

Beijing Seminar on China and Eastern Europe in the 1960-80s

The PHP held its second major international conference on March 24-26, 2004, in Beijing, under the title “Reviewing Relations between China and East European Countries from the 1960s to the 1980s” (see Program). Organized jointly with the Party History Research Center of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the seminar brought together former Chinese and East European diplomats for a roundtable discussion with Western and Chinese scholars. The London School of Economics Cold War Studies Centre, Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars (CWIHP) and the George Washington University Cold War Group (GWCW) were the cooperating institutions. In the early stages of the preparation, the Modern History Research Center and Archives and the School of International Relations, both at Peking University, had also been involved.

The seminar was the first time the Chinese Party History Research Center organized an international conference with a foreign partner. One of the participating Chinese diplomats commented that “When I first heard of the proposed seminar I could not believe my ears.” The goal was to engage in a structured and focused open discussion aimed at identifying, analyzing, and interpreting the main issues of the relations between China and the Soviet Union’s Warsaw Pact allies during their most turbulent period, as remembered by veteran diplomats from both sides. The seminar achieved that goal beyond expectations.

The discussion, arranged chronologically, was moderated by Professor Odd Arne Westad, of the London School of Economics, and Zhang Baijia, Senior Research Fellow at the Party History Research Center and director of its Third Research Department (responsible for research on the period since 1978). The Chinese side was represented by seven former ambassadors, the East European side by three former ambassadors and three other high-ranking diplomats (see List of Participants). The countries involved were Poland, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. No suitable participant could be located in former Czechoslovakia.

In advance of the seminar, the National Security Archive had prepared a CD with a selection of declassified US documents on the American-Chinese rapprochement in the 1970s. A further selection of documents, obtained by the PHP from former East German, Czechoslovak, and Romanian archives, had been posted on the PHP website, [www.isn.ethz/ch](http://www.isn.ethz.ch); a few had been translated with support from the CWIHP, with more translations to be added later. Numerous additional documents had been made available by the GWCW at its landmark November 2003 conference in Budapest, of which the Beijing seminar has been described as a “most perfect follow-up.” Although no new Chinese archival documents became available for the years covered by the seminar its coincidence with the unprecedented release by the Chinese foreign ministry of about 30 per cent of its records up to 1955 augured well for the future.

The proceedings of the seminar were recorded in both Chinese and English. The PHP will publish the English version in print as well as on its website. The seminar broke

new ground by offering insights into perceptions and assessments of policies, their making and implementation. Following is a summary of some of the most important findings with regard to Chinese-East European relations in their larger historical setting.

Ever since the onset of the Sino-Soviet rift, China differentiated between its policies toward the Soviet Union and the East European countries. It acted on the assumption that those countries, though extensively dependent on Moscow, nevertheless had interests of their own that could be exploited by China to help isolate the Soviet Union. Beijing therefore never publicly criticized their leaders and eventually had normalized relations with them earlier than it did its relations with the Soviet Union.

The East European diplomats agreed that the communist regimes they had served had interests of their own. The pursuit of those interests, however, differed depending on how much leeway Moscow was prepared to grant its dependent states at any given time as well as on how much those states were prepared to make use of the leeway. The former Romanian ambassador observed that in relations with China attitudes mattered more than issues.

Assessments by Chinese representatives abroad often differed among each other as well as from those by Beijing. In 1956, for example, the Warsaw embassy judged the Polish reform movement legitimate whereas the local representatives of the Xinhua press agency regarded it as reactionary, and thus worthy of suppression by the Soviet Union. China's opposing such suppression while abetting it in the case of the Hungarian revolution reflected Beijing's assessment of the Polish situation as involving rectification of an "unequal treaty" relationship with Moscow whereas in Hungary a violent overthrow of communist rule was at issue.

According to the Chinese diplomats, China's establishment in the early 1960s of its "special relationship" with anti-Soviet Albania—mainly at Albanian initiative—did not rule out reconciliation with Moscow until the Kremlin disappointed Beijing's hopes for a rapprochement in the aftermath of Khrushchev's ouster. They cited the 1965 Mao-Kosygin meeting as a turning point. Disagreements between the two countries about support for North Vietnam in its war against the United States—which neither initially believed the Vietnamese could win—fueled Chinese mistrust not only of the Soviet Union but also of its allies. China opposed Polish attempts at mediating the Vietnam War as untimely and remained aloof to Warsaw's apparent interest in establishing a "back channel" to Beijing.

The Chinese and East European diplomats agreed in their assessment of the Cultural Revolution as a disaster for China's foreign policy and its image in the world. The policy spun "out of control" as different factions fought one another in the foreign ministry. Albania alone continued to back China on international issues but there was no convergence between the two countries on domestic policies. Unlike in China, Enver Hoxha's campaign against "bureaucratism" targeted only the government, not the party establishment. When Albanian officials visiting China offered to join in public

castigation of high-ranking victims of the Cultural Revolution, notably Liu Shaoqi, they were spurned.

