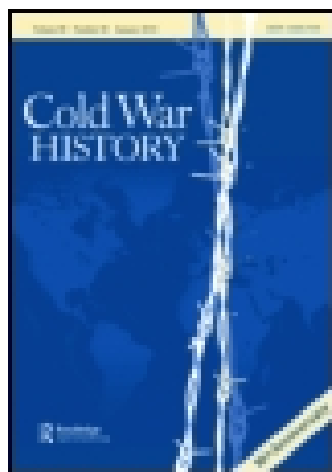


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Mao Zedong and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis

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This article provides an interpretation of Mao Zedong's political strategy during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. The connection between the internal and external struggle towards revisionism – launched by Mao in the first half of 1962 to eradicate the critics of the Great Leap Forward from the CCP – was energised by Mao's ability to exploit the opportunities offered by the Cuban crisis. Mao managed to capitalise on Moscow's strained relations in the Caribbean: the propaganda campaign launched within the country to support the Cuban revolution and criticise Soviet revisionism helped Mao to consolidate his political struggle and win over his opponents.

Introduction

As recently noted by Xia Mingxing and Shu Zhen Lan, the absence of references to the Cuban crisis in the official publications of the People's Republic of China (PRC) suggests that it is still one of the most delicate pages in the history of its foreign policy.¹ The lack of references to this important historical event in a recent photographic exhibition in Beijing on Che Guevara seems to corroborate this conclusion. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 also proved to be one of the most delicate moments for the internal development of the People's Republic of China, along with the crisis of the Great Leap Forward and the subsequent revival of Maoist radicalism from which the Cultural Revolution originated. These changes within the country drove Mao, as claimed by Xia and Shu, to follow a course in foreign policy, which, in retrospect, would prove to be wrong and unfair, especially with regard to

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¹ Xia Mingxing, Shu Zhanlan, 'Maozedong yu 1962 nian guba daodan weiji' [Mao Zedong and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962], *Weiren Chunqiu* [Spring and Autumn of Great Men], no. 2, (2008): 4–9.

the positions taken up by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) during the Cuban crisis.²

The delicate political nature of the issue under consideration could therefore be one of the reasons for the lack of reliable historical literature in Chinese on the subject. The few available studies on the issue – published only in recent years (2007–2010) – do not provide adequate critical analysis and are mostly based on public sources. None of them have made use of the numerous archival sources made available since 2004 by the *Waijiao Dangan Bu* (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, MOFA) for the years from 1949 to 1965.³ A study published in 2007 by Cheng Yinghong in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* relied on autobiographical accounts of Chinese diplomats and envoys of the Xinhua News Agency (XHNA) to Cuba recently published in Chinese.⁴ The nature of the Chinese sources used, however, inevitably led Cheng to overlook the profound influence that the internal political dynamics in the country had on its foreign policy in those years. One of the first Chinese historians to shed light on the importance of this aspect was Niu Jun in a working paper published in English in 2005 by the *Cold War International History Project*.⁵ Niu's work has provided Western historians with a fundamental tool for understanding the evolution of Maoist foreign policy at that stage. The interpretive keys provided by Niu have proven to be particularly useful in allowing some historians of Sino-Soviet relations, such as Lorenz Luthi⁶ and Sergey Radchenko,⁷ to better contextualise the findings of their extensive research conducted

² 'The way China handled the Cuban missile crisis was not very diplomatic and did not fully understand the world's fear of nuclear war. The Chinese were too optimistic in the analysis of the international context and not impartial enough in their accusations against the CPSU and the ICP. Perhaps this is the reason why today the government wishes to avoid dealing with this issue.' In this regard, the author goes on to cite an important exchange between Deng Xiaoping and Enrico Berlinguer during the visit of the Secretary of the Italian Communist Party to China in April 1980 (the first visit since Togliatti broke relations with China after the Cuban crisis): 'Not everything we said in the past was correct [...] all of us used so many empty words during the Cuban crisis.' Ibid., 6.

³ Cf. Feng Yunfei, 'Guba daodan weiji yu sulian dui zhongyin bianjie wenti lichang de zhuanbian' [The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Change of the Soviet Position towards the Sino-Indian Border Issue], *Dangshi yanjiu yu jiaoxue* [Research and Teaching of Party History], no. 2, (2009): 20–27; Xia Mingxing & Xue Zhenlin, 'Zhongsu zai guba daodan weijizhong de fenqi' [The Sino-Soviet Split in the Cuban Missile Crisis], *Guofangshibao*, [Defence Times] 2 (2009): 22; Yu Jiangxin, 'guba daodan weiji jiqi yingxiang' [The Cuban Missile Crisis and its Impact], *Zhanzhengshi yanjiu* [War History Studies], no. 4, (2004): 36–40. A few weeks after the research conducted for this article, the Archive of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs restricted the number of documents available to the public and consequently affected the possibility to expand this and many other ongoing research.

