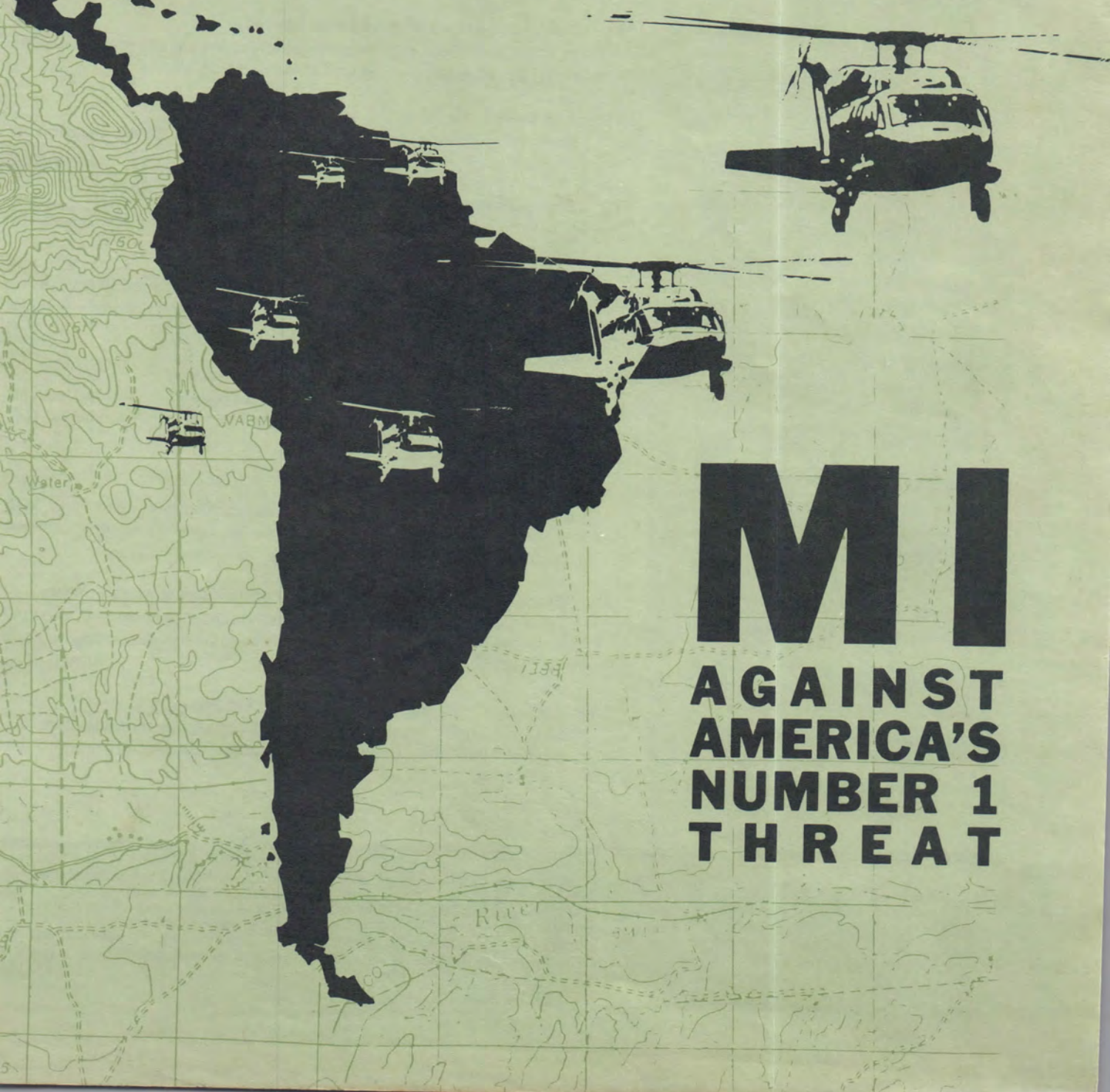


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Sino-American Security Ties



by Maj. Robert B. Adolph Jr.

The steadily improving relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) may be the most important U.S. foreign policy development of the last two decades. This is true because of the change it has made in how U.S. foreign policy-makers perceive the nature of America's strategic relationship toward the Soviet Union. That relationship, historically adversarial and competitive, is changing dramatically with the growing Soviet perception of a possible Sino-American alliance.