In 1968, China never managed to formulate a policy toward the Czechoslovak reform movement, vacillating between its assessment as resistance to Soviet domination and a variety of “revisionism.” Beijing nevertheless reacted strongly to Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia, fearing an ominous precedent. Zhou Enlai’s assurances of support to Romania against the threat of Soviet intervention, voiced publicly at Mao’s instructions at the Romanian embassy reception on August 21, went even farther in a private conversation with the ambassador. But when Albanian defense minister Beqir Balluku came to Beijing two months later to propose an anti-Soviet alliance, Mao was evasive, dwelling on the importance of Yugoslavia as an “indirect ally.”

The seminar elucidated but did not resolve the crucial question of how close China and the Soviet Union came to war in 1969. The Chinese and East European testimonies lent support to the growing scholarly consensus that the border clashes had been the result of the chaos brought about by the Cultural Revolution rather than of any deliberate decisions by either the Chinese or the Soviet government; once the clashes occurred, however, the excessive Soviet use of force made matters worse. Both sides geared themselves for war, exaggerating each other’s readiness to wage it. Each side remained more restrained than the other thought.

East European, particularly Hungarian and Polish, diplomats revealed that their governments disbelieved Moscow’s allegations of Chinese aggressiveness. While frightened at the prospect of a Soviet-Chinese War that could draw their countries in, they never really believed the Kremlin leaders would be so foolish as to start a war with China. On the vexing question of Soviet plans for a pre-emptive strike against its nuclear facilities, which was the subject of much Western speculation, the diplomats did not recall any hints from Moscow at the time.

The Chinese participants reported that later in 1969 Mao tried to defuse tension, and consequently disapproved of the mobilization order No. 1 that his anointed successor Lin Biao had presumably issued on his own. The Chinese rebuffed Soviet attempts at reconciliation because they thought the time was not ripe but possibly also because no one was in a position to take the necessary responsibility. Under these circumstances, the importance of the Chinese-American rapprochement appears even larger than it would have been otherwise.

According to Hungarian testimony, East Europeans had expected it but were still surprised when it came. The rapprochement strengthened China’s relations with Romania, which had been instrumental in facilitating it, but strained Beijing’s relations with other East European countries, albeit in different degrees. Bulgaria condemned it in strong terms, apparently at Soviet behest, as did Albania, which regarded it as a betrayal of international communism. Consistent with the policy of differentiation between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, the Chinese responded in a low key.

Much like the Brezhnev leadership, Beijing misjudged the Soviet Union's apparent global ascendancy during the first half of the 1970s. The Chinese misinterpreted the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe as a Soviet ploy to weaken Western Europe's defenses and exaggerated the benefits Moscow could derive from West Germany's new Ostpolitik. The management of China's relations with Eastern Europe during Mao's last years was thus not as sophisticated as his admirers have been inclined to think, nor did it immediately change after his death. Only the advent of reform under Deng Xiaoping in 1978 did provide China's foreign policy with the necessary admixture of "rationality and courage" that was the prescription for success.

China's turn toward reform was generally welcomed in Eastern Europe even while Beijing continued to view the Soviet Union as the enemy number one. Hungary came to regard China as a "partner in reform" although the preferred Chinese reform model was rather the Yugoslav one because of its more developed market features. Beijing's relations with Albania plummeted because of the undiminished Albanian commitment to ideological orthodoxy, leading to the termination of Chinese economic aid though not to public recriminations by Beijing.

The Chinese diplomats offered a convincing account of their government's commitment to the "Three Respects" principle—respect for the Eastern European countries' particular foreign and domestic policies, for their special relationship with the Moscow, and for whatever ways they would choose in pursuing mutual relations. China adopted a remarkably restrained attitude toward the Solidarity crisis in Poland, regarding it as the country's internal matter, and felt vindicated by the manner in which the Polish military seemed to have mastered the crisis. Its outcome, however, made Beijing less sensitive to the challenge Eastern Europe's communist regimes would subsequently face from their peoples. Bent on good relations with both the reform-minded regimes, such as Hungary's, and the reactionary ones, particularly East Germany's and Romania's, Beijing was unprepared when all of them collapsed.

The seminar raised the question of the effect of the June 1989 Tiananmen Square events on East European developments. The Hungarian representative remembered demands in his country for the transfer of diplomatic recognition from China to Taiwan. There was concern in Eastern Europe about Chinese support for local hardliners and especially about a possible Chinese attempt to rescue Ceausescu. These were unwarranted concerns. The former Bulgarian ambassador recalled Premier Li Peng having asked party chief Todor Zhivkov with apparent levity whether he had his "Egon Krenz" ready.

Romania's former ambassador was alone in voicing a critical view of the dissent that led to Tiananmen; for their part, the Chinese diplomats emphasized Tiananmen's irrelevance for the course of China's relations with Eastern Europe. One of them described the shock that the subsequent collapse of communism nevertheless meant for the Chinese who, having been "emotionally attached to socialism," now began to wonder about its meaning. The foreign ministry encountered criticism for its "hands-off" policy—exemplified by its letting Eastern European diplomats decide whether they

preferred to be addressed “Comrade” or “Mr.”—but the spirit of the “Three Respects” prevailed.

In taking stock of the results of the conference, the participants praised its spirit of open and substantive discussion as a good omen for further cooperation. The Party History Institute expressed interest in such cooperation in the study of China’s past relations with other parts of the world as well. For the PHP, this provides an opportunity for a follow-up especially with regard to the countries of Western Europe, NATO, and the European Union.

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