Modernization and anti-imperialism are the givens. But what will they mean tomorrow?

China After Mao

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Three propositions govern this essay. First, China feels more secure than at any point since 1949. Until the mid-1960's China felt a grave threat from the United States. For a period of several years, highlighted by the Cultural Revolution and crystallized at the Ninth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 1969, the Peking leadership felt danger alike from the U.S. and the USSR (and decided to defy both simultaneously). From 1969 to 1972 the American threat was felt to be much diminished, but the Russian threat was felt to be fairly acute. Now, for the past three years or so China has felt a reduced danger from the North and, of course, a negligible danger from across the Pacific. (Hence its formal military budget shrinks.)

Second, on the economic level, China, though backward, finds itself in an unruffled position amidst a post-1973 world of monetary mess, energy maldistribution, price fluctuation, and general economic uncertainty. We used to bare our fangs at Peking because it seemed the sponsor of an "unstable" world, but China now seems an island of stability in the churning sea of international economic relations. The Chinese feed their own 850,000,000 people, produce as much oil as Algeria and export sharply rising amounts of it, have no apparent inflation, enjoy rich reserves of natural resources, and keep under strict restraint the consumer aspirations of their populace.

Third, the aging nature of the Chinese revolution and its leadership raises ideological and political problems, the most important of which concern the credibility of ideological appeals for a people that has been put through many ideological fluctuations, and the difficulty of achieving political change and replacement of top personnel without a crisis that goes beyond politics. (Where the U.S. is strong—its political system allows for change within settled rules—China is weak.)

On two overarching priorities the Chinese government and people are united. China’s revolution has been a military, political, even spiritual struggle, yet its main goal is economic. This was frankly stated by Mao Tse-tung, and with force by the late Chou En-lai at the National People’s Congress in January, 1975, as the modernization of China.

China will remain a mainly agricultural nation for the foreseeable future; importing much of its food would be an impossibility for such a large population. Yet agriculture now accounts for only 30 per cent of China’s GNP, and China is set on a path that within twenty or thirty years will make it a major world industrial power.

Though there is a strong moral tone to Chinese socialism, no group in Peking questions that industrialization is the shape of the Communist future. The growth of industry has sometimes been slowed by the demand placed upon it to serve agriculture, yet industrial growth has generally been a fairly fast 10 per cent or so a year, with agriculture a steady 5 per cent. This balanced pattern can be expected to continue.

Although its rhetoric tempts one to believe otherwise, China is a self-contained and rather self-concerned nation, whose pressing cause is not world revolution or spiritual athleticism but pulling China out of its backwardness. Its foreign policy is designed to give the time and peace needed for the task; the moralizing of the People's Daily is for the purpose of affecting how development should proceed.

The second overarching priority in Peking is anti-imperialism. This has been China’s twentieth-century political religion. The present foreign policy of opposing the Superpowers and championing independence is at once consistent with the experience of the Chinese revolution and at the same time a means of turning China’s weakness into an intangible strength on the international stage.

Adding Russia to the ranks of the imperialists was a bold step (of that more in a moment), and being spokesman for the Third World is giving Peking some problems (more of that in a moment too). Yet the policy of saying the troubles in the world are due to one form or another of imperialism has been a winner for China and will continue to be the framework for its analysis of the world. (Pursuing modernization and attacking

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over political line in recent years has found the Cultural to become a party within the Party. The main debate was the post-Cultural Revolution tendency of the directions and can be expected to oppose each other on because his word has become both truth and law. But one cannot follow him through purges and sharp twists. One cannot any longer call Mao “left” or “moderate” or “right,” necessity loyal to Mao, pull in different policy certain points in a post-Mao China.

opposition to pragmatic methods (for example, bonuses expressed dissent that might enable the Clite China's view of its own and others' future comes through a Marxist lens; we may speak of “development,” but the Chinese mean it when they speak of socialist construction, and of a world moving inexorably to the left.

