

# China today: Deng's balancing act

by Uwe Henke v. Parpart

The 13th Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) convened on Oct. 25, and is expected to bring about some important leadership changes. But, according to pre-Congress reports coming into the Western press from Beijing, a compromise has been reached between Deng Xiaoping and his "rapid reform" followers and the party elders, such as Deng's fellow Politburo standing committee member Chen Yun, et al., who are of a more conservative bent. Reforms will continue, but the elders will retain certain key party positions. As far as it goes (not very far), the analysis is correct: It gives up the foolish notion of a sharp right-left Deng-Chen faction fight. However, it offers not even a hint of an explanation of the predicted leadership compromise. To understand this compromise requires looking behind the personnel chessplay and peering into the Chinese cultural matrix.

Both Deng and Chen are Confucian "centralists" with a "mandate from heaven" to restore a strong and prosperous China after the chaos of the 1960s and early 1970s. It is their shared view that this requires economic, scientific, and military modernization, as well as strong central (Beijing) authority.

However, both the Deng-Chen division of labor within their joint modernization project, and divergent interests of social forces set in motion by the modernization, have led to differences in point of view and emphasis between the two "old leaders," which Western observers have exaggerated and interpreted as a major factional struggle. The Chinese "faction fight" has more of the character of a family argument.

Deng himself has worn two hats throughout the entire process. He has been in the forefront of initiating and implementing economic reform measures—his better-known role. He has also, as head of the party's central military commission, overseen the process of creating leaner (major personnel reductions), better-equipped, and more centralized armed forces. Yu Qiuli, principal Army spokesman on the Politburo, has publicly attested to Deng's "high authority" in the armed forces. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) is presumably the conservative force. Is Deng, in his Army role, factionalizing against Deng, the economic reformer? Not to the extent of committing political suicide, but, yes, to the extent of using the Army's sway and authority to maintain

central control over the reform process.

Thus, it was upon the Army's insistence that former party chief Hu Yaobang (a close Deng associate in the fight for economic reform) was ousted after the 1986 student demonstrations. The episode did not diminish Deng's standing, and even perhaps enhanced it; but it certainly gave the jitters to Western "open door" watchers.

These fears are in a sense justified, and likely gave Deng a good laugh. Today's "open door"—unlike the one pried open by the Western powers in the late 19th century—is a revocable instrument of Chinese policy. But these fears are laughable at the same time, because the open door is regarded by both Deng and Chen as a necessary element of their joint policy of reconstructing a unified and strong Middle Kingdom, and not the subject of factional disputes.

## The dilemma

Deng and Chen are members of that peculiarly Confucian institution, the CPP's central advisory commission (presently chaired by Deng). They are resigning from the five-member standing committee of the Politburo, but are expected to retain their roles as advisers, with Chen replacing Deng as chairman. As advisers, their principal responsibility is to administer *li* (the law) in the legalist sense—the established (empirical) order devised to preserve and further the unity and strength of the Empire. This is a specific responsibility of the advisory commission, not shared in the same manner by governmental institutions, the party, or the military.

The task is difficult and complex: to advance the "four modernizations," while at the same time carefully checking centrifugal tendencies entailed by the reform process.

In this context, interaction with the overseas Chinese living in the Pacific Rim nations and elsewhere is considered as potentially more problematic than dealing directly with the "barbarians" of the different points of the compass. These overseas Chinese, whose economic power and connections are expected to make important contributions to successful reform and development, will often deal directly with their extended families in the different Chinese regions, bypassing Beijing authority. This has already led to a disproportionate increase in and resurgence of the economic and financial power of Shanghai and several other south Chinese coastal cities and regions. And it can be expected to go hand in hand

with reinvigoration of old family and secret society networks not necessarily under Beijing control. Such networks, of course, will be exploited by Taiwan and others not just for economic, but also for political gain. Chen, an early reform leader, has addressed this and has openly attacked certain "corrupt" tendencies.

