

The Interests of Revolutionary China: An Overview

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It is no exaggeration to say that the Chinese have been making revolution in one form or another for over seventy years. What has this meant for the country? How has it affected China's position in the region? Much depends on what kind of revolution has in fact taken place in China and how others in the region have perceived the changes there. As there is a separate paper on "China and its Neighbours" this paper will say little about the region but will concentrate on what has happened and is happening in China. Also it will limit itself to an overview. Towards the end, I shall suggest what other likely developments might yet occur.

The Chinese have recently reaffirmed that there has only been one revolution in modern history and it all began soon after the turn of the century. What they first wanted from the revolution was to rid themselves of their Manchu rulers — largely because these rulers had failed to preserve the empire's integrity, but partly also because the dynasty was foreign and the Chinese had begun to accept a narrow form of nationalism. But very quickly, the revolution went further to reject the ancient imperial system itself and this rejection led to an era of uncertainty and near-anarchy. Among the many political goals that came out of the state of disorder in the country, two became dominant. The first was the deeply felt desire to restore China to strength and prosperity. The other was the growing feeling among the young that a totally fresh start was needed and that the most advanced political ideals

offering the most dramatic change to the ancient polity was needed to do the job thoroughly. From time to time, the two merged and reinforced each other, but among the new generation of leaders, the divisions remained and the word revolution was used differently by the two major groups. While both sides recognised that new political structures were necessary, one stressed the historical roots of Chinese civilisation which should not be neglected in the process of necessary change, while the other emphasized the universality implied in the modern idea of revolution itself.

Both these desires were viewed with some alarm by the Great Powers before World War II. For some, the prospect of a strong, resurgent nationalist China was unacceptable. For others, a Chinese revolutionary movement linked with an international Bolshevik conspiracy was even more frightening. Ideally the Great powers would have liked to support a stable orderly China of enough strength to control revolutionary forces within China but of limited strength outside. The Soviet Union was also not keen to have a strong nationalist neighbour, but they supported any force that would ultimately weaken their capitalist enemies. As for China's other Asian neighbours, mostly under colonial rule of one kind or another, China's agonies were watched with interest, but there was always a degree of suspicion mixed with sympathy: sympathy for the common struggle for sovereignty and independence, but suspicion that China merely wanted to be another Great Power.

Events since the end of World War II have made striking changes to China. For one thing, to have been placed among the "Great Five" (with veto powers in the UN Security Council) was a spectacular uplift for a weak and war-weary country. But the most notable change came after 1949, when the word revolution took on a specific meaning totally different from what the Chinese had started out with at the turn of the century. What was exhilarating to the Chinese who led that revolution was not only that they had won but that they found themselves part of a global movement of which China might be seen to have been

promoted to be second in importance only to the Soviet Union. For whatever that was worth in reality, it was a heady experience. But the effect of that new status as the newest Great Power clearly struck fear among some of the new nationalist elites in the neighbourhood.

Let me concentrate here on what the revolution meant for the Chinese. There has been no objective measure of whether the pride felt in China during the first half of the 1950s was due more to any one of the following than to the others:

- (a) The victory of the Communist party and the "glorious future" for Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong thought;
- (b) The restored importance of China in world affair;
- (c) The end of civil war, the near-reunification of China and the restoration of order.

It is possible that some felt all three were equally important, and others felt only (b) and (c) but not (a). Even more likely was the prevalence of mixed feelings which included pride but also resignation, dismay, the hope that followed long years of despair and not least, much rationalisation. There are no reliable statistics of public opinion. What was published within China showed almost invariably relief and gratitude ending in paeans of praise for the Communist leaders and their victory over darkness and evil. It is doubtful if all the praise stemmed from an understanding of Marxist-Leninist thought, but it is likely that most people were proud that the Great Powers (USA, Britain, USSR and France) now had respect for whatever China said or did. Whatever the consequences China's new image might have had on smaller countries nearby, the Chinese probably only had thought for other people's awe, if not fear, of the achievements of an heroic and strong China.

