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THE OPPORTUNITY COSTS OF MAO’S FOREIGN POLICY CHOICES

John W. Garver


Chen Jian’s history of Mao’s foreign-policy decision-making during the Cold War is an important contribution to our understanding. Chen provides an insightful, richly nuanced and well-documented analysis of how and why Mao made the choices he did. In this regard, Chen’s book is unsurpassed. What Chen Jian does not offer, though, is an analysis of the options Mao faced at various points and of the costs to China of Mao’s decisions.

Numerous frank and critical analyses have been published about missteps and miscalculations by the US and other nations, but the long-closed nature of China’s decision-making processes and then the gradual opening up of its documentary resources have led scholars to forgo critical analysis in favour of understanding how China’s leaders viewed the world. Recent scholarship, including most prominently Chen Jian’s and Zhai Qiang’s, has now essentially accomplished this. It is now time for a critical assessment of Mao’s foreign policies.

Alliance with the USSR

One of Mao’s early, far-reaching decisions was to ally with the USSR. Chen explains quite well Mao’s thinking regarding this decision. Mao saw it as essential given the polarization of the world between the revolutionary and...

imperialist camps. By standing squarely with the revolutionary camp led by the USSR, China would enhance its international influence, stature and security, and this would help propel the rest of humanity toward a socialist world. Mao also saw alliance with the Soviet Union in terms of maintaining the momentum of China's internal revolutionary process. By 1949 the task of the revolution was to destroy capitalism and build socialism on the basis of a planned, state-owned economy and a Leninist political system. Confrontation with the United States and alliance with the USSR would be in line with these domestic objectives.

Yet the leaders of the People's Republic of China had the option in late 1949 and early 1950 of developing a working relationship with the United States. As Nancy Tucker, William Stueck, John Gaddis and Gordon Chang have concluded, by early 1949 the Truman administration had decided that 1) the Communists would win the civil war in China, and 2) the overriding interests of the United States lay in minimizing the expansion of the power of the USSR in East Asia by preventing the new Chinese regime from becoming an adjunct of Soviet power. Truman and Secretary of State Acheson concluded the US should disengage from the Chinese civil war, avoid making the United States the object of enmity of the new Communist government and allow tensions between the PRC and the USSR to intensify. The US objective was to turn Mao into a "Chinese Tito", drawing Communist China away from the Soviet camp. As a consequence, a definitive December 1949 decision by Truman, Acheson and the National Security Council to abandon Taiwan was taken and maintained until June 1950. As Nancy Tucker puts it, the fighting that erupted along Korea's 38th parallel on 25 June 1950 shattered the policy of flexibility that Acheson "had managed to retain, in spite of pressures from the China Lobby".

A crucial question is how CCP leaders perceived the option offered by the Acheson–Truman policy of encouraging Chinese "Titoism" during the eighteen months between January 1949 and June 1950. Chen Jian does not address this question. Wu Xiuquan, the director of the Soviet department of the PRC foreign ministry in late 1949, who accompanied Mao to Moscow to negotiate the February 1950 treaty, recounts that Stalin was deeply apprehensive that China might follow the "Yugoslav road", and dispelling these apprehensions figured prominently in Chinese calculations during the Moscow talks: "The signing of the

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3 Tucker, Patterns, p. 195. All of the authors cited in the previous note conclude that the Acheson–Truman "wooing/wedge" policy lasted, though under increasing pressure and increasingly frayed, until the outbreak of the Korean War.
treaty was tantamount to the complete failure of the imperialists headed by the United States to sow dissension between China and the Soviet Union. In other words, Washington’s desire to woo China was dismissed as an imperialist plot to split the socialist camp.

PRC leaders could not have asked for a more advantageous US policy in late 1949 – early 1950. Washington had decided to wash its hands of the Kuomintang, to condone an anticipated PLA takeover of Taiwan, to allow the PRC’s entry into the United Nations and to open political relations with the PRC. The Truman administration laid out and adhered to this course in spite of intense domestic opposition and at considerable domestic political costs. Chinese leaders must have surmised that a desire to open links lay behind the US leaving American diplomats in place in the last stages of the civil war as various cities passed to CCP control, and, as Chen Jian demonstrates, foiling these US intentions was precisely why US diplomats and diplomatic properties were seized. Whereas Dean Acheson has been criticized by earlier authors for an obsession with legalities that led him to defer recognition of the PRC, Chen Jian masterfully demonstrates the essential fact that these CCP moves against US diplomats and diplomatic facilities in China derived from a fundamental decision, already formulated, to make a clean break with the United States and align China closely with the Soviet Union.

