

Reconstructing the discourse on China



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By Charles McKelvey

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The brewing New Cold War against China draws upon a long-standing lack of understanding in the West with respect to the Asian giant. We ought to understand the fundamental historic facts.

Fueled by popular opposition to Western imperialist penetration and Japanese military occupation, Mao Zedong led a socialist revolution to triumph in 1948. Departing from classic Marxism, Mao conceived a socialist revolution adapted to Chinese conditions. The son of a well-to-do peasant, he discerned the revolutionary spontaneity of the peasants, and he envisioned the formation of activists with mature revolutionary understanding from various social classes, who would channel the revolutionary spontaneity of the peasantry toward effective political action, educating the peasantry in the process. The triumphant revolution sought the modernization of the country on the base of the 1950 Agrarian Reform Law, which distributed land to peasants, anticipating the collectivization of the peasants into agricultural cooperatives.

The period of 1950 to 1976 was characterized by intense conflicts within the Chinese Communist Party concerning the pace and extent of the collectivization of agriculture as well as the form and the pace of industrialization. Disagreements in revolutionary processes are often resolved in practice, and in the Chinese case, the extremist positions taken by Mao were demonstrated to be utopian and impractical, causing social and economic disruption as well as intensifying political conflict.

Learning from this experience, the Chinese Revolution embarked on the more practical road of the “Reform and Opening,” which increased production by expanding space for private capital in agriculture and industry as well as for foreign capital, under the direction of the state, developing a “socialist market economy.” Recognizing the heretical nature of their socialism, Chinese theoreticians called the project “socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

Many Western Leftist intellectuals with a fixed and idealized concept of socialism think that “socialism with Chinese characteristics” is an ideological maneuver to legitimate the abandonment of socialism. But in fact, all socialist revolutions in power have developed their concept of socialism in the context of practical demands, and they have found it necessary to include components of private property, in an economic system that is directed by a state controlled by the delegates of the people. The Chinese socialist road parallels the evolution of socialism in other nations, including the important examples of Russia, Vietnam, and Cuba, all of which saw themselves not as abandoning socialism but as developing a pragmatic socialism.

As the Indian historian and journalist Vijay Prashad points out, in a recent interview by the Qiao Collective published in ALAI, a socialist revolution is not an event; it is a process. It emerges in the context of contradictions between the aspirations of the people and the productive possibilities that the revolution inherits. Socialist revolutions triumphed, in nations such as Russia, China, Vietnam, and Cuba, in conditions that did not have the economic and technological base for the socialism that was envisioned. The economic and technological conditions necessary for socialism had to be developed by the revolution itself. And they found that a certain level of private property in agriculture and in industry was effective in creating the necessary productive forces; although not in a situation in which private property rules.

In recent decades, China has been seeking to develop its economy and to play a global leadership role by creating mutually beneficial trade with many nations of the world. Many in the West falsely accuse China of trying to become an imperialist power.

Prashad has responded to this accusation. He notes that imperialism involves using military force or economic sanctions to impose an economic relation that has advantages for the imperialist power. The European powers and the United States did this for a century in Africa, plundering the continent. But China has not taken such an approach with respect to Africa, Prashad insists. The Chinese government, for example, has developed a number of accords that contribute to the African infrastructure, without strings attached. Chinese private companies can solicit agreements, and when an African government does not accept the proposal, there is no effort to impose sanctions, as occurs in imperialism. Some of the agreements involving Chinese private companies involve the payment of low prices for raw materials, as is the norm in the capitalist world-economy, for various historical reasons. Prashad argues that it is the capitalist world-economy that is responsible for the cheap labor and low prices for raw materials in Africa, not China. It is disingenuous to accuse China of colonialism for its participation in the world-economy with respect to Africa, while decades of real colonialism in Africa by the European powers are overlooked.

Many Westerners assume that China is authoritarian and does not allow freedom of speech. These assumptions are to some extent influenced by Chinese intellectuals now living in the United States, whose politically motivated observations are not subjected to critical analysis. They also are influenced by assumptions that Westerners tend to have about communism, a legacy of the Cold War. In general, such assumptions are not based in a desire to understand through the asking of questions relevant to political dynamics in China.

Prashad observes that the Chinese are thinkers, always adjusting policy on the bases of results. The Chinese establishment includes intellectuals who are not thinking two or three months ahead; they are thinking in decades, they are planning for the next 10, 20, and 50 years. Accordingly, there is a significant ongoing debate within the Chinese Communist Party, which has its factions, groups, and schools of thought. The debate therefore has characteristics different from public discourse in the West: it is tied to practice and to long-term planning, and it seeks consensus. But it cannot reasonably be said that there is not debate or freedom of expression in the Chinese Communist Party.

When Bill Clinton granted China “most favored nation” status in 1994, he did so with the argument that trading with the United States would be a force for change in China. This was an insincere argument, because it obscured the economic interests of the U.S. elite in more extensive trade with China. And it created a political problem, namely, the problem that economic policies are promoted deceptively, with the intention of hiding true economic motives. Accordingly, they create an inconsistency between economic reality and ideology, and they distort public discourse. This is an approach that is bound to confuse the people and prevent the emergence of consensus.

The problem of a public discourse that cannot possibly promote understanding and consensus remains with us. Recent campaign ads by the Trump Administration have attacked Joe Biden for being soft on China. Commentators in The New York Times are saying that Biden should argue against a New Cold War with China, but he should avoid the trap of defending China.

However, if the accusations against China were true; if it were true that China covered-up and delayed reporting on Covid-19, that China represses freedom of speech, and that China is a new imperialist force seeking to dominate the world, then some of the people will likely be inclined toward principled opposition to trade with China and for a strategy of containment.

The goal ought to be the forging of a consensual policy on the basis of correct understanding and moral principles, and to do this, the false claims about China have to be exposed and discredited. This necessarily involves defending China against false accusations, which have their source in elite opposition to that alternative, more just, and post-imperialist world, rooted in mutually beneficial trade among sovereign nations, that China and the Third World hope to create.

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