Within China, however, the revolution proclaimed the transformation of everyone's way of life. With a few exceptions, all Westerners and Japanese were asked to leave. In their place came Russians, with whom few Chinese were familiar but whose experience and technical help were regarded as valuable. How welcome these Russians were is again

hard to assess. Anti-American campaigns over the Korean War were used to highlight the assistance and friendliness of the Russians. One can understand that there were changes in popular attitudes but the artificiality of these attitudes did not take long to become exposed. By 1960, when official policy changed, more genuine views about the fallacy of depending on the Russians came quickly to the fore. Despite this brief period of direct Russian help, it can be said that China experienced a paradox: an expansive sense of belonging to the mainstream of world history while in most major developments it sought a self-sufficiency in Maoist theory and practice that amounted to a turning-in within itself.

This, too, was a source of pride. The Chinese were once again able to say that, as with its unique civilisation, they had found the key to success largely by their own efforts. The dramatic end to landlordism, a scourge to the peasantry for centuries; the rapid, probably too rapid, change to agricultural collectivism; the creation of China's own heavy industry accompanied by a remarkable spirit of self-sacrifice among the majority of its people — no wonder most Chinese felt that the revolution that could move mountains was great. And it was this momentum of change that Mao Zedong tried to sustain when he launched the Great Leap Forward to fight off what he thought were the dual threats of bureaucratic complacency and hard-headed pragmatism. So carried away were some of the revolutionaries that to them even the ultimate communism was within sight.

The Chinese leadership was far from united on this subject and a titanic struggle over goals and means obsessed that leadership for at least two decades after 1957. Very complex factors were involved in that struggle, not least problems arising from China's size and its population numbers, its cultural heritage and its involvement in world affairs throughout the period. In trying to determine what China's interests have been in recent times, it is essential to separate some of these factors. But no picture would be complete unless we begin with the commitment to revolution, including the various changing faces of

revolution that China experienced.

What then are the interests of a revolutionary state like China? One must expect that interests change significantly with time. Revolutionary interests in the 1950s cannot be quite the same as those in the 1980s, and this is no less true within China as in its external relations. In the 1950s, there was triumph, hope and a glorious vision; never before in the history of China had so many Chinese been touched by enthusiasm for a new age. The combination of nationalist fervour, human drama on a grand scale and liberation from decades of humiliation and despair produced a moment of magic which the Communist leadership used to sustain their program of transformation. And this included doing many unpleasant things to hundreds of thousands of people. However unpleasant, they were widely accepted as the price the country had to pay for its new status and the chance of a new beginning.

The central point about revolutionary China's interests in the 1950s was to be the great experiment and model for all mankind which had to be protected at all costs from class enemies within and from foreign saboteurs. Like all experiments using the vocabulary of the natural sciences, the emphasis was on controlled conditions under which plans and blueprints for the experiment could be put into practice. Human beings were seen as basic chips in larger social units which in turn added up to the total revolutionary state. The confidence in their leaders of most Chinese as well as the tight control wielded over those who did not share their confidence made it possible for many of the plans to be carried out with fanfare. At one level, the plans succeeded dramatically to provide economic security and improve the living conditions of the landless poor and even the lot of the working poor. At other levels, it was recognised that the formerly rich and the relatively well-to-do had to sacrifice more to pay for the equality that most people seemed to want. For everyone to live simply for the sake of the revolution was a price most people seemed to pay.

In return, the new state brought law and order, checked inflation,

promised a whole range of social reforms that would ultimately destroy the last vestiges of feudalism and liberalism, render it impossible for capitalism to return to China in any form and thus prepare the way to full socialism. Along the way, the people's productive energies would be harnessed to the strengthening of China's capacity to defend the motherland as it had not been able to do for more than a hundred years. And indeed the Korean War, the Sino-Indian War, the progress with nuclear weaponry all confirmed the good management that a revolutionary state could provide. As for the impact of such developments upon China's small neighbours, it was enough to say, and in any case self-evident, that China as the victim of a century of imperialist aggression would never be an imperialist power and that the strengthening of China was merely in order to strengthen the side of the victims against the remaining imperial states. Those who doubted the Chinese image of themselves were either fooled by capitalist propaganda or were downright anti-Chinese. It was a confident age when it was thought that China's good intentions alone could overcome its neighbours' fears. It seemed rarely to have occurred to the Chinese propaganda officials that a strong China was not necessarily welcome to small nationalistic neighbours who felt that their countries had always been overshadowed by China.