The point is this: the PRC had an opportunity in 1949 and 1950 to secure Taiwan while working out a modus vivendi with the United States. Mao Zedong chose not to pursue that option. In a very real sense, Mao’s choice lost Taiwan for the PRC.

The decision by Truman to abandon Taiwan was made with anguish and over strong opposition from the Pentagon. The US Navy greatly valued Taiwan as part of the offshore island chain in the Western Pacific ringing the eastern fringe of Eurasia. Responding to navy pressures, during 1949 the US sought via diplomatic and economic means to prevent the PLA’s takeover of Taiwan. By the end of the year, however, it was clear that this was impossible and that only direct intervention by US military forces would suffice to protect Taiwan. This was considered but ruled as incompatible with the objective of wooing the new Chinese government away from the USSR. Truman’s decision to sacrifice Taiwan might have been undone later because of US Navy or Congressional pressure—though that outcome seems very unlikely if Mao had been more responsive to Acheson’s various openings. The fact is, however, that that decision was undone largely because of the foreign policy choices of Mao Zedong.

I do not wish, though, to reopen the well-debated question of whether or not the United States had a “chance” with China, which it lost. Chen Jian drives another nail into the coffin of that theory. A chapter title and a section subheading indicate that the American “lost chance” in China is a “myth”: Mao’s ideological Weltanschauung at that juncture required hostility toward the United States and

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alliance with the USSR. Yet, if there was no "American lost chance in China", it
does seem there was a "Chinese lost chance in America". Chen Jian outlines very
clearly the reasons for Mao’s rejection of that chance, but does not make clear
that the opportunity costs of Mao’s choice were very substantial.

Mao’s decision of February 1950 to sign a thirty-year military alliance with
the Soviet Union, pledging to assist the USSR “by all means available” in the
event of war and to make Manchuria a base for Soviet military operations, greatly
weakened the rationale for the Truman administration’s China policy. Were
Taiwan now to be brought under PLA control, under the terms of the February
1950 treaty the island would be made available to Soviet air and naval forces in
the event of war. Beijing’s conclusion of the February 1950 treaty was a
monumental blunder on the order of Tokyo's September 1940 conclusion of a
tripartite treaty with Nazi Germany. Both treaties linked the European challenger
of the United States to an Asian power that Washington had previously hoped to
separate from its European nemesis. Both treaties directed US hostility toward the
Asian signatory. To merely explain the rationale that brought the Asian
signatories to their decisions without exploring the disastrous costs is
unsatisfactory. It is like explaining how Tokyo in 1940 hoped the tripartite treaty
would deter American intervention against Japan’s projected takeover of
Southeast Asia, without also explaining how Tokyo’s decision in fact backfired
and encouraged exactly the US intervention Tokyo had sought to avoid.

Mao could have chosen not to ally with the USSR in 1950. Yugoslavia under
Tito had demonstrated to the world in 1948 the possibility of national
Communism and the ability of unallied Communist states to secure support from
the West. Had the PRC positioned itself somewhere between Moscow and
Washington, it might have been able to play on Washington’s fear of Moscow to
secure significant US support.

Launching the Korean War

In Korea, too, Mao had other options. Stalin had adroitly arranged that Mao
would have the final say regarding Kim Il Sung’s war plans. In April 1950 Kim
sought and secured Stalin’s approval for a projected massive offensive to take
over South Korea, but Stalin directed that “the question should be decided finally
by the Chinese and Korean comrades together, and in case of disagreement by the
Chinese comrades, the decision on the question should be postponed”.5 In other
words, Stalin specified that Mao had the final say. Sergi Gancharov, John W.
Lewis and Xue Litai conclude that Stalin was ensuring that China, not the USSR,
bore responsibility for rescuing Kim Il Sung should Kim’s scripted invasion of
South Korea go wrong. Stalin bluntly informed Kim: “If you should get kicked in
the teeth, I shall not lift a finger. You have to ask Mao for all the help.”6

5 Stalin telegram to Mao, 14 May 1950, in Cold War International History Project Bulletin
(Woodrow Wilson International Center), Issue 4, Fall 1994, p. 61.
6 Sergi N. Gancharov, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and
was in a win–win situation. If the United States did not intervene, a united, Communist-led Korea would result, serving as a buffer between the USSR and Japan. If the US intervened and China shouldered responsibility for confronting it, tensions between China and the US would spiral, reducing the danger of China following a “Titoist” course. Mao walked obligingly into Stalin’s trap.