Similarly, the advisory commission has become increasingly wary of the implications of the large and growing (20%-plus) foreign trade dependency of China on Japan. Anti-Japanese student protests on almost any pretext, e.g., the elevation of a property dispute in Kyoto into a major international incident, are designed to prevent any resurgence of Japanese influence, especially among the younger generation.

### **Foreign policy: caution**

In the same vein, but more broadly, the Confucian advisory commission during the past 10 years has subjected, and for the foreseeable future, will continue to subject virtually all dealings with the outside world to the requirements of its modernization balancing act. Chinese attention is largely absorbed by the dynamics of their internal process. It is therefore idle to analyze specific Chinese foreign policy maneuvers from the standpoint of trying to discern longer-term strategic international alignments vis-à-vis either the United States or the Soviet Union. These will not be alliances with, or even sustained leanings toward, either superpower in the coming years. In substance, though not necessarily in appearance, Chinese foreign policy will be cautious and non-committal, evaluating Chinese advantage on a case-by-case basis. This was the attitude toward the Kissinger-Brzezinski "China card" policy, as well as toward last year's more skillful Gorbachov approach in his Vladivostok speech.

Historically, this foreign policy stance is consistent with policy attitudes during earlier periods of restoration and reconstruction, most notably the mid-19th-century Ch'ing restoration under Tseng Kuo-fan, a role model for Deng.

Hence, U.S. enticements and urgings that China align itself with the United States against the "common enemy" produced no tangible results. And the essential response to Gorbachov's talk of the "boundless potential" for Soviet-Chinese cooperation is captured in constant Chinese reminders regarding the "three obstacles"—Cambodia, Afghanistan, and Soviet troop concentrations on the Chinese border.

### **Securing the Rim**

An activist foreign policy will be practiced only on the immediate periphery of the Empire, both to protect already realized gains and to secure bargaining positions for future attention. Prototypes are Chinese policy toward Indochina and South and Southwest Asia. Both areas (along with the Northeast) are crucial to Chinese security and the exercise of regional control.

Failing to exert dominant influence, Chinese policy will

be to keep the areas unstable and China's adversaries off balance, and wait for another day. Since, in the shorter run, Soviet influence will be difficult to dislodge from Indochina, settlement of the Cambodia issue is not in the Chinese interest. It could only consolidate the Soviet position and even bring the United States (and possibly France) back into the picture. Thus, China, while not wanting to appear as a spoiler, has consistently thrown cold water on ASEAN initiatives on Cambodia and urged "caution."

More recently this occurred when Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savestila traveled to Beijing to present an ASEAN

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proposal for a "cocktail party," involving all parties to the Cambodian conflict. He registered lack of Chinese enthusiasm, and commentators concluded that a cocktail party would not take place any time soon. In the meantime, China continues its significant support for the Khmer Rouge, resupplying them to the extent of enabling constant harassment but no large-scale damage to the Vietnamese troops in the Cambodian countryside.

Chinese policy on the western borders and toward South and Southwest Asia is similarly dictated by security concerns and determination to exert influence, at least to the extent that conflict resolution without Chinese assent is impossible. Sinkiang Province borders on India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the U.S.S.R., in a militarily highly sensitive area. China wants to see Soviet troops leave Afghanistan, but not on the basis of a three-way deal between the United States, the U.S.S.R., and Pakistan, and possible Pakistani concessions that would leave the entire region in a neutral "Finlandized" state. Recent high-level Pakistan-China discussions were clearly aimed at forestalling such a development.

The present turmoil in Tibet fits into the same pattern of shoring up border security and projecting power on a limited scale into adjacent regions. A secure Chinese position in Tibet is crucial in their border conflict and territorial disputes with India, as well as possible intervention into Burma in the not-too-distant post-Ne Win era. While anti-Chinese sentiment in Tibet is endemic, it appears that the recent unrest was actually provoked by Chinese security forces. The dual reasons would be to preempt more serious insurrectionist problems, while at the same time moving sizeable military forces into position, where they might exert pressure on India or Burma as might be required.