A major turning point was the "Cultural Revolution" of 1966—1967. The consequences of that bit of blood-letting in China, not least the intensifying of Soviet military pressures on China's northern borders, was to dampen some of the fears in China's neighbourhood. No one who gave the subject thought wanted the Soviet Union to invade China and win, nor did they want China to disintegrate into anarchy again, which was tantamount to inviting Soviet military intervention. But a China that was totally engrossed within itself with its own revolutionary struggles, that was ideologically divided between fanatical idealists on the one hand and realistic pragmatists (supported also by strong vested bureaucratic interests) on the other, did take the pressure off its neighbours.

The consequences within China, of course, were even more significant. Mao Zedong single-handedly destroyed the myth of the Communist Party's infallibility and then proceeded to undermine that of his own infallibility. He had begun to do this in the late 1950s but did not succeed for another decade. After 1969, following the 9th Party Congress, when he tried to restore the people's confidence in the Party, it was too late. Instead, he found himself in a series of bitter battles to determine who should succeed him, each battle causing greater disillusionment and cynicism among most Chinese. And between high-pitched idealism and continuous inner-party struggle, China's economy stagnated, its industrialisation program halted, its skilled elites attacked and set aside and its bureaucrats largely corrupted when they were not demoralised. Until Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China seemed to have been paralysed by fears and uncertainty about its future after Mao.

China's national interests for the past five or six years cannot be understood without recalling the ups and downs of the period since 1949. And its interests where the security of the Southeast Asian and Southwest Pacific Region is concerned cannot be separated from these national interests. What is now of primary importance for China's leaders is the restoration of the Party's control over the country and this requires that the Party restore its sense of purpose and its self-respect. The image of factionalism and corruption has to be corrected if the Chinese people are to regain confidence in the Party. From the point of view of most Chinese, Deng Xiaoping's leadership has been a great relief after the anxieties of the last years of Mao Zedong. From their own accounts, it is clear that they want to be assured that those bad years and that kind of Party self-destruction will never return and that an orderly concern for law and democracy will prevail from now on. At the same time, as people are wont to do after years of deprivation, they want a clearly better standard of living. More money to spend, better quality consumer goods and more democracy are the common demands. And the leaders do seem to be trying to give them more of what they want.

In order to do so, China needs not only time and a secure environment for its economy to grow but also the wherewithal to develop, to produce more, and ultimately to be able to sustain growth largely by itself. The opening to the West, to Japan and to non-socialist countries has made China a country that is far easier to understand. It has taken on the appearance of another developing Third World country of a familiar kind. The revolutionary fervour seems to have gone, there is a deliberate playing down of Marxist-Leninist doctrine both in internal and international discourse. Instead, what is projected is a country troubled by the imbalance between its people and its resources. It is one that is concerned about how to manage the agonies of modernisation on such a large scale. It is worried by the shortage of skilled manpower, the apparent alienation and cultural vacuum of the young and the moral fibre of its cadres.

This is comprehensible and induces a fair amount of sympathy. The question that remains is, whether this is a temporary position for China made necessary by some very bad experiences or whether this represents a new direction for China which enables it to reconcile its national goals with those of its non-socialist neighbours. The Chinese government has not made explicit what its course will be. It seems ambivalent in seeking the friendship of non-Marxist, even anti-Marxist countries while assuming that the scientific character of its own Marxism makes Marxist principles indispensable.

This takes us back to China's commitment to revolution. It has been a long commitment. The Chinese revolution has, in all important ways, replaced the Confucian order. Whether it has been more nationalistic or more Marxist-Leninist is less important than the way modern China sees itself as the product of revolution. However most Chinese might feel about making revolution today, all of them have grown up with the idea and the hopes of revolution. Despite the failures and the tragedies — whether in 1911~1912, in 1926~1927, in 1945~1949, in 1958~1960, or in 1966~1976 — there is ample evidence that China's elites accept the revolutionary order as central to their modern heritage, as their duty

and almost as their destiny. They have provided us with no reason to doubt that the willingness to work towards that order is pervasive and deep among them.