⁴ Y. Cheng 'Sino-Cuban Relations during the Early Years of the Castro Regime, 1959–1966', *Journal of Cold War Studies* 9, no. 3, (Summer 2007): 78–114.

⁵ J. Niu, 1962: *The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy*, Working Paper 48, Cold War International History Project Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC., October 2005, 1–36. Available at: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/NiuJunWP481.pdf> (30 January 2013).

⁶ L. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split. Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷ S. Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens. The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

in the archives of the countries of the former socialist bloc, including China. This research, conducted, especially in Luthi's case, also in the central and provincial archives of the PRC, has addressed the issue of Sino-Cuban relations primarily from the perspective of Sino-Soviet relations and is therefore focused on the documents available on the subject. Neither of them has, however, analysed the papers on Sino-Cuban relations found in the MOFA archives in Beijing. A very recent publication by the *Cold War International History Project (CWIHP)* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis, edited by Radchenko in collaboration with J.G. Hershberg, partly fills this void: the analysis provided by the two scholars is without doubt the most innovative contribution in the field, a contribution enriched by their ability to link evidence found in the Sino-Cuban papers to those found in the archives of the former socialist bloc.⁸ However, the key to interpretation offered by the authors is limited only to the history of diplomatic relations and strangely does not mention the important insights provided by Niu Jun on the origins of Maoist foreign policy. The collection presented by the CWIHP is far from complete: the research conducted in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing for the preparation of this study brought to the light thousands of pages of documents on the issue.

This article is therefore in line with that of Hershberg and Radchenko, and attempts to gain greater insight by broadening the scope of analysis of the sources and using the interpretive keys provided by Niu Jun. However, it is based on only a portion – about 300 pages – of archival documents available in Chinese and therefore leaves room for further research on the subject.⁹

The effects of the Great Leap Forward on China's foreign policy: the theory of 'two intermediate zones'

As clearly demonstrated by Niu Jun, in the 1960–61 period, China's leadership was set on solving its problems with neighbouring countries – and in particular with the Soviet Union – by charting out a sufficiently pragmatic foreign policy that would allow the country to concentrate on the economic construction envisioned by the Great Leap Forward.¹⁰ This plan, however, was thwarted by the concurrent emergence of the economic damage caused by the Great Leap, which was further accentuated by

⁸J.G. Hershberg and S. Radchenko, 'Sino-Cuban relations and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1960–1962: New Chinese Evidence', in *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50: New Evidence from behind the Iron, Bamboo and Sugarcane Curtains and Beyond*, ed. J.G. Hershberg and S. Radchenko, Bulletin, Issue 17/18, Cold War International History Project, Washington DC, Fall 2012, 21–117. Available at: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/CWIHP_Cuban_Missile_Crisis_Bulletin_17-18.pdf (30 January 2013).

⁹The sources of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China used in this study will be cited in English providing the references and official index entries used by the archives. The documents were translated by the author.

¹⁰J. Niu, '1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China's Foreign Policy', 1–36.

the sudden withdrawal of Soviet experts in the summer of 1960. The criticism levelled at this stage by a large part of the party against the economic policy promoted by Chairman Mao in favour of the Great Leap, led the Chinese leader to revive his radical positions both inside and outside the country: the launch of the Socialist Education Movement at home and the positions taken up by Beijing during the Sino-Indian crisis and the Cuban crisis were therefore the most immediate reaction of this new ‘left turn’ in Chinese politics.

As shown by Chinese sources, starting from the 7,000 Cadres Conference in January 1962 (following the meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee in February and that of the Central Committee in May), a number of party leaders started to share the opinion that there was an urgent need for a drastic revision of the country’s economic policy.¹¹ Criticism of the economic development model promoted by Chairman Mao would obviously have political repercussions both on the role of the Great Helmsman and the policy he promoted. Therefore, Mao tried from the beginning to defend himself and prevent the debate on economic policy from undermining the centrality of class struggle and the building of socialism in China.¹²