Had Mao told Kim “no”, Kim almost certainly would have been forced to shelve his war plan. And even if Kim had gone ahead, the PRC could have stood aside—perhaps extracting additional concessions from Washington for this neutrality. It is well to remember that Mao did something along these lines with Hanoi’s enthusiasm for war in both 1954 and 1973, and Chen Jian lucidly explains why Mao sought to rein in Hanoi’s militancy at those junctures.

Chen explicates why Mao said “yes” to Kim. He also faults Mao for miscalculating in 1954 and 1958 when he launched the two Taiwan Strait crises, expecting to drive a wedge between Washington and Taipei only to find that PRC belligerence in fact drove Taipei and Washington closer together. But Chen overlooks Mao’s even more egregious mistake—pushing the United States into engagement with Taiwan in 1950 through his decision to approve Kim’s invasion plan.

The launch of North Korea’s offensive in June led to the swift scrapping of Washington’s earlier policy of disengaging from the Chinese civil war. Coming so soon after the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet alliance, and clearly enjoying the full support of both the USSR and the PRC, the North Korean offensive convinced Washington that the new Sino-Soviet bloc was on the march. The February alliance together with the onset of the Korean War militarized US policy toward the PRC. The long-standing arguments about the utility of the island of Taiwan took on new meaning in the new geo-strategic context.

The de facto loss of Taiwan due to American military protection was followed by two decades of intense US hostility and economic sanctions. Zhang Shu Guang has recently explored these sanctions against the PRC and concludes that the US embargo pushed the PRC into deeper dependence on the Soviet Union while simultaneously increasing Soviet leverage over Beijing, creating major tensions within the Sino-Soviet alliance that eventually destroyed it. America’s economic sanctions also forced the CCP to move more quickly toward a state-controlled and planned economy, resorting to extreme measures to mobilize internal resources for development. Through this, the US embargo indirectly “planted deep seeds for a slowly but surely developing economic and social disequilibrium with an enormously devastating effect”.

Had Mao chosen a different course and the PRC entered the UN Security Council in 1950 rather than in 1971, how might Beijing have used its veto to advantage? Had the PRC enjoyed normal ambassadorial relations with the United States, would Beijing have found itself drawn into yet another war in Vietnam?

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Without US efforts to support Tibetan insurgents and to secure Indian cooperation in those efforts, would the PRC have found it necessary to fight a war with India? While it is impossible to answer these questions, it does seem fairly clear that the costs to the PRC of making an enemy out of the United States were heavy.

Chen Jian is almost certainly correct in explaining Mao’s rejection of non-hostile relations with the United States: such a path did not comport with his world view. What he does not consider is the costs of Mao’s decision.

**Understanding US Hostility**

In the PRC today it is widely believed that US opposition toward the PRC in the 1950s was due to anti-communist ideology and US enmity to the prospect of a strong and independent-minded China. While Chinese scholars who specialize in Sino-American relations do recognize the desire of the Truman administration in 1949 and early 1950 to reach an amicable *modus vivendi* with China’s new Communist government, that awareness has not made it into the popular Chinese mind-set.

Chen Jian does not fall for the canard of inveterate American hostility to Communist-ruled China. Yet neither does he challenge it—at least not in this book. The book will likely be translated into Chinese and enjoy a wide circulation in the PRC, but, by confining itself to presenting how Mao viewed the world and why he decided as he did, Chen offers nothing to challenge the reigning orthodox narrative of popular anti-Americanism in the PRC.