Given such an historical relationship with revolution of over seventy years, what does this commitment mean for the Southeast Asian and Southwest Pacific regions in the short term and in the longer run? I had earlier mentioned that the epic political struggles since 1949 were always related to problems arising from China's size and its population numbers, its cultural heritage and its involvement in world affairs. Let me try to answer the above question with at least these three factors in mind.

To begin with the short run, China's involvement in world affairs during the coming precarious years will obviously be the single most important factor in determining China's interests in the region. Soviet support for a hostile Vietnam and United States military backing for the regime in Taiwan seemed to colour all attempts to define Chinese interests. The first is^o relatively new and probably avoidable if Chinese internal politics in the 1960s had not led to Vietnamese doubts about the Maoist view of the world and to suspicions that Vietnam would be continually pressured to toe the Chinese line in regional affairs. The Chinese seem to have underestimated Vietnamese nationalism almost as much as the French and the Americans had done earlier on. The Vietnamese, of course, had not made it easy for the Chinese. As the much smaller country, already devastated by years of war, Vietnam has portrayed itself as the victim of centuries of bullying by China. Even if this was simply not true, China would have a tough time explaining away the limited invasion it launched in 1979. Equally difficult has been the effort to justify the Pol Pot regime and to paint the Khmer Rouge as heroic patriots whose only wish is to save Kampucheans from Vietnamese oppression. Fortunately for China, the Soviet presence in the Indo-China states has frightened most Southeast Asian governments; and American backing for China on this issue has given the Chinese the

first real chance they have had for decades to establish a new trust and friendship with its southern neighbours, the five ASEAN states. It remains a hesitant relationship, and this is not necessarily the fault of the Chinese government today. The fact that large numbers of people of Chinese descent reside in each of the ASEAN states must make their governments pause and there is probably nothing much China's leaders can do to reassure these governments of their good faith short of denouncing communism themselves. And obviously these leaders cannot do this unless they want to commit suicide. Both China and Vietnam are counting on the hope that time is on its side. In the short run, both cannot be right. But from the point of view of the ASEAN nations, a China entangled in an Indo-China problem kept alive by a limited but steady Soviet support might be preferable to a China which the Vietnamese are prepared to forgive and follow. And it is far from certain that it is not in China's interests to try and keep things exactly as they are for several years longer while they rebuild their economy and continue gradually to improve their relations with those ASEAN countries who need more time to defuse and diminish their respective local Chinese problems.

The problem of Taiwan, on the contrary, is the people's Republic of China's oldest problem. But possibly because the problem is more mature with age, it is not threatening. While reunification with Taiwan would be desirable, it is no longer the urgent matter it used to be in the 1950s. Good relations with the United States has made the Taiwan question not so much the time-bomb between China and the US but almost a special common bond that ties the two together today more than it divides them. It remains the best antidote against careless talk on both sides and encourages both sides to be sensitive and alert to each other's moods. And that surely helps good relations between the two, at least in the short run. From the point of view of the region, it has become increasingly clear that, while almost everyone pays lip service to the "one-ness" of China, the region as a whole would be content to treat

with "one China" in two parts, and might even prefer to do so. China is perfectly aware of this but now recognises that this is understandable in the short run. It might even make a virtue of this necessity, keep tensions down in the region and concentrate on getting Taiwan's oldest friends, Japan and the US, to assist more directly in China's modernisation program.

For the rest of the world, China's involvement has never been as low-key as it has been for the past few years. The operative word has been realism, especially in South Asia and in Western Europe. Only on the United Nations stage in New York has China had to heighten its rhetoric from time to time. And even there, the occasions have mainly been related to issues like the Soviet-Vietnamese partnership in Southeast Asia and American politics over Taiwan, both very much within our region.