Second, within the two overarching priorities a zigzag pattern in applying them seems built into China's political system. This is because of the towering position of one man, Chairman Mao, who is a particularly subjective and bold Communist leader, and also because there is no safety valve of widely expressed dissent that might enable the élite to discern moods before they erupt into resistance. Political tension does not stalk the country in Watergate style. It is bottled up at the top in a few (literally) smoke-filled rooms—hence the potential for political zigzag.

The prestige of Mao is so high that he has been able to get most of the leadership to follow him through purges and sharp twists. One cannot any longer call Mao “left” or “moderate” or “right,” because his word has become both truth and law. But one can identify two sections of the élite that, though of necessity loyal to Mao, pull in different policy directions and can be expected to oppose each other on certain points in a post-Mao China.

The main significance of the 1970-71 Lin Piao crisis was the post-Cultural Revolution tendency of the army to become a party within the Party. The main debate over political line in recent years has found the Cultural Revolution Left arguing the need for greater socialist purity in the “superstructural” realm of culture and politics.

On development the Left has four emphases: opposition to pragmatic methods (for example, bonuses to boost production) on the ground that they can lead to a slackening of values that transcend methods; a desire to quicken the pace of advance to a stage where hangovers (“bourgeois rights”) from preliberation exist no longer and communism is ushered in; opposition to leaning on foreign technology (the Left criticizes people “who think the moon is rounder abroad”); and a readiness to let spontaneity and “going against the tide” interrupt, if need be, the steady beat of Party authority.

There may be quibbling from the weapons-hungry military about development policies. Also the People's Liberation Army is a peasant army, less inclined than the Left to push cautious farmers headlong toward communism. Generally the PLA's uneasiness with the Left in domestic policy boils down to the tension between order and spontaneity. The application of the foreign policy line of anti-imperialism has been troubling for some PLA officers (both regional and central). They find it hard to accept that the erstwhile brother of China, the USSR, has become as imperialist as the USA, and further that Russia, since 1971-72, must be judged an even greater foe of China than the USA.

The Left seems to have less trouble than the PLA with the anti-Russian line. Even during the Cultural Revolution the Red Guards and their senior friends did not come out with a systematic foreign policy alternative. They did call for bolder support of peoples' and nations' struggles for independence, and for an escalated link between the stage of the struggle for Third World independence and the subsequent stage of socialist revolution. Yet even the Left's 1967 demands—more support for embattled overseas Chinese in Rangoon, a takeover of Hong Kong, for example—are not raised these days. It is at once hard for the Left to gainsay the tremendous success of Peking's post-Cultural Revolution foreign policy and to escape the ongoing imperatives China's new international involvements have set in motion. In addition, neither the Left nor the PLA won any victories in the anti-Lin anti-Confucius movement of 1973-74. The themes of the movement focused on the need for rules and respect for the laws of history (so much for utopianism), and on the need for a strong center (so much for the “independent kingdom” dreams of some regional military élites). In anticipating China's future leadership, we should keep our eyes on these natural differences of policy emphasis, of regional and functional perspective, rather than on expectations of pure power struggles between individuals.

Since China's modernization is distinguished by being a deeply social modernization, there is a self-moving character to change in China. We cannot understand China's modernization by using only the lens of economy and technique. Moral philosophy (“politics”) outweighs what we know as economics in dictating the character of China's modernization. Changes in leadership are in these circumstances probably less crucial than in most non-Communist Third World countries, where modernization is essentially a function of the influence of international economic forces.

A "collective leadership" after Mao goes is inevitable. Mao was the maker of the
revolution, and the revolution is basically made. It neither needs nor could tolerate another highly original revolution-maker. No one will "replace" Mao in any sense worthy of the term. The leadership in China of the 1990's will not be confronted with the breathtaking options that Mao knew throughout his career as a revolution-maker (and chose to reenact in the years beyond 1949).

If we can predict a collective leadership, I do not think we can firmly predict a future policy line that will seem moderate to non-Chinese. The main reason for this is that Chinese power is growing, and China can be expected to cause more problems for Asia in the future than in the past. It will impinge more. It is getting beyond the stage of an essentially reactive foreign policy.

