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Chinese Foreign Policy: A Study into Consistency and Change

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Abstract

This article details history of Peoples Republic of China's foreign policy in two distinct eras, namely pre-Communist and Communist. After provision of specific details of both eras, the pre-Communist era is used as tool of comparison, to find elements consistency and change in foreign policy. In pre-communist era, China was termed as center of the world and its relations were mainly in the area of military and at times in the trade. Communist China's first priority was furthering ideological interests and guarding security of the nation. With the end of Cold war and coming of new leadership, China re-arranged its preferences in public policy, and introduced "Four Developments" which consequently changed the foreign policy. This article also touches upon factors responsible for changes and consistency in foreign policy.

Being one of oldest civilizations of the world, China has long history of foreign relations. For the purpose of better understanding we can divide the subject in two logical units, that are, foreign policy of dynastic rule; and foreign policy of Communist China.

Foreign Policy of Dynasties

From 14th century BC to 1922 that is from establishment of Yin dynasty to fall of Manchurian Qing dynasty, two major areas of foreign relations of China were defence and trade. All foreign relations necessarily were the reflection of Chinese self-image and their system of government. A highly centralized governmental system having *Wang* (King) at its center with unlimited powers was evolved due to Chinese self-image and

specific hostile atmosphere of the region. Upper edge of the nation in power equation was only possible through highly centralized and authoritative rule.

Like any other primitive society, Chinese with no significant knowledge about the rest of the world considered themselves to be the superior nation and their country as the center of the world. Names that the Chinese had given to their homeland in that dynastic rule established this fact. *Zhongguo* (The Middle Kingdom) and *Tianxia* (The Celestial Empire) are few to mention. Like all other old and un-informed civilizations, Chinese considered non-Chinese people as uncultured one, as they have no connection with the Chinese language and culture, the basic criteria of being civilized.¹ An interesting observation about self-image of Chinese is made in the diary of Thomas Pereira, a Portuguese missionary who spent 17 years in the Qing Empire and held several high governmental posts. In 1670 he wrote in his diary²:

“The tartars (the Manchurian invaders who set up Qing dynasty) however were completely under the influence of Chinese customs. From the beginning of the world; China had never received foreigners in its Empire except as tribute bearers. In their gross ignorance of the world, the Tartars, with the same pride as the Chinese, considered all other nations to be shepherds. They thought everything of pride was part of the China, which they called Tianxia, that is to say “All under the Heaven”, as if nothing else except China existed.”

The *wang* was not only the supreme leader but he was also the sole landowner and chief priest of the nation. In Zhou dynasty (11th to 3rd century B.C.), the *wang* also took the title of "Son of Heaven" thus claiming unlimited sovereignty over all Chinese and non-Chinese lands,

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under the heaven. Thus annexing land of any bordering country was not an act of expansionism, but simply integration of a new part to motherland. Teaching of Confucius (551-479 BC) further substantiated divine origin of the power of the *wang*.³

With such graftifying self-image and governmental system the early foreign relations were largely modeled on the pattern of links, which exists between the central Chinese authorities and local Chinese rulers. That is assertion of unlimited power of *wang*. Ancient Chinese foreign policy was essentially based on this Tribute system. Chinese monarch had to be recognized as sole ruler with mandatory annual gifts and letters of loyalty from the rulers to the *wang*. In cases where exercise of power was not possible, the diplomatic relations were concentrated in areas of trade with constant efforts to make the political situation more favorable for furthering the Chinese interests.

The Qin and Han dynasties (4th and 3rd B.C.) were first to establish foreign relations with other nations. Discovery of iron-smelting techniques have resulted in qualitative development in agricultural and military power. It was during *Han* period that the relations with the states of Central Asia, India and Ceylon were established. Following the Mongol conquest, when China was part of the huge Mongol Empire, relations with Central Asia and Asia Minor begin to flourish. During *Ming* dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) a Chinese fleet meant for military and commercial exploration, visited Philippines, Indonesia, various Indian states, Ceylon, Maldives and even reaching as far as the Persian Gulf and the African coast. But those expeditions were not followed up due to political unrest in China.

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Scholars have outlined some of specific diplomatic policies that were developed during the era.⁴ *Canshi*, that is "the gradual consumption of neighboring lands, like the manner in which silkworm consumes leaves", *jimi* "shackling", that principle of bestowal of generous gifts on foreign rulers, and *yi yi zhi yi*, that is to "suppress barbarians by using other barbarians".⁵ These were some of the major policies that were adopted at most of the time.