In the longer run, China's present involvement in the region plays only a small part in determining its interests. I believe two other factors are perennial and will continue to mould China's long-term interests in the region and even more its future role in world affairs. One of them concerns the problems arising from China's size and population, the other derives from China's view of its history and cultural heritage. China's size, especially the size of its population, is a well-known feature. It has remained the one common theme for the outside world since the earliest contacts. The West, notably businessmen and political prophets, have commented on this phenomenon endlessly and breathlessly for nearly three hundred years. It has survived all talk of modernisation, of radical transformation, of the end of the *ancien régime* and the age of revolution. Whatever else might have changed, this feature of China has been uppermost in everyone's calculations, not least the Chinese themselves. Remember Mao Zedong's strictures against Malthusian pessimism and his optimism about enough Chinese surviving a nuclear war. Note the updating of four hundred million to one billion customers. Recall all the jokes about the Chinese marching four by four around the globe again and again and about the large second hand on the clock

ticking away while Chinese babies come tumbling out of their mother's wombs.

The subject is still a perennial one, but the emphasis has changed somewhat. In the 1950s, there was talk about well-disciplined human waves in war, about blue ants mounting an industrial revolution to surpass imagination, about the vast natural resources that one-quarter, and now one-fifth, of mankind was going to exploit to enable them to dominate the world. The past few years have seen a complete turn-around in approach. Now China's large population is the single largest obstacle to China's progress, acting largely to eat up all surplus foods, to clog up bureaucracies based on full employment and to keep standards of living indefinitely low. In sharp contrast to earlier times, there is a new sympathy for China's population problems and an urgency about the measures needed to reduce these problems to manageable size. The Chinese themselves have largely been converted to this view and the spectacular long-term plans they have made to deal with their population have almost everywhere been greeted with approval. Never before has a Chinese act been received so warmly and with so many offers of help. And as always with China, its bigness renders any decision it makes for itself mammoth and momentous for others.

How long can China sustain this decision to reduce its population over the next hundred years? If the Chinese are as determined as they sound today, the commitment well into the twenty-first century will engage a great part of their energies for a long time to come. It would require a stable political system with extraordinary powers of social control, tough managers to ensure that draconian methods are accompanied by appropriate rewards, and rapid industrialisation to ensure that, for the next few decades before the population begins actually to fall, there is a steady and measurable rise in the standard of living for most people. A commitment of this kind and on this scale must have ramifications for our region if not for the whole world.

One cannot, of course, expect the world to stand still while the

Chinese are undergoing this vast experiment they have willed upon themselves. But the possibility of their holding their course steady for decades to come will itself influence events. China would depend more and more on an extended period of internal stability and external peace. It would require a long period of rising productivity while technical and managerial skills are improved and a whole new generation of well-educated and well-trained people emerge to sustain an increasing rate of economic growth. China would have a greater vested interest in low-key international politics in its neighbourhood than ever before. Whether such favourable conditions can be maintained may not be up to China, but if it is to pursue its long-term plans effectively, it must actively contribute towards an environment which would allow it to do that. And it would seem rational, and in their own interest, for its southern and eastern neighbours to help in that assigned task.

This leads me to the other perennial factor which is closely related to size and numbers, and that is, China's view of its history and its cultural heritage. As has always been noted, China's sheer size carried with it some special interests, so also would its long and continuous history create exceptional interests. This point, of course, is no longer as clear-cut as it had been from ancient times until the 1950s. There is now the question of whether the Chinese polity today is continuous with the Confucian state. The commitment to revolution, whether political, social or industrial, that I spoke of earlier may have marked a turning-point in modern history that fundamentally changed the nature of Chinese society and culture. If so, would not the present perspective on China's past and its cultural heritage be so different that even historically based interests would have been transformed?

I believe it is still too early to say that such a transformation has occurred. We can certainly point to important departures from earlier patterns of history: mass industrial democracy is quite new, rule by a revolutionary one-party state would have been inconceivable, agricultural collectivisation based on non-military and non-kinship principles would

have been impossible in the past. And there are a thousand smaller items in the everyday lives of the Chinese people which bear no relation to the traditional way of doing things. Yet like China's size, its deeply-rooted history remains real and still guides its modern political culture. Personalised bureaucratic structures are dominant, private connections are indispensable and people remain quick to pass moral judgements, flatter those in power and condemn those who lose power in very familiar traditional ways. I say this not in criticism but in acknowledging that behaviour and thought patterns are slow to change. The decades of revolutionary rhetoric and activity are simply not enough to make significant shifts in these patterns. It is not possible to predict if and when the Chinese will sever their strong ties with their past. I suspect they will not do so in the foreseeable future. Hence, for the long-term view of Chinese interests, the historical patterns in modern dress need to be carefully observed.