To say this is to be reminded that the term "moderate" is used in different ways. Lack of moderation is no worry if the government in question lacks the power to back up rhetoric with action. Is the Soviet leadership today moderate? On the spectrum between militancy and revisionism among Communist elites the USSR may be moderate. In terms of its control over its own people and the boldness of its interference with other peoples it could not be called moderate.

There are signs that the Left may be stronger in China's government apparatus in the 1980's than it was under the immensely skillful leadership of Premier Chou until his death in January. At the same time, the Left's room for maneuver on economic development policies will probably be limited, since its exhortations seem to run against the grain of the new young modern China is producing, and against the powerful seductions of international economic relations. The adjustment toward the political center over recent years made by Chang Ch'un-ch'iao, the Shanghai left-wing leader, reflects a recognition that the nonheroic generation of contemporary Chinese are not in the mood for too quick a lunge toward communism as defined in Marxist texts. But, to repeat, though China is unlikely to become more left in domestic policy, this does not mean she may not become "tougher" in foreign policy.

Though regionalism is a very strong force in China—third only to modernization and anti-imperialism as a key to political issues—we can rule out any future breakup comparable to the warlord period or to the fragmentations during various periods of Chinese history. Most of the endemic causes of breakup have been ameliorated (famine, absence of transportation, linguistic noncommunication, lack of a sense of the nation). At the same time, it should be realized that the power of the PLA since the fall of Lin Piao is less that of the central military than of the powerful regional commands such as those in Shenyang, Nanking, and Canton.

If it is on the fundamental issue of Russia that some change may come in China—particularly under the influence of PLA leaders. It is not that China and the USSR will ever return to the brief intimacy of the 1950's; China would not do that even if Moscow should ever want to. In any case, the immediate prospect is for increased rivalry between the two giants for influence in various parts of the world, notably in Southeast Asia.

But the split between China and the Soviet Union will not go on forever. Chairman Mao, the proud architect of China's unique Communist way, has ten times, on his own admission, faced opposition from senior colleagues on issues concerned with views of, influence of, or relations with, the Soviet Union. The policy of China toward the Soviet Union in the 1960's and 1970's may turn out to have been idiosyncratic to Mao Tse-tung.

The PLA, understandably, sees defense cooperation with the Soviet Union of the kind enjoyed in the 1950's as highly attractive. The consensus in Peking is that the danger from Russia is less today than at its peak in 1969, and this could embolden some military leaders to push for détente with Moscow once the PLA fully recovers from the disastrous effect on its prestige of the Lin affair. At the same time, it is possible that in the ideological evolution that will follow the passing of Mao, the Left will find reasons of socialist theory to modify Mao's line that Russia has become capitalist in its social structure and fascist in its polity.

In other areas of foreign policy there seem to be two main foci of uncertainty for Chinese leadership into the 1980's. First, it will not be easy for China to preserve its position as chief spokesman for the Third World. China has nuclear weapons, a veto in the Security Council, and other attributes of a very big power. Its unique values and historical experience are not shared by many Third World nations. It seems increasingly clear to Peking leaders that the Asian area is of much greater importance to China than the rest of the precarious entity called the Third World. Post-1973 economic trends are in any case further reducing the degree of common interest among Third World lands.

Second, there will be increasing pressures on China to move away from the autarkical policies of the past twenty-five years. In international economic policy China faces a world where national sovereignty is increasingly qualified by the international connections of business. In defense policy the development of weapons technology, including China's own ICBMs, may seem to call into question the assumptions on which the doctrines of people's war are based.

In sum, China is becoming more secure and more modernized, and as a result of these successes is facing fresh issues. By contrast with the United States, which will no longer by the 1980's find every crisis in the world to be of acute personal concern, China's new success and power will bring more of responsibility's headaches.

Because a quest for modernity is at the heart of the Chinese revolution, Peking will have to walk the treadmill of change without respite; success at one stage of modernization is the mother of surprising problems at the next stage. China's influence in the world will grow steadily, in Asia fairly quickly. This will both facilitate and complicate Peking's efforts to pursue its revolutionary values.