

MEMORANDUM

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MEMORANDUM FOR: THE PRESIDENT
FROM: HENRY A. KISSINGER *
SUBJECT: Mao, Chou and the Chinese Litmus Test

The Litmus Test

Over the long term, the intangibles of your China visit will prove more important than the tangible results. We should be able to leave the People's Republic of China with a creditable public outcome -- because of the advance work, the careful scaling down of expectations, and the needs of both sides for various audiences. The crucial factor, however, will be the Chinese judgment of our seriousness and reliability: this litmus test will determine their future policy. If we fail it, the immediate results will be less satisfactory than we expect, but more importantly, they could turn sharply away from us in subsequent months.

In that case, they could easily resort to the tempting levers of public opinion. They could then deal with us like the North Vietnamese do -- inviting in opposition politicians, dealing with unfriendly private groups, appealing to hostile journalists, lambasting us in the United Nations, and generally turning popular pressures on us while being tough on the state-to-state level. We can be certain that they would be especially skillful at this game; we would pay a double price at home and abroad for our alleged naivete at trying to deal with these people in the first place.

Thus, the Chinese will be concentrating on your strategic concepts as they discuss the various tactical issues. They will want to know if you understand their perspectives, how we chart the future, and whether we can be counted upon to move ahead surely and steadily. This does not mean that we shouldn't be firm with them. On the contrary, they will only respect strength and resoluteness. Nor does it mean that we shouldn't demand reciprocal treatment from them. On the contrary, they must be made fully aware of our own international and domestic imperatives.

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Mao

When one refers to the Chinese one is in effect discussing Mao and Chou, they are the premier exhibits, the two clearly dominant figures on the Chinese scene today, and your only real interlocutors during your visit.

A convenient distinction between Mao and Chou -- and one that is generally valid today -- is to cite the Chairman as the philosopher and Chou as the practitioner. Thus we can think of Mao as the philosopher, the poet, the grand strategist, the inspirer, the romantic. He sets the direction and the framework and leaves the implementation to his trusted lieutenant. He can be counted on to speak in broad, philosophic, historic terms and leave the negotiations to Chou. He will want to talk about the long view, the basic tides running in the world, where China and the U.S. are heading, with each other and with others.

Chou is the tactician, the administrator, the negotiator, the master of details and thrust and parry. His emphasis will be on the concrete substantive issues, and he will invoke the Chairman's authority and presence with what seems total sincerity.

However, this distinction between the two men can be misleading. Chou is perfectly at home on the philosophic plane, and he couches his tactical arguments in historical and conceptual terms. No man could have endured and accomplished what he has without a strategic vision.

More importantly, Mao can be as ruthlessly pragmatic as he is ideologically fanatic. Now in his final years, he envisions himself as a man above practical details, but his writings and his actions have shown hard-nosed adaptability as well as philosophic insight. After all, in the past half-dozen years a whole string of his closest associates have been declared guilty of the most serious crimes and whisked out of sight -- including two hand-picked heirs apparent and his personal secretary.

Mao's style then, includes audacity and the activist impulse with a skilful sense of political tactics. He has repeatedly shown a unique capacity to judge when to press, when to retreat and adopt a humble posture, how to build a broad coalition of support, and also an unflinching willingness to attack his opposition when his own position is strong.

His pragmatism and tactical adaptability is reflected in what was clearly his decision to use one barbarian (the United States) to control another (the Soviet Union) and invite you to the Middle Kingdom. He is reported to have remarked:

"Bad things can change into good things, and bad persons can become good persons. I like a person such as Nixon, but I do not like Social Democrats or Revisionists. These kinds of people say one thing and do another. Although Nixon has his cunning side, he is not as bad as the others, for his policy is more open."

Pointing out Mao's tactical agility should not, however, obscure his basic philosophic trait. His stature as one of the 20th century's outstanding political figures derives from his visionary side -- a combination of personal assertiveness, charismatic self-confidence, and a creative native intelligence. This man knows where he wants China to go, and has been pushing his country's social revolution for more than fifty years. He has torn China apart twice in a decade -- in the Great Leap Forward and in the Cultural Revolution -- to meet what he considered ideological requirements.

When he started his revolutionary road back in the 1920s there was absolutely no prospect of success. Since then, again and again, he has faced one towering crisis after another -- the annihilation campaigns of Chiang, Long March, Japanese invasion, civil war with the Nationalists, Korean War, Great Leap Forward, split with Moscow, Cultural Revolution, progressive Soviet encirclement. Surmounting such challenges requires vision as well as tactics.

