

## Evolution in Vision: Principal Contradictions of Chinese Policy

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Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China's foreign policy has undergone a series of significant shifts. These shifts can be understood through the changing of the principal contradiction that characterizes each period of development. According to Mao's analysis of Marxism-Leninism, "once this principal contradiction is grasped, all problems can be readily solved."<sup>1</sup> From Mao to now, the Party has identified three such principal contradictions.

On September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1949, when the CCP was officially elected as the ruling party of China, Mao declared that "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation. We have stood up."<sup>2</sup> Under Mao, the principal contradiction took the form of class struggle, manifested in the clash between "the proletariat and the bourgeoisie," "the great masses of the people and feudalism," and "all the oppressed classes in Chinese society and imperialism."<sup>3</sup> The logic of class struggle extended into China's foreign policy during the Cold War. Mao's "一边倒" (*yi bian dao*, leaning to one side) strategy clearly stated that "all Chinese without exception must lean either to the side of imperialism or to the side of socialism."<sup>4</sup> However, China was unwilling to follow the Soviet Union's lead as a vassal state. Instead, by supporting "national liberation struggle" movements in countries like Angola and forming friendships with non-aligned nations like Indonesia, Mao attempted to forge a "Third World" that could swing the balance of power between the US and USSR without being beholden to either.<sup>5</sup>

The 1955 Bandung Conference was reflective of China's carefully crafted approach; at the Bandung Conference, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai repeated "a consistent message of respect for sovereignty, disclaiming the significance of ideological difference, and urging his fellow delegates to come to China to see for themselves that Communism posed no threat."<sup>6</sup> Zhou even renounced the use of overseas Chinese nationals as tools for subversion in other nations.<sup>7</sup> China's approach to the Bandung Conference reflected an awareness that uniting the Third World against

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<sup>1</sup> Mao Zedong, "On Contradiction," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, August 1937.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Cavendish, "Mao Zedong becomes Chinese Head of State," *History Today*, September 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Mao Zedong, "On Contradiction," *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, August 1937.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Cheng and Franklin Zhang, "Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis," *Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 14, no. 3 (1999): 95.

<sup>5</sup> Yafeng Xia, "The Cold War and Chinese Foreign Policy," *E-International Relations*, July 16, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Sally Wood, "'Chou Gags Critics in Bandung' or How the Media Framed Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference, 1955," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (2010): 1019.

<sup>7</sup> Chao Chin Low, "China's Citizenship Diplomacy at Bandung: An Evaluation from the British Perspective," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 17, no.1 (2015): 49.

imperialist influence was best achieved by allaying suspicions regarding Chinese interference in other countries' affairs. Entering the conference, China and India had just signed the 1954 Panchsheel Treaty establishing the five principles of peaceful coexistence: "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence."<sup>8</sup> Zhou's skillful diplomatic presentation of China indicated that the Five Principles would serve as the framework for China's foreign relations with all countries, not just India. In an article for *The Argus*, Peter Russo humorously remarked that "Cunningly and with subhuman restraint, [Zhou Enlai] upset our anticipations by refraining from howling aggressively at the other delegates or threatening to infiltrate them."<sup>9</sup> The success of the Bandung Conference contributed to the creation of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, to which China would become an observer.

Despite extolling the virtues of peaceful coexistence, Historically, China's foreign policy priority was first and foremost to avoid encirclement. This was reflected in China's response to the Soviet Union's promotion of "peaceful coexistence," proposed by Krushchev at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Khrushchev described peaceful coexistence as "peaceful competition for the purpose of satisfying man's needs in the best possible way" without "resorting to arms in order to prove that one is right," explicitly renouncing "interfering in the internal affairs of the capitalist countries."<sup>10</sup> Although the principles of Khrushchev's framework for peaceful coexistence did not contradict China's Five Principles, China saw the Soviet version of peaceful coexistence as a repudiation of class struggle. In the words of Zhu Ziqi, China believed the shift in Soviet policy would "change the general character of the solidarity movement ... and have it led by the right-wing of the bourgeoisie," while "stealthily spreading the seeds of anti-Sinicism, in order to weaken and shift anti-imperialism."<sup>11</sup>

The Soviet Union's pivot away from class struggle would sow the seeds for China's participation in triangular diplomacy with the US. Triangular diplomacy refers to "using relations with one country as leverage to extract concessions from another."<sup>12</sup> China viewed the Soviet Union as a more immediate military threat than the US, and consequently adopted the "一条线" (*yi tiao xian*, united line) strategy. In Mao's words, "We can take advantage of the contradiction between the two superpowers ... I want to draw a line ... lining up the US, Japan, China, Pakistan,

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<sup>8</sup> Chinese Consulate General in Karachi, "The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China](#), July 30, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Sally Wood, "Chou Gags Critics in Bandung' or How the Media Framed Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference, 1955," *Modern Asian Studies* 44, no. 5 (2010): 1025.

