A Response: How to Pursue a Critical History of Mao's Foreign Policy
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A Response

HOW TO PURSUE A CRITICAL HISTORY
OF MAO'S FOREIGN POLICY

Chen Jian

John Garver has raised a very important issue in his review essay of my book. I am in complete agreement with him concerning the necessity for scholars in the China field to pursue a more critical approach to the study of Chinese foreign policy under Mao. However, I find myself in disagreement with him on how best to achieve this.

Let me begin with the “costs” argument of Garver’s thesis. There is no doubt that the Chinese people paid a high price for Mao’s “continuous revolution”, including China’s foreign policy. In Mao’s China and the Cold War and earlier works, I do not shy away from highlighting this fact. For example, in discussing China’s involvement in the Korean War, I referred readers (p. 117) to the discussion in my earlier book, China’s Road to the Korean War, where I argue that “China’s participation in the Korean War caused the loss of tens of thousands of its soldiers on the battlefield, forced the expenditure of billions of dollars on military purpose at the expense of China’s economic reconstruction, prevented Beijing from recovering Taiwan, made Beijing, at least in the short run, more dependent upon Moscow than before, and excluded Beijing from the UN until the early 1970s”.

In evaluating Beijing’s strategies in the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958, I contend that Mao’s management of this crisis, together with his constant use of international tensions for the purpose of domestic mobilization in the Great Leap Forward, created a “great disaster” for China. And I further point out that China’s domestic and foreign policies leading up to the Cultural Revolution

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represented “a path toward another great disaster” (pp. 202–4, esp. p. 204). In describing the consequences of China’s involvement in the Vietnam War, I argue that Beijing’s support for Hanoi ironically resulted in the creation of a new enemy—a unified Vietnam—and thus “the Vietnam War was also a ‘lost war’ for China” (p. 236). Most important of all, in identifying Mao’s legacies, I emphasize that the Chairman’s “continuous revolution” had completely lost the inner support of China’s people during the last years of his life and that Mao’s revolution and his foreign policy both ended up as grand failures. Indeed, a central argument of *Mao’s China and the Cold War* is that Mao’s continuous revolution and foreign policy had been facing a serious legitimacy challenge throughout. In the end, they led the Chinese Communist state into an ever-deepening legitimacy crisis not only in the last years of Mao’s life but also in the post-Mao era (pp. 277–80). For me, this is a key issue that scholars of modern China will need to pay attention to in their critiques of Mao and his foreign policy.

In comparison, I find Garver’s “opportunity costs” thesis not sophisticated enough to catch the essence of the issue or to serve as an insightful point of departure for criticizing Mao’s foreign policy. Garver emphasizes that Mao had missed a series of important “opportunities” and “alternative options” in directing China’s external relations. My disagreement is not with the “costs” part of Garver’s argument, but with the “opportunity/option” part of his hypothesis. Here we face a basic question. Why did Mao choose the path he actually pursued? It was not because he believed that his policy decisions would result in lower “opportunity costs” for China; it was simply because he was determined to sustain and enhance the legitimacy of his grand “continuous revolution” enterprise at any cost.

Thus we touch upon the question of how to understand the interactive relationship between the specific rationale underpinning a particular actor’s behaviour and the “opportunities” and “options” available to him. In this regard, it is essential to note that Mao’s China, from its birth, was a revolutionary country. Challenging the Western powers in general and the United States in particular meant not only changing the international balance of power but also questioning and, in the final analysis, negating the legitimacy of the “norms of international relations” that, as viewed by Mao and his fellow Party leaders, were of Western origins and inimical to revolutionary China’s goals. Thus in defining its relations with other parts of the world, “New China” had its own language and theories and would act only in accordance with its own values and codes of behaviour. A series of basic rationales were developed that were drastically different from those that would be held by a “normal”, non-revolutionary regime.