It may be concluded that the foreign policy of dynastic era in China was mainly concentrated in the areas of trade and military, pursued by a highly centralized and authoritative government structure. The driving force behind that policy was Sino-centrism and expansionism.

Foreign Policy of Communist China

With internal conflicts, foreign pressure and intervention, and loosing track of latest military and war technology Qing Dynasty lost its writ over hundreds of war-lords enjoying blessings of the western colonial powers. Starting from proclamation of Republic of China in 1922 to Communist takeover in 1949, China went through a phase of turmoil.⁶ Two world wars on the external front and conflict between communist and capitalist forces on the internal scenario left hardly any room for implementation of an effective foreign policy.

Mao Tse-Tung just after taking over the charge, announced "First let us arrange the house then we will invite guests" and "let The Party to first taking care of internal affairs." People's Republic of China, during last half century, had proceeded for establishing foreign relations in three phases.⁷ In the first phase relations were established with the Communist countries and only a few of non-communists. Those few non-Communists also include Egypt (as only Middle East nation having

former relations with China) and Pakistan. In the second phase China inspiring for leadership of third world, went at a distance from First and Second world, and in this phase China established relations with almost all non-Communist countries except core capitalist nations and their allies. However all these relations were blocked during *Cultural Revolution* (1966-9). In the third phase, after Mao's death, relations were established with all countries of the world, transcending all ideological considerations.

A glance at internal and external situation of China in last half century will help us to understand the policy adopted. At internal front, After the Communist victory over the Kumintang in 1949, Mao went for rebuilding shattered China. At first there was Russian advice and aid, but in the late 1950's Sino-Soviet relations were cooled down and aid was reduced. This was mainly due to ideological conflict over "right path" to be communist along a Marxist-Leninist lines. Thus in 1958 Mao introduced "*Great Leap Forward*" in which communism was tried, though not so successfully, to be adopted according to Chinese situation with the emphasis on decentralization, agriculture, communes and contact with masses. This approach yielded opposition about method and ideology. With the "Cultural Revolution" Mao tried successfully to crush opposition within party and keep China developing along Marxist-Leninist lines. But this revolution, though achieved all its objectives, caused a great damage to economy and system, where every one and each activity was to be watched for its correctness according to Mao's vision of Chinese communism.⁸ In fact, the *Cultural Revolution* was great political success to safeguard Chinese brand of Communism and the whole system achieved by vision and struggle of Mao. But indeed like any other political campaign, it has to pay its price on other sectors.

This is very evident that even Mao, having a very sharp skill in political analysis, was very much aware of all the price of *Cultural Revolution*. But in matter of priorities, like any great statesman, he choose to save integrity and ideology of the nation so that less important factors of finances and development be taken care of later.

After Mao's death there was power struggle within the Communist Party from which by 1981 *Deng Xiaoping* had emerged as undisputed leader. *Deng* changed the policy, making it more compatible with new ground realities of the world.

New policy emphasized over modernizing China by using ideas of Capitalist West and where possible, also their assistance. At initial stage this opening-up gave rise to anti-Communist and pro-Democratic movements, even to opposition to *Deng's reforms*. Deng dealt the anti-Communist movements with an iron hand and agreed to slow down the pace of reforms.⁹ In fact anti-Communist forces miscalculated Deng reforms. Deng and his comrades, with carefull analysis of new world situation reach to the conclusion that, now China facing no threat to its ideology and integrity, and having no threat of war by any power for next few decades, its best time to acquire and increase power through economic, technological and developmental means. The “Iron Hand” deal make Deng’s adherence to Chinese system and ideology very much clear to all the world and anti-Communist elements.

At external front, after The September revolution, China had no choice but to seek assistance of USSR. Later it developed difference over method and vision with USSR. China lacking any choice as the Cold War was on its peak, decided to form a broader collation of all underdeveloped countries, so that it may be in a position to face the pressure from both poles and also not be labeled as anti-Communist at

the internal front. No industrial base and ever expanding ideological conflicts led the whole governmental system to the situation of a collapse. The main challenge of this era, to protect China's Communist identity and its system of government with rejection of all external pressure was, however achieved in full. Russian invasion of Afghanistan and subsequent war for its disastrous effects to USSR economy and foreign policy, paved the way for end of Cold war. At this stage, realizing that externally China has no visible threat for next two decades, the new generations of leadership decided to first modernize China and go for advancement in the field of economy, as without a stable economy no state can survive or prevail.¹⁰

New Policy and Four Developments

Modernization was key word of *new* Chinese vision for world and its domestic policy. In this era, China declared to integrate its efforts for modernization in four basic areas. Those areas were defined in order of preference and were called "Four Developments".¹¹ The areas are:

- 1) Agriculture
- 2) Industry and Trade
- 3) Science & Technology
- 4) Military and defense

Why these goals were selected and how the integration of all goals minimized to just four, is classic example of Chinese policymaking model. A number of articles and books deal with subject but here outline two of developments i.e. agriculture and Science and Technology (S&T) are selected to briefly illustrate the factors behind setting this new agenda.