<sup>10</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, "On Peaceful Coexistence," [Foreign Affairs](#). October 1, 1959.

<sup>11</sup> Zhu Ziqi, "Zhu Ziqi to Chinese Peace Committee," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, PRC FMA 108-00106-01, March 23, 1960.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Historian, "Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972," [US Department of State](#), Accessed July 15, 2019.

Iran, Turkey and Europe.”<sup>13</sup> The US and China’s shared fears over the Soviet Union would eventually culminate in Kissinger’s secret trip to China in 1971 and Nixon’s groundbreaking state visit to China in 1972. It is in this context that Deng Xiaoping assumed power in 1978.

Under Deng, the principal contradiction shifted to one between “the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and backward social production.”<sup>14</sup> In the spirit of this transition, Deng boldly proclaimed that “To get rich is glorious,” marking an end to the fixation on class struggle that had consumed the previous era.<sup>15</sup> Under Deng, the US and China established diplomatic relations on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1979. When it comes to the Deng era foreign policy, many analysts first think of Deng’s infamous maxim of “hide your strength and bide your time.”<sup>16</sup> Some have interpreted this as a call for “actively deceiving the enemy to mask one’s true ambitions,” and used it to paint a narrative in which China exploited Western friendliness, infiltrated international organizations, and accrued power with the intention of toppling the liberal international order.<sup>17</sup> However, the original Chinese idiom “韬光养晦” (*tao guang yang hui*, keep a low profile) in 1990 was construed to promote self-cultivation over interventionism, self-reliance over external dependency, and honest work over bluster. Or, to rephrase, “韬光养晦” calls for China to keep a low profile not as a strategic deception preparing for revenge against the West, but as the particular Chinese mindset that in Deng’s view is the foundation of civilizational flourishing and resiliency, a necessity for China to escape the cycle of dynastic collapse. It ties directly into the principal contradiction as a response to “the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people” by elevating economic reform over geopolitical competition.

Deng’s economic reforms are usually referenced with the catch-all term “改革开放,” (*gai ge kai fang*, reform and opening-up), implying a grand feat of central planning. It is more accurate, however, to understand China’s economic reforms using Deng’s own idiom, “crossing the river by feeling the stones,” which captures the experimental and tentative mindset with which the CCP approached policymaking.<sup>18</sup> For example, the “household responsibility system” that served as a foundation for privatization of the economy was only implemented nationwide after experiments in Sichuan and Anhui.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, China only embraced an export-based growth model after first

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<sup>13</sup> Joseph Cheng and Franklin Zhang, “Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis,” *Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 14, no. 3 (1999): 98.

<sup>14</sup> Xinhua, “Xi: Principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved in new era,” *The State Council of the People’s Republic of China*, October 18, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Whiteley, “The era of prosperity is upon us,” *China Daily*, October 19, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Rudd, “Emperor Xi’s China Is Done Biding Its Time,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, March 2, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China’s Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015), 71.

<sup>18</sup> SCMP Reporter, “Crossing the river by feeling the stones,” *South China Morning Post*, July 22, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Klaus Muhlhahn, “Reform and Opening: China’s Turning Point,” *China Channel*, February 7, 2019.

experimenting with an “open door policy” in Guangdong and Fujian, then with the special economic zones in Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen.<sup>20</sup> Even as China became open to foreign trade and investment, Deng continued to value independence and stability, with the policy of the decade being “独立自主的和平外交” (*du li zi zhu de he ping wai jiao*, independent and peaceful foreign relations). In Deng’s words, “while we Chinese people value our friendship and cooperation with other countries and other people, we value even more our hard-won independence and sovereign rights ... no foreign country can expect China to be its vassal nor can it expect China to accept anything harmful to China’s interests.”<sup>21</sup> Refusing to be a vassal is distinct from wanting to be a hegemon, and Deng’s quote serves as a valuable reminder not to conflate the two. In 1990, Deng reinforced this distinction, stating that “Some countries in the third world want China to be the leader, but we should not be, and this is the fundamental policy of our nation.”<sup>22</sup>