In August 1962, during the technical meeting on the economic policy of the Central Committee, Mao suddenly decided to change the agenda by imposing a discussion on class struggle. His goal was to isolate the critics of the Great Leap – like Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping – by depicting them as having responsibilities even greater than Khrushchev’s: ‘Has Khrushchev dared to openly ask for the abolition of the communes in public?’, Mao pointed out provocatively on that occasion.¹³ Obviously, it was not just a personal attack. By associating the detractors of his economic policy with the symbol of revisionism, the Great Helmsman established an important link between the domestic front and the foreign front. ‘Home affairs and foreign affairs are part of the same set of problems: it all depends on whether the revolution is waged by the bourgeoisie or the proletariat’, wrote Mao.¹⁴ As pointed out by Niu Jun, this had two major consequences: criticism of the Great Leap became a consequence of the class struggle within the party and as such was labelled as ‘Chinese revisionism’, while the connection between Chinese and Soviet revisionism implied a collusive pact between

¹¹ T. Zhang, ‘1962 nian zhaokai de qiqianren dahui’ [The Seven Thousand People Meeting in 1962] in *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao*, Zhongguo Jiefangjun Guofang Daxue, 1986, vol. 24, 20–21; *Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1949–1976* [Biography of Zhou Enlai], Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1998, vol. 2, 683; C. Xie, *Dayuejin kuangchao* [The Tide of the Great Leap Forward] (Zhenzhou, Henan: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1990), 236–37.

¹² Z. Mao, ‘zai kuoda de zhongyang gongzuo huiyi shang de jianghua’ [Mao Zedong speech at the enlarged working meeting of the Central committee], in *Zhonggong dangshi jiaoxue cankao ziliao*, 1986, vol. 5, 9–10.

¹³ *Mao Zedong Daguan* [Mao Zedong Grand View], (Beijing: Renmin daxue, 1993), 642, cited in Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 221. Author’s translation.

¹⁴ *Maozedong zhuan*, [Mao Zedong Biography], 1235, cited in *Ibid.*, 220. Author’s translation.

the two¹⁵ (hence the slogan, 反修防修, *Fanxiu, fangxiu*, to be translated as ‘fight and prevent revisionism’).¹⁶

The next step in Mao’s manoeuvre came immediately after the Tenth Plenum of the Eighth Central Committee (24–27 September 1962) by changing the traditional form of his ‘theory of the intermediate zones’. According to this theory, there was a vast ‘intermediate zone’ consisting of non-Western oppressed nations, including China, that stood between the opposing forces of American imperialism and Soviet socialism. Mao believed that control over this area was crucial to the US plan to encircle the socialist bloc. Maoist anti-imperialism and support for communist movements of national liberation in Asia were hence instrumental to defending the socialist camp and at the same time to creating the conditions for China’s new leading role in the region.¹⁷ It was, therefore, the anti-imperialist nature of the Soviet Union to have inspired the logic of 一边倒 (*yibian dao*, literally ‘lean to one side’), i.e., Mao’s choice to join the socialist bloc, after the founding of the PRC.

Recent frictions between the two countries on the policy of peaceful coexistence, the alleged collusion between the USSR and the United States against China, and Mao’s belief that European countries rejected the hegemonic role of the superpowers, led him to revise his previous theoretical assumptions in order to gradually redefine the role of the PRC in the world.¹⁸ He pointed out the presence of ‘two intermediate zones’ between the superpowers: on one hand, the countries struggling against imperialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America and, on the other, Europe, North America, and Australia and New Zealand. Therefore, the bipolar hegemony of the superpowers loosened the bond between Maoist anti-imperialism and the Soviet front and, by weakening the cohesion of the two blocs, a space for Beijing’s influence opened right before Mao’s eyes, stretching from Asia to the Caribbean.¹⁹

The Sixth Conference on Foreign Affairs, acting on the directives of the Tenth Plenum, went on to translate Mao’s new vision into foreign policy directives both for

¹⁵ J. Niu, ‘1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China’s Foreign Policy’, p. 33. On this crucial aspect, Niu Jun refers to a passage of Mao’s manuscripts collected by the Department for Documentary Research of the Central Committee of the Party in *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts Since the Founding of the PRC], vol. 10, Zhongyang Wenxian chubanshe (Beijing: Central Party Literature Publishing H, 1987–98), 199.

¹⁶ The slogan, ‘Fight and prevent revisionism’, suggested ‘to combat revisionism’ outside the country and to ‘prevent revisionism’ at home. The concept of ‘revisionism’ appeared for the first time in an essay on the differences between the leaders of China and the Soviet Union published in the *Renmin Ribao* on 6 September 1963. The slogan later appeared in a letter from Mao published in the same newspaper on 14 July 1964. On both occasions, however, and even later on, there never was a clear definition of the concept, making it become a mere instrument of political struggle to identify and wipe out opponents within the party.