Agricultural Development as Top Agenda of Public Policy

The very difference of China's communism with all other democratic and socialist systems is its agro-based society. Mao, after being appointed as Chairman of the party, long before 1949, had defined differences of Chinese society with that of other countries where communist revolution took place. Mao's analysis of the Chinese society was, that as in China exist no industrial working class in majority, and most of the workers are those who are in agricultural fields, so here in China the revolution would not be a sudden change of power as it was in Russia. He defined a whole course of action for Chinese society to march over the way for revolution and the basic difference with other communist system was that of agricultural feature of Chinese society.¹²

After taking over the control of Chinese government the differences faced with USSR were again the difference dictated by Chinese societal feature of its agriculture. "The Hundred flowers Campaign" (1957) was an effort by Mao to let public opinion aired and be agreed on the difference of policy over what path to be followed in Chinese society to be more strong Marxist-Leninist communist country. In this campaign the basic issue was again, whether Russian model be imported with mass industrialization or the indigenous model on agricultural based and slow pace communism be adhered to. "The Great Leap Forward" campaign was again attracted most of its concentration on agriculture. "The Cultural Revolution" (1966-69) was manifestation of same controversy over what path should be adopted, and this revolution had forced to adopt only of Maoist way and terming all other ways as anti-Communist and anti-nationalist.

After Mao, when new undisputed leadership established the course of action for near and far future defined in a more scientific way.

But as rationality dictate, having the basic feature of society as its fields, the Agriculture was placed as first priority in *Four Developments*. This decision was taken on two basic assumptions. First, the Chinese society agricultural potential can be used in world community as its "comparative advantage" over other nations. Second, due to the present wave of globalization of markets and capital, the whole world is going to be transformed in industrial based society. So in far future, China would be in a better position to meet the world food needs if it give most of its attention to modernization of agricultural sector.¹³

In this field, Chinese leadership seek help of all countries having know-how of agri-sciences or capable of provision of hardware. Chinese leadership proved by its behaviour that they consider the field of agriculture as their first priority in all its foreign relations as well.¹⁴

Science and Technology

Concerns about the increasingly rapid globalization of science and technology (S&T) and its implications for China have come to occupy an increasingly important place on the policy agenda of the *new* Chinese leadership. That is very much illustrated by setting the S&T as third important preference in the national agenda. China's top leaders were anxious to prevent a further widening of the prevailing gap in S&T between their country and the industrialized nations.¹⁵ This gap was in fact outcome of China's cutoff from the international academic circles. Chinese scientist had no active link with any international scientific bodies or journals. To bridge this technological and academic gap the leadership has taken a number of steps to ensure that China attains substantial progress in its modernization in the near future.

Beijing's approach has been to pursue two complementary courses of action. First, the leadership has introduced a range of new

policies to strengthen indigenous S&T capabilities. Increased funds at both the local and national levels have been provided for domestic research and development (R&D) and education. Moreover, the system was re-designed to make it more responsive to the needs of economy and the military. Second, Peoples' Republic of China leaders have also made a sustained effort to expand and enhance China's international activities in S&T in both the commercial and government-to-government domains.¹⁶

Unlike early years, China soon realized that in the field of S&T China had to concentrate on software expertise.¹⁷ The import of hardware that is, import of whole technology in any form from advanced nations, may be a good quick fix but will not help in contributing in the strength of infra structure.¹⁸

This new vision is crux of new foreign policy strictly based on non-interfere in any outside dispute and no conflict with any country of the world. This *new* policy, being practiced for last two decades, along with new ground realities of the world power has proved its merit. China now stable at economic front, still purses *new* type of foreign policy that is solely based on non-intervention in other states and no participation in any *high politics* issue until question of integrity of the China is involved.