Mao's peasant background is evident in his direct and earthy humor, which he often used to ridicule or disarm opponents. At the same time, he has the sensitivity to write appealing poetry, displays a good working knowledge of Chinese history, and has a capacity for insight and abstract social analysis which has produced a number of philosophical writings and a clear (if not necessarily attainable) concept of his country's future.

And he has made this vision real to others, like Marshall Yeh who told me in July of Mao's romantic appeal to him. Yeh was a general in Chiang's army in the 1920s when he heard of Mao in the mountains and what he was doing for the peasants and for China. The Marshal decided that his place was alongside this man, and he has been with him ever since. Countless others followed his example.

Chou

Chou is clearly running China. He is the dominant figure in both the party and government, and he steers both foreign and domestic policy. He refers to Mao for major issues of principle but clearly has great latitude in carrying out policies and decision-making.

He is charming, articulate and tough. You will enjoy the give-and-take with Chou on several planes, on all of which he is equally at home -- historical discussion, philosophic dissertation, tactical jousting, hard bargaining, light repartee.

You can be sure that he had done his homework, not only on the issues but also on America and you personally. He has a good command of American politics and society, although his picture must be distorted.

His negotiating style is extremely effective and requires finesse to counter. If he states a position in absolute terms, he will stick by it at least for a while. He is not to be pressed if he is not ready to be pressed.

If, however, he is at all evasive or ambiguous -- which is the usual case -- this suggests room for exploration. In this case it is better to go at the issue circuitously rather than frontally. Either later in a meeting, or on an informal occasion, you could pick up the subject again and suggest another approach. He might then absorb this and come back subsequently with a new statement incorporating elements of what you said but presenting it as the Chinese view.

The indirect approach, the use of analogy, is typical of the Chinese in general and Chou in particular. Almost everything he says, no matter how far it seems to stray from the subject at hand, is making a relevant point. This oblique style is not at all inconsistent with candor. Indeed, frankness was one of the dominant elements in our talks with Chou, and frankness would serve you well in your conversations.

Chou can be extremely -- and suddenly -- tough. Both General Haig and I have been treated to withering blasts, although Chou has never been vituperative or harsh in personal terms. In dealing at your level, he may round a few edges, but you can assume that you will get some very hard speeches, spoken with a simple eloquence and perhaps just after some cordial small talk.

You should not let such statements stand but rather respond very firmly, though non-abusively. If you start pulling back he will stay on the offensive. If his thrust is philosophic, you should counter with your own viewpoint without attacking his. If he makes a frontal assault on a specific issue, however, you should retort directly.

Chou's firmness, however, is not the kind of brutalizing toughness which we have come to expect from the Russians, but rather a hardness and consistency of purpose derived from fifty years of revolutionary experiences. To these people "struggle" is a way of life, without which they never would have gotten to where they are. Peace in the abstract is not a virtue; without justice it can serve to ratify oppression.

Thus if Chou (or Mao) makes hard statements, your response must be different than what you would use with the Russians. The latter can be met with tough language as well as tough substance. With the Chinese it is important to counter strongly with one's own viewpoint, but in a way that reflects comprehension of their point of view. My own experience is that if you remain firm on principles but express yourself with restraint, they are likely to modify their rhetoric and address points of contention in a relatively realistic way. They may actually try to test you by firing some "empty cannon" of rhetoric at you, but a polite, though firm, rebuttal should get them to drop this tactic.

Conclusion

In sum, these people are both fanatic and pragmatic. They are tough ideologues who totally disagree with us on where the world is going, or should be going. At the same time, they are hard realists who calculate they need us because of a threatening Soviet Union, a resurgent Japan, and a potentially independent Taiwan.

The Chinese leaders are deadly serious people who will not be swayed from their convictions by anything that in their view smacks of opportunism or convenience. They take a very principled approach, but within that framework they are willing to be realistic. This reflects the tension between their sense of history and their imperative for movement.

On the one hand, they have been surmounting towering internal and external obstacles for some fifty years. They take a long view. They see history on their side.

On the other hand, these leaders are in their seventies, and they surely want to reach certain goals before they depart the scene. Assuring the security of their country and their system for their successors must preoccupy them. In addition, the mysterious events last fall and the alleged Lin Piao challenge underline the great gamble Mao and Chou have taken in dealing with us and inviting you. Thus they will need to show some immediate results for their domestic audience.

Our essential requirement is to demonstrate that we are serious enough to understand the basic forces at work in the world and reliable enough to deliver on the commitments we make. If in our formal and informal talks we can impress the Chinese with these intangibles, we will have truly made your visit an historic success. If we fail to do so, we can expect the Chinese to be an increasingly thorny adversary, and history could record your visit as a gallant but stillborn venture.