President Nixon's visit to China in 1972 came to be known as "the week that changed the world." This perception was widespread because every administration since Truman had developed foreign policy based on the perception that the world had only two political, ideological and economic poles. One pole was the free world led by the United States, and the other pole was the Communist world led by the Soviet Union. This bi-polar concept colored nearly all foreign policy decisions. Foreign policy was developed, at least in part, on how that policy would affect the Soviet Union. Although it is a recognized fact that the world is developing along a multi-polar political and economic path, bi-polarity is still a prevalent U.S. foreign policy consideration.

Nixon's trip to Beijing highlighted the fact that China was not only independent of Moscow, but had also come to view the Soviet Union as an enemy. Americans who had previously viewed communism as monolithic were compelled to recognize that a significant split had developed between the two Communist superpowers. With this split came a new concept described as "the strategic triangle."

The PRC became the "wild card" in this triangular relationship and was capable of tilting the balance of power that had existed for decades between America and the Soviet Union. The bi-polar concept suggested that Washington should view its relationship with China as a means to influence Soviet behavior.

Technological Need

In 1983, the Reagan administration placed the PRC on the State Department's list of "nonaligned but friendly nations." Until that time, China was still listed as a potential antagonist. Much of the military technology they sought was denied them in their former status. Now, a low-key security relationship between the United States and China is developing based on arms sales and technology transfer. Beijing would like to buy technologically advanced equipment which cannot be produced domestically. More important, they want the technology necessary to produce their own weapons systems. Recently, the United States and the PRC agreed on a \$500 million arms sales package which would significantly upgrade the recently developed F-6 fighter. There are plans for construction of an artillery munitions factory and for transfer of technical specifications for 155mm projectiles. The United States has already sold the PRC civilian versions of the Sikorsky Black Hawk helicopter, General Electric LM2500 gas turbine engines for warships, Raytheon DE1167 towed sonar and MK46 M002 torpedoes.¹

Parris Chang, the noted China specialist, says that China must have access to advanced western technology.² The military technological gap between China and the Soviet Union grows almost daily. The larger that gap, the greater the advantage to the Soviets. For the Chinese, the United States is the most logical supplier of advanced military weaponry. Even if Sino-Soviet relations were good, the Soviet Union has much less to offer in this critical area than does the United States. Arms sales and technology transfer is an example of the triumph of Chinese pragmatism over Communist ideology. The purchase of military hardware from the West's leading capitalist state would have been unthinkable twenty years ago. The real threat, in China's perception, is not U.S. imperialism but Soviet external domination.

Complications

While the United States obviously

favors the establishment of closer ties with the PRC, there are certain complications with this policy that will not be easily overcome:

- In order to normalize diplomatic relations with the PRC, the United States had to sacrifice its longstanding relationship with Taiwan. This was a particularly difficult move, since Taiwan still has many staunch supporters in the U.S. Congress.

- The PRC is a Communist state. The country is politically, culturally and economically very different from the United States. Washington must be able to deal effectively with a government that is completely different, politically and idealistically.

- In late 1979, the PRC and the Soviet Union began talks aimed at normalizing diplomatic relations. Beijing may seek to publicize its claim in the strategic Spratly Islands to press the Soviet Union to accept Chinese sovereignty prior to a possible normalization of Sino-Soviet ties. Normalization has grown more likely with Moscow's recent decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.³ A closer Sino-Soviet relationship could seriously hinder Sino-American relations.

From China's perspective, the problems in dealing with the United States may be even more difficult:

- Despite China's size and population, it is by Western standards a poor and underdeveloped nation. The PRC's leadership recognizes that this places China at a disadvantage in potential security arrangements with the United States. It places the PRC in a junior partner's role in military technology.

- Ideology, although deemphasized in its recent dealings with the United States, is still a thorny domestic issue in China. The Chinese Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s demonstrated the volatile nature of China's domestic politics. Another such upheaval could possibly change Chinese foreign policy perceptions.

- China lacks the hard currency to purchase from the United States the expensive military technology it seeks.

- China has deep-rooted national-

istic feelings and views itself as a leader in the Third World. Its leadership will resist any U.S. overt actions to curtail its independent foreign policy and limit its flexibility.

Sino-Soviet Relations

Abetting closer Sino-American security ties is the fact that neither nation directly threatens the economic or regional interests of the other. On the other hand, Soviet expansionist policies have kept the Sino-Soviet relationship strained.

The Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 set the stage for the "war of words" that still exists between the two powers today. Recently, however, the tone of that war has been muted since the Soviet Union has pursued a more moderate policy toward China. Still, an unsatisfied precondition for more normalized relations is fewer Soviet soldiers along their common frontier.⁴

The Soviet Union provided ample proof of Soviet expansionist policies with the invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. This was viewed as an aggressive act and was publicly condemned by both China and the United States. The invasion reinforced the Chinese perception that Moscow was bent on hemispheric dominance. The PRC will closely monitor the upcoming withdrawal of Soviet troops.

Soviet economic and military support to Vietnam further aggravated its relations with China. That support made it possible for Vietnam to invade neighboring Kampuchea (Cambodia). (Another unsatisfied precondition for normalized relations is the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from that country.⁵) Additionally, that same support allowed Vietnam to withstand Chinese military incursions in 1979.

The threat of a Sino-U.S. alliance is not taken lightly in Moscow. The Soviet Union is faced with potential military threats on two borders: NATO in the west and China on its southeastern border. The leadership in Moscow recognizes that they have few genuine allies. North Korea and Vietnam are probably best described as clients. The Warsaw Pact nations are politically and militarily unreliable. Further, the growth of economic ties between the Warsaw Pact countries and the European community also gives Moscow pause.

Conclusions

For the United States, the question is

where to from here? Should America base its security policy with China exclusively on strategic needs, or should it be more balanced? Should U.S. policy-makers base decisions predominately on bi-polarity theory? According to Edward Ross, the development of Sino-American military relations began soon after the normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries.⁶ America's China policy is still developing. The current administration tends to lean heavily toward the bi-polar theory, though strict bi-polarity has its problems: "It seems unlikely that a Sino-American relationship founded on opposition to the Soviet Union could have the breadth of view or flexibility to cope with the tensions one can expect to arise out of cultural differences, differing foreign policy goals and differing views on how to cope with the Soviet threat."⁷ The United States must base its relationship with China on more than anti-Sovietism. We have to expand areas of mutual concern, develop similar interests and establish a domestic view of China which recognizes their need to conduct an independent foreign policy.

The United States can increase economic and military aid, expand cultural and student exchanges, establish a joint U.S.-Chinese economic development organization and form other business and governmental groups. Establishing a bond with China will take time, patience and understanding. If we can assist in bringing China fully into the international economic order and develop mutual interests, then we can reasonably expect them to respond positively to broader U.S. security initiatives in the future. The ongoing exchanges of high-level government officials and senior military personnel are examples of the linkages we should expand. Continued close contact will foster mutual understanding and respect.

Our continuing support of Taiwan is still a major unresolved issue. Despite our differences, the PRC is at least willing to agree to disagree as evidenced by the Shanghai Communique which essentially listed unresolved issues between the two powers. It is extremely unlikely that China would consider any formal security arrangement with the United States unless Sino-Soviet relations worsen. China, however, is continuing in its attempts to normalize relations with Moscow so that they can

modernize militarily and develop economically while at peace. The Soviets will most likely continue to attempt to drive a wedge into the continuing Sino-U.S. *rapprochement*.

The security relationship that the United States and China are attempting to forge is slowly developing and will improve gradually if the present relations among all three powers remain relatively stable. China's drive for modernization provides encouragement for improving relations with the United States. China's desire for peace is a good reason for *rapprochement* with the Soviet Union. The United States must attempt to expand mutual interest outside of security concerns and bi-polarity. The expansion of economic, cultural and political programs is essential. A stable, developing and friendly China may be America's best chance for the maintenance of peace into the next century. ★

Footnotes

1. Executive Memorandum, "Wanted: A U.S. Policy for Selling Arms to China," Heritage Foundation, #106, January 15, 1986.
 2. Dr. Parris Chang, "U.S.-China Relations," *The Annals of the American Academy*, November 1984, p. 159.
 3. Ann Scott Tyson, "Gunboat Diplomacy in South China Sea," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 13, 1988, p. 9.
 4. Joseph C. Harsch, "What Soviets Gain from Going: Afghan Pullout Augurs Better Ties with China and the West," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 1988, p. 9.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Edward Ross (The Assistant for China in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, International Security Affairs), "U.S.-China Relations," a presentation to the Heritage Foundation Asian Studies Center, January 28, 1986.
 7. Joseph Frederick Bouchard, "U.S. Security Interests in China: Beyond the China Card", Defense Technical Information Center, Naval Postgraduate School, September 1981, p. 33.
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