Consistency and Change

In last half century China had adopted some non-traditional approaches, cutting off from dynastic tradition and giving the country a real and ideological Communist look. Principle of equality was firmly observed to the extent that, in 1956, a resolution of the Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, accepted unanimously, emphasized the need to 'educate our people, in all their contracts with foreign countries

and their people, to treat others on a really equal footings, and strictly to oppose great-nation chauvinism.¹⁹ Three worlds theory, considering all underdeveloped countries to be part of Third World having no link with USSR, and US is also contribution of Mao's China in international relations. Besides, principle of peaceful co-existence as observed by China, and rejecting the theory of Great Power Chauvinism as against considering all nations as equal, is somewhat a very precisely Chinese contribution in Communist theory and practice.

This major change strangely, in a particular sense, stem from consistency in self-image. This very policy principle of equality is result of self-image of Communist China wherein China is unique nation of the world and has to play a unique role in world politics. China policy makers see Chinese brand of Communism as something very special system of decision-making where scientific socialism is capable to solve all human problems. As this brand is product of Maoist vision of socialism, and is particular to China, it could be seen that self-image is similar to dynastic era, in terms of considering China as unique nation of the world, but particular policy principle of equality is adopted to achieve working relationship, as far foreign relations are concerned. Indeed, the change is in other's image as they are different but civilized.

Another obvious change, need no details, is high level of professionalism in diplomatic practices and more informed decision-making, a result of advancement in technology and practices of public administration.

Consistent elements are Sinocenterism and highly centralized decision-making model.²⁰ As detailed above in agricultural development, the very difference of Chinese Communism was dictate of its geo-social realities. In this sense the insistence of Chinese leadership on Moist

model of Communism is just insistence on Chinese social and historic factors. Likewise, from dynastic era Wang to present day The Party, where ultimately all powers converge to few individuals, prove the consistency of centralized decision making.

Endnotes:

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- ¹ Elvin, M., *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1973) pp. 23-24.
- ² The diary of Thomas Pereira (Rome, 1961), P.207. in *China and her neighbors*, pp. 13
- ³ Elvin, M., *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1973) p. 9.
- ⁴ Hsueh, Chun-tu, ed. *China's Foreign Relations*, (New York, Praeger, 1983)pp. 67-91 and Elvin, M., *The Pattern of the Chinese Past*. pp. 45-46, etc.
- ⁵ For instance northern tribe of *ziongnu* were decisively defeated in 85 A.D. by a coalition of tribes and people formed by *Ban Chao*, the famous *Han* Diplomat.
- ⁶ Mancall, Mark. *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy*, (New York, Free Press, 1984)pp. 123-127.
- ⁷ Camilleri, Joseph. *Chinese Foreign Policy: The Maoist Era and its Aftermath*, (Seattle, Wash, University of Washington Press, 1980) pp.23-33.
- ⁸ Ibid. pp. 102-105.
- ⁹ Kapur, Haarish, ed. *The End of an Isolation: China after Mao*, (Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985) pp. 24-31.
- ¹⁰ Kim, Samuel S. 'Whither Post-Mao Chinese Global Policy?' (International Organization 35, Summer, 1981) pp.433-465.
- ¹¹ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee. *China Under the Four Modernizations*, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982) Part 1. P. 7.
- ¹² Tsou, T., Blecher, M., & Meisner, M., 'National Agricultural Policy: The Dazhi Model and Local Change in the Post-Mao Era', in M.Selden and V. Lippit, eds., *The Transition to socialism in China*, (Armonk, N.Y., M.E. Sharpe, 1982) p. 23.
- ¹³ Ibid pp. 47-49.
- ¹⁴ N. Lardy, *Agriculture in China's Modern Economic Development*. (Cambridge University Press)
- ¹⁵ Yu, G., *China's Socialist Modernization*, (Beijing, Foreign Languages Press, 1984) p.167.
- ¹⁶ The Wilson Center, *China's Scientific and Technological Modernizations: Domestic and International Implications*, (Occasional Paper No. 11. Washington, D. C., The Wilson Center, 1982) pp. 34-42.

¹⁷ E. E. Bauer, *China Takes Off: Technology Transfer and Modernization*.
(University of Washington Press.)

¹⁸ China in 1990's had concluded a total of 11,456,23 agreements and 71 percent of those were in realm of *software*, the training and expertise import.

¹⁹ Eighth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Vol. I, documents (Peking, 1956) P. 131.

²⁰ Raees A. Mughal, *FOREIGN POLICY OF CHINA: A Study of Structures and Factors of Policy Process*(*The Dialogue*, Vol. II No. III) pp.127-133.

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