Anti-communist ideology was certainly very strong in the United States in 1949–50—just as it is today—but the decisions of the Truman administration in 1949 and early 1950 to woo the Chinese Communist leadership demonstrate that anti-communist ideology did not determine US policy at that critical early juncture. As noted, the geo-strategic interests of the United States in containing the expansion of Soviet influence trumped anti-communist feelings, and only when the PRC allied with the USSR and supported Kim II Sung’s war plan did Washington become deeply hostile to the PRC. Twenty years later, in 1971–72, when China’s geo-strategic alignment had shifted, Washington dropped its policies of hostility. And during the 1980s, the intensely anti-communist Reagan administration, which waged the most comprehensive and sustained anti-communist campaign of the entire Cold War against the Soviet bloc, nevertheless supported PRC efforts to implement the Four Modernizations, including military modernization. Further, during the 1990s when the PRC, the last remaining major Communist-ruled country in the world, embarked on an ambitious course of globalization, anti-communist ideology once again did not prevent the United States from supporting PRC development efforts. The record seems clear: anti-communist American beliefs have not played a decisive role in determining US enmity or amity toward China. Far more important have been the choices of China’s own leaders about their alignment vis-à-vis the United States. The common Chinese attribution of periods of US hostility to anti-communist ideology is a way of obviating the responsibility of China’s own foreign policy choices for that hostility.
The Sino-Soviet Split

Having paid such a heavy price for Soviet assistance, Mao proceeded to throw that assistance away, leading China down the road to a Sino-Soviet split. Once again Chen Jian masterfully outlines Mao’s thinking during the escalating conflict with Khrushchev. Yet once again Chen Jian fails to analyse either Mao’s miscalculations or their costs.

Mao made two serious miscalculations regarding the USSR. The first was the belief that he could challenge the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the international Communist movement without alienating the USSR. He imagined that Party-to-Party conflicts, even profound disagreements, could be handled on a “comradely” Party basis and would not spill over into state-to-state relations.

Mao held a romantic view of the international Communist movement. He perceived it as a band of equal comrades united in struggle for a higher ideal and a better world. Truth, a “correct line”, was the basis of this common struggle, and it did not matter who elucidated that truth. It became increasingly clear to Mao, as the 1950s progressed, that he, Mao, and not Khrushchev, was the genuine heir to Stalin and Lenin. It was he, Mao, who correctly understood and applied the universal truths discovered by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. As Marxist-Leninists, Khrushchev and the CPSU should embrace the correct line suggested by Mao and the CCP.

Reality did not conform to Mao’s view. The reality was that the world Communist movement was the USSR’s major instrument for global influence. The CPSU’s position of leadership over that global movement, comprising parties in a hundred countries by the early 1960s, established the USSR as a global actor. This was especially the case prior to the Soviet arms build-up that began after the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. By virtue of its leadership of the international Communist movement, the CPSU had the ability to interject its views into virtually every region of the world and not infrequently to significantly influence events in those regions via fraternal parties. Moscow’s leadership was founded on the financial and organizational resources possessed by the USSR, but it was exercised through its power to specify the “line” of the world Communist movement. Yet it was this that Mao was challenging. The practice of Soviet Communism was not correct, Mao said with increasing clarity, but was fundamentally flawed by “revisionism”, as were the CPSU’s prescriptions for the international movement. Mao’s belief that he could challenge Moscow’s leadership in this fashion without alienating it was a monumental miscalculation. Yet again Chen Jian does not explore this, but confines himself to merely explaining how Mao viewed the world.

Mao’s second miscalculation involved his evaluation of the Soviet proposals of 1958 to establish a fleet of submarines jointly operated by the PRC and the USSR and to set up a long-wave radio broadcasting station on the Chinese coast to communicate with submarines operating in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Mao interpreted these two proposals as “unreasonable demands designed to bring...
China under Soviet military control”—in the words of a later Chinese polemic.\(^8\) Mao saw the Soviet proposals as inspired by a desire to control and dominate China, akin to European efforts circa 1900 to carve out spheres of influence in China. Here again Chen Jian presents Mao’s views fully and clearly. What he does not explore is the near certainty that Mao’s judgment was utter nonsense. Mao’s attribution of ulterior motives to Khrushchev was made in a very few days in July 1958. It was not the judgment of the Ministry of Defence, State Council or Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It was not the judgment of the Chinese specialists charged with analysing such matters, but of Mao Zedong personally.\(^9\) Mao totally dominated China’s foreign policy process, and, once the Chairman decided, that determination set policy.

