7 Strategy and ‘Realism’ in Sino-American Normalisation

In the West, the Chinese view of Sino-American normalisation has often been cast as the triumph of post-Cultural Revolution ‘pragmatism’ over revolutionary ideology. Zhou Enlai was, indeed, a realist, but only in his own Chinese Marxist-Leninist terms, and an important part of the explanation of his ‘realism’, as it related to Sino-American normalisation, lies in his ideological understanding of ‘workstyle’ and ‘strategies and policies’.

Henry Kissinger described Zhou as ‘extraordinarily intelligent and subtle’.1 Kissinger believed that Zhou was a ‘great diplomat’ with a ‘masterly’ grasp of international realities.2 Indeed, Zhou could weave a spell over some of his most ardent critics; for example, the anti-Communist reporter, Joe Alsop, conceded after an interview with the Premier: ‘... I cannot recall any leader of a great country who more strongly conveyed extreme intelligence and total sang-froid than China’s present Premier’.3

Zhou Enlai, on the other hand, rarely commented on Kissinger. Critical colleagues at Harvard believed that Kissinger fantasised about reliving the career of the famous Austrian genius who crafted the post-Napoleonic reconstruction of Europe.4 Zhou responded to a comparison of Kissinger and Metternich with a rhetorical query: ‘How can there crop up in the present day a Metternich of the nineteenth century?’5 For Zhou, the world of Metternich had receded into the mists of time, and the social forces which had given rise to Metternich were no longer relevant. Kissinger, himself, rejected the comparison with Metternich referring to changes in communications, and the passing into history of interrelated European aristocracies whose diplomacy was marked by a ‘homogenous cultural reality’.6

Kissinger, in describing Zhou, laboured over the correlation of Chinese ideology and foreign policy. In his initial report to President Nixon concerning his secret trip to Beijing, he characterised the Chinese leadership as ‘deeply ideological, close to fanatic in the
intensity of their beliefs'. In his account of his ‘journey for peace’, Nixon indicated that his most ‘vivid memory’ was ‘the unique personality’ of Zhou Enlai. Nixon was impressed by Zhou’s combined ‘elegance and toughness’, but his respect was com Mingled with the instinctive caution of a Cold War veteran. Perhaps, Zhou’s knowledge was impressive, but Zhou’s ‘perspective’ was ‘badly distorted by his rigid ideological frame of reference’. 8

Despite his early reservations, Kissinger, after having engaged Zhou in several stimulating discussions, concluded that Zhou had a realistic understanding of international politics, and Kissinger distinguished between propaganda and actual strategic calculations made in Beijing. Continuing anti-American propaganda did not necessarily imply a lack of realism as to the necessity of Sino-American normalisation.

As National Security Advisor, Kissinger moved beyond his own academic paradigms. As a Harvard professor, he had compared ‘ideological’ and ‘pragmatic regimes’ to show that the former, in its obsession with ultimate ends, was incapable of a rational assessment of international realities, but in the following assessment of Zhou’s realism, Kissinger suggests a symbiotic relationship between ‘faith’ and disciplined rationality:

He was a dedicated ideologue, but he used the faith that had sustained him through decades of struggle to discipline a passionate nature into one of the most acute and unsentimental assessments of reality that I have encountered. 9

Kissinger contrasted Chinese and American approaches to international relations in such a way as to make the former appear to be more realistic. The ‘homogenous cultural reality’ of European aristocracy may have passed into history, but the underlying rationality of classical European diplomacy had been reincarnated in the Chinese approach of Zhou Enlai. Kissinger concluded:

China was in the great classical tradition of European statesmanship. The Chinese Communist leaders coldly and unemotionally assessed the requirements of the balance of power little influenced by ideology or sentiment. They were scientists of equilibrium, artists of relativity . . . Only one principle was inviolate. No nation could be permitted to be pre-eminent.10

Kissinger, on the other hand, regretted the confusion in the American approach which too often devolved to the level of adolescent