At the time of the PRC’s establishment, Mao and the Party leadership decided to break with the legacies of the old China, to “make a fresh start” in
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China’s foreign affairs, and to lean to the side of the Soviet-led socialist camp. When the Korean War broke out, Mao’s crisis management aimed not only at safeguarding China but also, and more importantly, turning the tensions created by the crisis into sources of domestic mobilization that would help legitimize the new Communist regime and Mao’s programs of “continuous revolution.” Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, a revolutionary foreign policy helped to make Mao’s various state and societal programs such as the Socialist Transformation and the Great Leap Forward into powerful unifying national themes that supplanted many local, regional and factional concerns. When Mao’s continuous revolution repeatedly failed the test of the Chinese people’s lived experience and thus lost the people’s inner support, a revolutionary foreign policy served as a way in which Mao could sustain the legitimacy of the revolution.

The central role played by a revolutionary foreign policy in sustaining Mao’s continuous revolution must be understood in the context of the Chinese people’s “victim mentality”—that it was the political incursions, economic exploitation and military aggression of foreign imperialist countries that had undermined the Central Kingdom’s historical glory and had reduced it to the status of a victimized state in the modern international community. The profound impact of this “victim mentality” led the Chinese people to willingly embrace Mao’s revolutionary programs aimed at reviving China’s central position in the world.

In the final analysis, the close relationship of Chinese foreign policy with Mao’s revolution created fundamental restrictions on the Chairman’s perception of the “opportunities” and “options” available in China’s external affairs. Garver is asking Mao and his comrades to view the PRC’s foreign policy “opportunities” in a way that is inconsistent with the regime’s essence.

Contending that Mao had a number of foreign policy options, Garver highlights such events as the PRC’s pursuit of an alliance with the Soviet Union, the Party’s confrontational attitude toward the United States, Beijing’s support for Kim Il-sung’s plan to invade South Korea, and Mao’s split with Moscow at the height of the Sino-Soviet alliance. Garver underestimates not only the overwhelming impact of the revolutionary essence of Mao’s China upon its foreign policy behaviour but also the extremely rigid international environment—

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2 Xue Mouhong et al., Dangdai Zhongguo waijiao (Contemporary Chinese Diplomacy) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1988), pp. 4–5; for a more detailed discussion of Mao’s China as a revolutionary country, see Chen Jian, China’s Road to the Korean War, Ch. 1.

characterized by a “one or the other” bipolarized division—during the early years of the global Cold War.

Garver argues that if the PRC had followed a policy of Titoism and had not hurriedly pursued a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union, it would have been possible—and even desirable—for Beijing to achieve a “working relationship” with Washington. Without considering the profound ideological causes underlying Mao’s “lean-to-one-side” choice, Garver’s suggestion would not have worked even in practical terms. As is well known, by adopting Titoism, socialist Yugoslavia cut off almost all of its relations with the Soviet Union and was virtually expelled from the international Communist movement. If Mao’s China had adopted Titoism, it would have destroyed any hope of the PRC gaining substantial aid from the Soviet Union and, as seen in the fate of Tito’s Yugoslavia, would have converted Beijing, in Moscow’s vision, into a traitor and bitter enemy to the socialist bloc.

It is questionable whether Beijing would have been able to offset this through an opportunity “to secure significant US support”. Garver seems here to have exaggerated the manoeuvring space in Washington’s policy choices toward China. It is true that in 1949 and early 1950, some in Washington—Secretary of State Dean Acheson in particular—demonstrated a willingness to “let the dust settle” in dealing with the aftermath of a Communist victory in China. But it is also true that during the same period the “China Lobby” was beginning to use “the loss of China” to attack the Truman administration, that the broad social and psychological context within which McCarthyism became rampant was already taking shape, and that with the authorship and later implementation of NSC-68 Washington would actively pursue a strategy of containing Communist expansions anywhere in the world. It is therefore unconvincing for Garver to claim that a new Chinese Communist regime would have been able to secure substantial support from the United States in the early Cold War years simply because it had shown itself nationalistic as well as Communist.