¹⁷ For a more accurate description of the theory of intermediate zones see J. Chen, *China’s Road to the Korean War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 18–21, for the connections between anti-imperialist movements and the international proletarian movement see *Mao Zedong xuanji* [The Selected works of Mao Zedong], vol. 4 (Beijing: Renmin, 1992), 1191–1192.

¹⁸ L. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 221.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 221–222.

the party and for the government: the intensification of the anti-revisionist struggle – through the dissemination of Mao’s thought abroad and a mounting propaganda campaign against the Soviets and Yugoslavia – was matched by an increasing focus on Asia, Africa and Latin America. China was therefore set on presenting itself as the centre of the global revolution and the only true vanguard of national liberation movements.²⁰

The Sino-Soviet competition and the Cuban crisis of 1962

The Great Helmsman’s effort to link the fight against Khrushchev’s revisionism outside the country with that against the opponents of the Great Leap within the party was further boosted by the contemporary unfolding of the crises of 1962: by criticising Khrushchev for his revisionism – who was accused of being tame towards imperialism in Cuba and hesitant in supporting a ‘brother’ country like China during the conflict with India – Mao also struck out against his opponents at home. If Khrushchev the revisionist gave up the interests of the revolution in favour a bipolar condominium based on a compromise with imperialists, the opponents of the Great Leap within the CCP became the ‘associates’ of Soviet revisionism because they kept Maoist China from taking the lead and revitalising the international revolutionary front by sabotaging the country’s revolutionary transformation.

Therefore, the Cuban revolution lent itself perfectly to the new direction taken by Mao’s foreign policy: the similarities between the Castro and Maoist revolutions – the anti-colonial stance and the common strategies of Batista and Chiang Kai-Shek, elements constantly reiterated during the first Sino-Cuban meetings during the 1960s – suggested the potential applicability of Mao’s revolutionary theory to the countries of the first intermediate zone and revealed the role that China could play within the international revolutionary movement.²¹ In 1959, in the months immediately following Castro’s victory in the Cuban revolution, the Chinese were very cautious and their propaganda machine did not criticise Moscow’s position toward the new regime in Havana. As suggested by Soviet diplomats in China, the reason for this was probably that China wished to keep a diplomatic channel open with Taiwan, which at the time was still recognised by the Cuban government.²² With the normalisation of diplomatic

²⁰ Ibid., 222.

²¹ Memorandum of the Conversation between Premier Zhou Enlai and Cuban Revolutionary Government Economic Delegation, 18 November 1960; Memorandum of Conversation between Mao Zedong and Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, 19 November 1960, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 41–55.

²² Information Sheet of the USSR Embassy in the PRC on the Relations of the PRC with Cuba, Centre for the Preservation of Contemporary Documentation, Moscow (TsKhSD), f. 5, op. 49, d. 530, l. 464, cited in M.Y. Prozumenshikov ‘The Sino-Indian Conflict, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1962: New Evidence from the Russian Archives’, in *New East-Bloc Evidence on the Cold War in the Third World*, Cold War International History Project, Bulletin 9–9, Winter 1996/1997, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 252.

relations between Castro's new regime and Beijing in September 1960, Chinese diplomacy set in motion a radical change of policy and started to actively court the Cubans – by identifying those closest to Beijing's positions – in order to tap their influence on other revolutionary movements in Latin America and spread Chinese propaganda throughout the region.²³

The risk that Cuba could fall prey to Chinese propaganda led the Soviets to boost their engagement. In Khrushchev's eyes and in view of Cuba's strategic importance – the first socialist country in the Western Hemisphere, just 90 miles from the shores of the United States – the understanding between the Chinese and Cubans was a dangerous challenge to Moscow's role and urged it to compete with Beijing in courting Cuba's leaders.²⁴ The study of Soviet papers by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali seems to support this theory: it outlines the Soviet fear of a Sino-Cuban understanding – exacerbated by Castro's purge of the pro-Moscow Popular Socialist Party in March 1962 – as one of the main reasons behind Khrushchev's decision to grant nuclear weapons to Cuba.²⁵ The same could probably be said of the Soviet promise, revealed by Chinese documents, to send the Baltic fleet in case of a US attack.²⁶

The Chinese – who according to some sources were already aware of the presence of missiles in Cuba before the crisis in October²⁷ – interpreted the move as yet another Soviet attempt to control and monopolise the Cuban revolution.²⁸ When the crisis broke out after the famous speech delivered by President Kennedy on 22 October, the Chinese embassy in Havana constantly stressed Khrushchev's increasing difficulties with the Cubans. The Soviets 'are riding a tiger' (骑虎难下, qihunanxia, literally