When Jiang Zemin was appointed as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China on June 24, 1989 the principal contradiction did not change. Under Jiang, China would continue to diversify its economy and attract foreign investment, establishing good relations with both Russia and the US.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Jiang expanded China’s international footprint by promoting “走出去战略” (*zou chu qu zhan lue*, going out strategy), spurring its growth into a major FDI-originating country.<sup>24</sup> Most importantly, China successfully joined the WTO in 2001, a move which “unquestionably deepened China’s integration into the WTO’s rules-based international trading system” and solidified its position as a stakeholder in global stability instead of a revolutionary agitator.<sup>25</sup> Jiang’s successor Hu Jintao would also operate under the same principal contradiction, advocating a policy known as “和平崛起” (*he ping jue qi*, peaceful rise) intended to avoid conflict and continue growth. According to Kenneth Lieberthal, director of Asian affairs for the National Security Council during the Clinton administration, the peaceful rise strategy was primarily intended to create “an environment that maximizes the chances of China’s economic development,” rather than alter the geopolitical status quo.<sup>26</sup> To create such an environment, Hu was acutely aware of China’s need to secure its sea lines, announcing the goal of becoming a “maritime great power” capable of securing overseas interests.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Klaus Muhlhahn, “Reform and Opening: China’s Turning Point,” [China Channel](#), February 7, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Cheng and Franklin Zhang, “Chinese Foreign Relation Strategies Under Mao and Deng: A Systematic and Comparative Analysis,” *Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 14, no. 3 (1999): 100.

<sup>22</sup> Teddy Ng, “Deng Xiaoping’s guiding principles are still in play today,” [South China Morning Post](#), August 22, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Clibbon, “A look back: Jiang Zemin and a more accountable China,” [CBC News](#), July 17, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> Hongying Wang, “A Deeper Look at China’s ‘Going Out’ Policy,” [Center for International Governance Innovation](#), March 8, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Andy Rothman, “China’s accession to WTO has been a boon, not an error,” [Financial Times](#), February 16, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Esther Pan, “The Promises and Pitfalls of China’s ‘Peaceful Rise,’” [Council on Foreign Relations](#), April 14, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Rush Doshi, “Hu’s to blame for China’s foreign assertiveness?” [Brookings Institute](#), January 22, 2019.

Unfortunately, China's growth model was exhibiting worrying problems that led Premier Wen Jiabao to call the economy "unstable, unbalanced, uncoordinated, and ultimately unsustainable."<sup>28</sup> The Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and China's massive stimulus program would only deepen those economic problems, creating massive overcapacity in China's steel and cement industries and fuelling corporate debt. It is in the context of rising inequality, rampant corruption, environmental catastrophe, and slowing growth that Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012. Under Xi, the principal contradiction would change for the first time since Deng, to one of "unbalanced and inadequate development and the people's ever-growing needs for a better life," which is essentially a direct response to the challenges that Wen identified under Hu.<sup>29</sup> This new principal contradiction is expressed in China's current foreign policy in the form of the "national Chinese Dream," which calls for "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>30</sup> At the 19<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi determined that "to achieve national rejuvenation, it was critical to ... realize China's independence, the people's liberation, national reunification, and social stability."<sup>31</sup>

Despite popular belief that Xi's rise to power marked a pivot towards a more assertive Chinese foreign policy, Xi has largely remained true to the policy tradition set by his predecessors.<sup>32</sup> As previously mentioned, China's growing maritime power projection capabilities started under Hu. China's support for outbound investment and overseas economic activity started under Jiang. China's desire to create a stable external environment for economic growth started under Deng. Xi has enshrined new concepts like "building a community with shared future for mankind" into China's constitution and implemented new policies like the Belt and Road Initiative, but even these have echoes in Mao's "Third World," and the dynasties of ancient China. In short, China's foreign policy thinking has not dramatically shifted, rather it is China's rapidly increasing economic and military power that has prompted the world's alarmed reaction. In the rush to understand China's "new" foreign policy, analysts and policymakers often conflate a variety of issues ranging from the South China Sea to the BRI to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), grouping them all under the broad label of "assertiveness" and "global ambitions."

Entangling these policies serves only to obscure proper understanding and response, and disentangling them is the foundation for rational analysis of China's current foreign policy.

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<sup>28</sup> Tom Holland, "Wen and now: China's economy is still 'unsustainable'," [South China Morning Post](#), April 10, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Xinhua, "Xi: Principal contradiction facing Chinese society has evolved in new era," [The State Council of the People's Republic of China](#), October 18, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> China Daily, "Background: Connotations of Chinese Dream," [China Daily](#), March 5, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Xinhua, "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress," [China Daily](#), November 4, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Haenle and Shi Yinhong, "China's Shift to a More Assertive Foreign Policy," [Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy](#), December 9, 2018.