On the Chinese side, Garver also ignores the fact that Mao’s anti-American-imperialist stance served the fundamental mission of his revolution. Indeed, the anti-America campaign that Mao personally initiated in the wake of the US State Department’s publication of the China White Paper went far beyond the sphere of Chinese–American relations. In reality, this was Mao’s way of defining the essence of “New China’s” domestic and external policies. Mao did not pursue a

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“working relationship” with the United States not because he was blind to the “opportunity costs” involved here, but because he was willing to risk heavy costs to achieve what he viewed as most valuable—the emergence of a “New China” in accordance with his ideals.  

The Taiwan issue is more complicated than Garver indicates in his essay. I agree that Mao should not have given Kim Il-sung the green light for the invasion of South Korea. This at least would have allowed the Chinese Communists to concentrate on dealing with the Taiwan issue. But would this have guaranteed that the CCP would have “liberated” Taiwan in the early 1950s? I am not sure. In retrospect, it is doubtful whether the Chinese People’s Liberation Army possessed the military capacity to secure Taiwan in 1950–51, and we should not take it for granted that Taiwan would have fallen into the CCP’s hands without American intervention. There is also the question of how long Washington’s non-intervention policy toward Taiwan would have lasted if there had not been the Korean War. While the eruption of the war in Korea certainly played a crucial role in pushing US policy-makers and military planners to put such a grand strategic design as NSC-68 into effect, America’s policy of containment cannot be explained merely by the need to respond to the conflict in Korea. In this sense, the Korean War represented more a trigger than the underlying cause in America’s expanding military intervention in East Asia beginning in mid-1950, and it is reasonable to regard America’s “hands-off” policy toward Taiwan as no more than a temporary phenomenon. Given the prevalence of anti-Communist sentiment in American society and given Washington’s increasing willingness to contain Communist expansions in all “strategically important regions” in the world (including East Asia), with or without the Korean War, US policy toward Taiwan would have had to change. 

Garver correctly points out that Mao’s decision to “break with Moscow cost China dearly”, and that if Mao had not led China down the road to a Sino-Soviet split the Beijing–Moscow alliance would have had every reason to thrive, rather than collapse. Yet Garver’s discussion has placed too exclusive an emphasis on the split’s material and quantitative aspects to the neglect of the cultural context. Garver quotes Shu Guang Zhang’s recent book, Economic Cold War, in support.

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8 For an informative discussion of this issue, see He Di, “The Last Campaign to Unify China: The CCP’s Unmaterialized Plan to Liberate Taiwan”, Chinese Historians, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 1–16.

9 For an insightful recent study on this issue, see William Stueck, Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), Chs. 2–3.
of the proposition that “the US embargo [against China] pushed the PRC into deeper dependence on the Soviet Union while simultaneously increasing the Soviet leverage over Beijing, creating major tensions within the Sino-Soviet alliance that eventually destroyed it”. Yet this is only part of Zhang’s argument. In exploring the causes of the Sino-Soviet split, Zhang emphasizes the role played by political culture. He contends that the effect of the American embargo against China upon the Sino-Soviet alliance cannot be fully revealed in mere quantitative terms, and that it is crucial to examine “not only how decision makers think and calculate but also how they feel about and perceive the exercise of such diplomacy”.  

Zhang’s insights are enlightening here for comprehending Mao’s attitudes toward the “opportunities/options” and related “costs” facing Chinese foreign policy.

Although I disagree with Garver on the ways in which a critical history of Mao’s foreign policy can most appropriately be achieved, I deeply appreciate this opportunity for dialogue. Garver is absolutely right when he points out that, as the PRC grows in power, it becomes increasingly important for the international community of scholars to develop critical perspectives in evaluating the history of China’s external relations, and he and I share the same goal.