Let me now limit myself to comments which are relevant to our region. For example, the region to China's south and east is still not so vital to China's security as its northern land frontiers. Despite the advent of sophisticated nuclear technology which makes distances and boundaries much less meaningful than in the past, vulnerability on land over the wide open spaces of the north is still seen as the prime threat. And despite the modern use of air transport and electronic communication, it is still assumed that the southern and eastern coasts represent wealth and economic progress. Also, the leaders since 1949 have strongly reaffirmed the supremacy of central authority and now have the means of implementing this more thoroughly than at any time in the past. And, while giving different reasons for their decision, they have re-enforced the historical tendency towards basic self-sufficiency and restored their suspicions about the outside world, again in familiar ways. There is, of course, an understandable pride in China's history and we are not talking about crude imitations of the past. Modern Chinese rightly reject

the idea of using past analogies to base their current policies upon. Yet it is so easy to slip into such analogies, whether appropriate or not. The fact is, the past, and especially China's long past, is full of usable analogies, mostly inaccurate and inapplicable to the present and future. But this will not deter the Chinese from using them as they have always done. What is important is who decides which bit of the past to use for each occasion. What is puzzling about China in the long run is how the past will be used in the future.

As far as the region is concerned, there are several contradictory bits of the past which could be used. When the north was lost, as happened under the Mongols in the thirteenth century and under the Manchus in the seventeenth, there was considerable pressure for the Chinese to push south. Indeed, the Mongols even sent naval expeditions to Japan and to Java and these did influence the expeditions of Cheng Ho to the Indian Ocean a century or so later. And, under Manchu rule, the south became so overpopulated that many of the Chinese there seized opportunities to trade and work in, and ultimately migrate to, Southeast Asia. Here the uncomfortable thought for the nations in the region is that, over the past thousand years or so, the northern capital of Peking (Beijing) was under foreign rule for over seven hundred of them. It would seem to be in the region's interest not to have China ever under northern foreign rule again.

On the other hand, another bit of the past would emphasise something quite different. The founder of the Ming dynasty in the fourteenth century laid down that China should never invade or seek trouble in the south and east, but concentrate its forces in northern defence. And his great-grandson pulled back Cheng Ho's expeditions altogether and left Southeast Asia entirely to others to dominate for the next five centuries. Thus the idea that China would return to dominate the region after the West withdrew is simply not based on history. What has been demonstrated as more potent here is that the West cannot, and is not allowed

to, withdraw and as superpower rivalry develops in our region, China is vitally and necessarily interested. It can then be argued that China has learnt from its more recent history. A Southeast Asia that is fought over by Great Powers will eventually open the door to these Powers to enter China from the south. The lesson, therefore, is that China cannot afford to neglect its interests in our region whatever the northern threats may be.

I could go on but it is easy to go too far. Most events are not directly related to a country's early history and most people do not turn to historical analogies for explanations and solutions. It is enough to remind ourselves that, while China's immediate interests need not be rooted in its history and its use of analogies would be unpredictable anyway, China has had a unique way of allowing its long-term interests to be influenced by what had happened to a large country located where it is. Two things can be done. The region could refine its understanding of China's history, especially in its relations with countries to its south and east. Or, China could be encouraged to identify its use of its past in a more reassuring way; while some Chinese may prefer to leave their options open at all times, there will be many who would realise that a more predictable concern for present and future interests would be better appreciated by its friendlier neighbours.

I began by asking what revolution this century has meant to China and how that has affected China's position in the region. Insofar as the revolution is incomplete, and no revolution ever is complete, its position need not have changed a great deal. On the other hand, it may be suggested that a conscious commitment to revolution might in time overcome the inertia that China's history and a geography had long decreed for it. I believe the Chinese would expect that to happen but until it does, its long-term interests will be guided by its huge size and its varied and colourful past. What is ironical and interesting is that China is closer today than anyone expected to the kind of China each

of the Great Powers would have liked to have supported early this century: a stable, orderly China with enough strength to control revolutionary forces within China but of limited strength outside.

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