

China and the superpowers

The relations between the USSR and the People's Republic of China are complex, to say the least. The problem for the Western world was that for too long it had seen the communist world as monolithic, and under the stern leadership of Stalin there was some truth to this. However, there were very real differences among communists, especially among those leaders who achieved their positions of power independently. Initially, Mao deferred to Stalin as leader of the communist world, and respected his position as head of the most successful Marxist–Leninist state to date. But with the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies, the situation changed.

It may be surprising in today's world to think of China as a client state, rather than as itself a superpower itself, but this was the case for much of the Cold War, especially from the point of view of the Western world. Seeing all Marxists as equal and linked, the prevailing view among Western policy makers was that the Chinese followed the same line as the Soviets, and took their orders from Moscow. The idea that these two countries were acting in concert was supported by international actions and statements of the Soviet and Chinese governments. However, this was far from the case: the Russians and Chinese had a long and troubled history that was informed as much by nationalism and conflict as it was by ideology and co-operation.

US policy was a hindrance to developing an in-depth understanding of the intricacies of communist relations. In 1950, when the Chinese Nationalists were expelled from mainland China and fled to Taiwan, the United States refused to recognize the communist government as the legitimate government and blocked its recognition by the UN. As a result, the USA had no diplomatic relations with Communist China and thus very little insight into its distinct nature and approaches to domestic and foreign policy. When Stalin was still alive, this was perhaps understandable. Mao Zedong looked to Stalin as the leader of the communist world, head of the country that had begun the Marxist–Leninist revolutionary process. Accepting leadership from Moscow meant having a reliable ally and a powerful, industrialized country that could help China to develop in the same way. It was, after all, Stalin who had taken a largely agricultural, peasant-based system and transformed it into the industrial society and nuclear power that it was by the time Mao and the Communist Party of China (CPC) came to power. He therefore provided a template for implementing the Marxist–Leninist ideals. Additionally, Stalin's cult of personality appealed to Mao, who sought to establish something similar, if not better, for himself.

In 1950 the Soviet Union was China's closest ally. They signed a Treaty of Friendship, agreeing to a 30-year military alliance and the Soviets agreed to provide low-interest loans to China amounting to US\$300 million. The USSR also sent experts, machinery and the newest technology to assist China in a much needed push for industrialization. However, the amount of Soviet assistance actually provided was not as much as China had expected. Even in the Korean War, when Chinese troops received air support from Soviet MiGs, the level of support was seen as inadequate.

The Sino-Soviet split was a gradual process that began in the late 1950s and continued through the 1960s. Once again, Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin and Stalinism was a catalyst for a change in the nature of relations within the communist world. As indigenous Marxist movements spread, there was increased competition between the Chinese and Soviets as to which type of communism the revolutionary parties would adopt. Often, those decisions were based on where the aid came from; in some cases, countries would have two Marxist parties, one following a Chinese line and one following the Soviet line. In attempting to gain support, the Chinese referred to Khrushchev's policies as deviationist; the Soviets considered Mao something of a maverick.

Khrushchev's calls for peaceful coexistence were anathema to Mao, who felt that the communist world had an obligation to engender revolutions elsewhere, and that co-operation was the same thing as embracing capitalism. The Soviets began to withdraw their specialists and stopped any assistance they had given China in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. In 1962 Mao criticized Khrushchev for backing down in the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviets had also provided assistance to India in its war with China. When Khrushchev was ousted in October 1964, his successors followed a similar policy, which the Chinese saw as hostile, and the tension between the two dominant communist powers escalated.

When the conflicts and tensions between the USSR and China are so described the break seems obvious, but this was not the case for US policy analysts. The few China experts who saw the fissures in the communist world were largely ignored by both the State Department and intelligence communities. However, the actions of 1969 dramatically changed this.

Although the Americans periodically found themselves engaged in negotiations in which China was also a contributing member (such as those in regard to Vietnam in Geneva), from 1949 to 1969 the USA refused to recognize the PRC and instead remained loyal to the Nationalist government on Taiwan, called the Republic of China (RoC). At times this meant some involvement in affairs regarding the PRC; one such being the conflicts in the 1950s between Taiwan and the PRC over the islands in the Taiwan Straits which the Nationalists held. These islands were right off the coast of mainland China and the Nationalists had fortified them to use as a point for reconquest of the mainland. When the PRC challenged these actions through shelling the islands, the United States responded in support of Nationalist forces, even going so far as to threaten use of nuclear attack. The USA later provided the Nationalists with air-to-air missiles to prevent PRC aerial aggression against the islands. Interestingly, one of the reasons for the PRC's second assault on the islands was to show Chinese autonomy from Moscow. The US support of the Nationalists was a forgone conclusion.

