time has come to reject both and develop a strategy that falls somewhere between the two. Agreement must first be reached, however, on whether a stronger China would contribute to world peace and stability.

Guidelines for US policy can then be developed more easily.

#### NOTES

1. US Department of Defense, *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1981* (Washington: GPO, 1980), sec. 1, ch. 4.
2. Richard Solomon, *Choices for Coalition Building* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 1981), p. v.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-39.
4. For example, Alan N. Sabrosky, "Allies, Clients and Encumbrances," *International Security Review*, 5 (Summer 1980), 117-50.
5. Hermann Eilts, "Security Considerations in the Persian Gulf," *International Security*, 5 (Fall 1980), 79-113.
6. Interview with Jiang Youshu, Secretary General, Beijing Institute of Strategic Studies, 9 September 1981.
7. US Department of Defense, *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1981*, p. 52.
8. At the time of the trip, Geng Biao was Secretary General of the Party's Military Affairs Commission. In early 1981 he was appointed Minister of Defense. The author participated in each of these exchange visits, to include accompanying Geng Biao in the United States.
9. These points have been made in almost all contacts between senior PLA officers and US military officials.
10. Robert Scalapino, "Approaches to Peace and Security in Asia: The Uncertainty Surrounding American Strategic Principles," *Current Scene*, 16 (August-September 1978).
11. US Department of Defense, *Annual Report, Fiscal Year 1981*, p. 52.
12. Tension along the border has continued, as reflected in recent newspaper and radio accounts such as FBIS report 081543, September 1981, from Hanoi Radio in English. That report described "PRC armed provocations in 2 weeks since 24 August."
13. This is a recurrent theme in PRC newspapers and official statements since September 1982.
14. Reuters, "Defection a Dirty Trick," *South China Morning Post*, 25 October 1982, p. 10.
15. Interview with Jiang Youshu, 9 September 1981.
16. Michael Parks, "Peking Reportedly Broadens Basis For Talks With Taiwan," *Herald Tribune* (Hong Kong), 15 September 1981, pp. 1-2.
17. New China News Agency, Beijing, 17 August 1982.
18. Statues of Sun Yat-sen under repair were observed by the author in Wuhan and Lanzhou. The Sun Yat-sen Memorial in Nanjing has also been reopened after extensive renovation.
19. Parks, pp. 1-2.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Interviews with military and political leaders in Taiwan in 1978.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Interview with Zhang Bingyu, Deputy Director, Foreign Affairs Department, Ministry of National Defense, People's Republic of China.
24. See "Communique of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China," *Hongoi*, No. 1, 1979, p. 14.
25. US Embassy, Beijing, Economic Section Report, "Economic Trends of the People's Republic of China," 20 October 1980 (unclassified).
26. Interviews with PLA officials in Guangzhou, Kunming, Chengdu, and Xinjiang Military Regions in the spring and summer of 1981.



27. Ibid.
28. Briefings during science and technology (September 1980), logistics (December 1980), and education (May 1981) delegation visits to the PRC.
29. Interview with Tao Hanzhang, Deputy Commandant, PLA Military Academy, in May 1981. PLA Military Region leaders also reflected these beliefs.
30. Discussions with military attaches stationed in Beijing from England, France, Italy, and West Germany during August and September 1981.

31. Discussion with Japanese military attache to China, August 1981.
32. Discussions with military attache from Thailand, August 1981.
33. See Banning Garrett, "Soviet Perceptions of China and Sino-American Military Ties—Implications for the Strategic Balance and Arms Control," unpublished paper, June 1981.
34. David Bonavia, "Profits of Peace," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 October 1982, p. 9.