There is now sufficient documentation available from the former Soviet Union to allow a firm conclusion that the Soviet proposals of 1958 were inspired not by a desire to control China but by a desire to enhance the capabilities of the Soviet submarine fleet vis-à-vis the United States Navy. The USSR was deploying steadily greater numbers of ever more capable submarines, but the Soviet navy faced major geographic constraints. To reach the high seas where US and allied convoys would operate in time of war, Soviet submarines had to pass through straits that were closely monitored by US anti-submarine warfare forces. This would impose unsustainable levels of attrition on Soviet submarines in wartime. The port of Petropavlovsk at the southern tip of the Kamchatka peninsula was situated on the open sea, but it had no rail or adequate road support and had to be supplied by ship. This would render it virtually useless in wartime. Access to ports on the central and southern Chinese coast would solve these problems. Enhanced communications were also absolutely vital for offensive submarine operations. Ships are very hard for submarines to find without intelligence support. Soviet naval planners concluded that radio facilities in southern China would meet their urgent communication needs.\(^10\)

Mao’s attribution of imperialist-like motives to the Soviet proposals shocked Khrushchev. If Mao saw the USSR as a predatory imperialist power and not as a fraternal socialist ally, could Moscow expect China to be friendly as its power grew? After China acquired nuclear weapons, for example, how would China

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deal with the USSR if the Chinese leaders really put the Soviet Union in the same imperialist category that Britain, France, Germany and the United States had occupied vis-à-vis China circa 1900? Khrushchev began to reconsider the wisdom of large-scale Soviet military assistance to China.

Once again Chen Jian’s explanation of Mao’s mental processes as he led China into an open polemic with Moscow seems sound. Mao saw struggle against Soviet revisionism as conducive to a struggle against revisionism within China and to mobilization of the energies of the Chinese people for continued revolutionary struggle. Yet again, Chen Jian does not consider the costs to China of Mao’s handling of relations with the Soviet Union.

The break with Moscow cost China dearly. Soviet assistance to hundreds of major industrial projects came to an abrupt halt. Thousands of Soviet advisory personnel, mostly engineers and technical specialists working on industrial and scientific projects, were withdrawn. Soviet assistance to enhance China’s indigenous scientific and technological capability ceased. Soviet assistance to China’s military modernization efforts—the development of jet aircraft, submarines, missiles and nuclear weapons—ceased. Henceforth, China would bear the full cost of the development of these weapons. The pace of Chinese development slowed and became much more costly and difficult. The break with Moscow also left the PRC without protection against US nuclear coercion and cast the PRC into a situation of extreme vulnerability in simultaneously confronting both superpowers. In fact, during the decade after the Sino-Soviet split, both superpowers would seriously consider the possibility of a pre-emptive strike against China.

Once again, China had options. The evidence suggests that Moscow highly valued its alliance with China in the 1950s and provided a vast aid program to China to solidify that alliance. As Constanine Pleshakov has concluded, prior to 1958 Khrushchev was trying his best to accommodate China.11 Mao probably could have retained a substantial degree of Soviet support had he distanced the PRC from the USSR in a less confrontational fashion. Suppose that Mao had attempted to increase Chinese independence from the Soviet Union not by dramatic and abrasive demonstrations of independence but by quietly cultivating relations with Britain, India, Japan, France or even the United States. Suppose Mao had worked to convince Moscow that the USSR was still an ally—perhaps by giving Moscow advance notice of the decision to bombard the offshore islands in 1958 and by politely, but firmly, denying the radio station and joint fleet requests of 1958.

In other words, China had the option to retain a degree of amity and cooperation with the USSR, while moving away from close alignment with the USSR and trying to expand the PRC’s cooperative relations with Western countries. Mao’s preference for extreme positions ruled this out, but the choice was his. It constituted a severe setback for PRC economic and military development efforts.

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11 Pleshakov, “Nikita Khrushchev and Sino-Soviet Relations”.
Towards a Critical History of Chinese Foreign Relations

As the PRC grows in power, it becomes increasingly important that the international community of scholars develop a critical understanding of the propensity of China’s leaders to miscalculate, to base their decisions on misperceptions or to act in ways counterproductive to China’s own best interests. Barbara Tuchman termed the pursuit of policy contrary to self-interest as “folly”. A large portion of Mao’s foreign policy helmsmanship involved such folly.

But Chinese public opinion continues to conceive of foreign policy as essentially a succession of victories over hostile powers achieved though the wise direction of China’s incisive leaders. As a consequence, Chinese opinion could well become more susceptible to jingoistic pitches. If, on the other hand, China’s citizens knew that their leaders have sometimes blundered mightily, they might be more sceptical of such pitches.

It is time to move beyond merely understanding Chinese views and purposes and to begin developing a critical appreciation of Chinese foreign policy. We need to try to identify when and why China’s leaders made egregious mistakes. This is important for scholars to understand, and it is even more important for the people of China.