The border between the PRC and the USSR was one that had been negotiated by the Nationalists at the end of the Second World War and stemmed from the unequal relationship between Imperial China

and Tsarist Russia. Even though they were ostensibly allies, both countries had amassed a large number of troops along their border. By 1968 the Soviets had 25 divisions and 120 medium-range missiles along the border, double what had been stationed there in 1961. Then, in March 1969, there was a border clash at the Ussuri River, initiated by the Chinese, followed by a subsequent attack in August in the western area of Xinjiang. According to Russian statistics, the Chinese suffered 800 casualties and the USSR 60, but these figures are contested by the Chinese, who argue that they suffered far fewer casualties. By the end of 1969, there were 500 000 troops on the border. Through negotiations, a solution was reached and the fighting stopped, even though there was no official agreement or terms. In the midst of this conflict, Soviet diplomats hinted to Americans of the possibility of a nuclear strike on China's nuclear weapons.

The most significant effect of this conflict was that the USA finally saw the split in the communist world and opted to use it to its own ends. Fearing the USSR's growing nuclear strength, the USA saw an advantage in engaging the PRC in diplomatic talks. In addition to non-recognition, the USA had placed an embargo on the PRC due largely to Chinese assistance to the Vietnamese. At the height of its involvement in 1967, the Chinese had 170 000 troops stationed in North Vietnam, providing support so that the Vietnamese could fight in the south. The border clash showed that the PRC and the USA had a similar interest: to counterbalance Soviet strength.

US-Chinese rapprochement

As often happens, the trigger for political change was not a particular diplomatic or military action. That trigger in the reopening of relations between these two powers came through a sporting event. In April 1971, at the world championships in Japan, a young American ping-pong player boarded the bus transporting the Chinese national team and was engaged in conversation by a Chinese player. Much to the surprise of American officials, the US team subsequently received an invitation to play in Beijing, and were granted visas to travel to China. This simple opening led to Henry Kissinger's secret trip to China, where he approached the leadership to begin opening relations. President Nixon was subsequently invited to China and in February 1972 he had his fateful meeting with Mao Zedong. The countries issued a joint statement, the Shanghai Communiqué, in which both countries pledged to do their best to normalize relations, and the USA stated a one-China policy. (According to this policy, which most Chinese both in Taiwan and the PRC subscribe to, there is one China and Taiwan is part of China.) After this, the United States established the Liaison Office, which gave the two countries a method with which they could negotiate. By the end of 1978, economic relations had resumed and negotiations concluded.

On 1 January 1979, the United States officially recognized the PRC as the legitimate government of China and full diplomatic relations were established. Even before these diplomatic overtures had taken place, other countries in the Western sphere felt comfortable embracing the PRC and recognition of the PRC increased. In 1971, the UN voted to replace Nationalist China with the PRC on the UN

Nationalist China and Taiwan

Currently there are 23 countries that recognize Nationalist China. In the past more did, but the issue of recognition is usually based on which countries require assistance, and in recent years the PRC has outbid the Nationalists in the developing world. The USA passed the Taiwan Relations Act in 1979, giving them a venue at which they can engage the Nationalists without formally recognizing the government. In sports, Taiwan is called Chinese Taipei and uses a different flag.

Security Council. The issue of Taiwan remains difficult to resolve both for the USA and for the international community.

This did nothing to assuage (calm) Soviet fears and indeed further alienated the Chinese and the Soviets. Although there was no official break, in 1979 the Treaty of Friendship lapsed, and neither side approached the other to re-establish such an alliance. Just as the Soviets had assisted the Indians in 1962, the Chinese assisted the Islamists in Afghanistan against the Soviets, and supplied the Contras in Nicaragua against the Soviet-backed Sandinistas, showing that national interest trumped ideology.

When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, he tried to normalize relations and reduced the number of Soviet troops on the border. Under Gorbachev—and Deng—the situation steadily improved, so that in May 1989 Gorbachev made a much publicized visit to Beijing. Due to this visit, there were numerous foreign reporters in China, which led to the widespread coverage of the democracy movement, or June 4th movement as it is called, that culminated in the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Meanwhile, the change in Chinese domestic policies, especially with regard to economic policies and allowing foreign visits, increased relations between the USA and China—trade relations in particular but also cultural exchanges and similar endeavours. Despite popular support for the democracy movement among the American public, relations between the two countries were not significantly strained by the repression of the movement seen at Tiananmen Square in 1989. At present, the PRC is the main trading partner for the USA; it has a favorable balance of trade and has considerable investments in the United States. Despite problems with pollution and infrastructure, the 2008 Beijing Olympics attracted numerous tourists from the West. This relationship between the USA and the PRC seems to be as defining today as the Cold War relationship between the USSR and the USA was previously.

When Brezhnev died, the Soviet Union faced a struggle for succession that mirrored what had occurred in China in the previous decade. At that point, the old guard in the politburo was aged and infirm, and the question was who would replace him: another member of the old regime or someone new. Initially, two successors—Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko—were Brezhnev's contemporaries, but they too met their demise before 1985. A new generation of politicians took the lead in the USSR in 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the head of the government.