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The Yugoslav ambassador to Cuba, citing a reliable source, revealed that Castro was leaning towards the Chinese revolutionary model at the time. Hungarian embassy in Havana (Beck), Report on meeting with Yugoslav ambassador Boško Vidaković 19 March 1962, in 'Hungary and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Selected Documents, 1961–63', introduction by Csaba Békés and Melinda Kalmár, Ibid., 422;

²⁵ A. Fursenko and T. Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War: the Inside Story of an American Adversary* (New York: Norton and Co., 2006), 427–429. On the purge in the Popular Socialist Party, see A. Fursenko and T. Naftali, 'One Hell of a Gamble' - *Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: Norton, 1997), 160–165.

²⁶ At the meeting on 1 December 1962, Che Guevara expressed his complaints to the ambassador of the PRC to Cuba, Shen, about the promises made by the Soviets before the crisis broke out: 'They even babbled about the intention to send the Baltic Fleet [...]; they said that [...] the mighty Soviet Union would have dealt a lethal blow to anyone who dared invade Cuba, etc. At the time we thought that they were sincere.' In 'Conversation Between Ernesto Che Guevara and ambassador Shen Jian', 1 December 1962, PRC embassy in Havana to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC [AMAERPC], No. 111-00353-06; for an English version, see Hershberg and S. Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 103–107. (The number of the document quoted here does not match the one analysed by the author at the Central Archives of the Ministry).

²⁷ R. MacFarquhar, *Origins of the Cultural Revolution*, vol. 3, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 317.

²⁸ 'From the beginning of the Revolution, the Soviets tried to control Cuba politically and militarily,' in 'The situation in Cuba: new developments,' 31 October 1962, Embassy of Cuba to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AMAERPC, No. 111-000342-04.

‘riding a tiger and have difficulties getting off’), wrote the Chinese in Havana: the intransigence of the Cuban position made it hard for Moscow and threatened to make it lose face if it were too weak and submissive in the face of US imperialism. While Khrushchev could not help but support the Cubans, at the same time – according to the Chinese embassy – he was terrified by the risk of an escalation with the United States. The US leadership, aware that Moscow was not ready to engage in a war over Cuba, continued to exert pressure to force the Soviets into accepting a compromise and abandoning (撒手, *sashou*) the Cubans.²⁹

Khrushchev’s decision to withdraw the missiles seemed to confirm the Chinese insights. In the days following the compromise between Moscow and Washington, the Chinese stressed the strengthening of an entente between Soviet revisionism and US imperialism against Cuba and the revolutionary movement: while the United States was aiming to deepen the rift between Havana and Moscow and to weaken Castro – as Chinese diplomats in Havana and Moscow wrote – Moscow, for its part, tried to exploit the Cuban crisis to extort a new and more favourable compromise with the United States. According to their sources, Khrushchev sought to use the threat of US imperialism to kill the ‘tiger’, that is, to destroy the Fidelist revolutionary bloc and pave the way for the triumph of revisionism on the island.³⁰

The growing tensions between the Cubans and Soviets opened the way to China’s action. As noted by Chinese diplomats in Cuba, between November and December, the frustration of Cuban leaders with Moscow seemed to result in growing support for Beijing’s position.³¹ From 22–28 October, the Chinese had been very cold towards Moscow, as the Soviets did not fail to note with dismay.³² All this despite Moscow’s

²⁹ ‘Analysis of the current situation in Cuba,’ 25 October 1962 Embassy of Cuba to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AMAERPC, No. 111-000342-04.

³⁰ In the document written by the Chinese embassy, mention is even made of rumours of a conspiracy orchestrated by the Soviets to overthrow (搞掉, *gaodiao*) Fidel and replace him with President Roa. ‘Opinions on the current situation in Cuba,’ 24 November 1962, Embassy of Cuba to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AMAERPC, No. 111-000342-04. See also the analysis written by the Chinese Embassy in Moscow: ‘Opinion towards the Khrushchev negotiations on the Cuban issue,’ 31 October 1962, PRC Embassy in Moscow to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AMAERPC, No. 111-00342-12.

³¹ ‘The Cuban leaders, and especially Che Guevara, are trusting us Chinese more and more’ Ibid. In the days following the meeting between Che Guevara and Shen Jian, this analysis was confirmed. Che shared his disappointment at the Soviet betrayal with Shen and apologised for having been too naive in the past and having believed the promises made by Moscow. It is interesting to note that someone at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had paid particular attention, underlining it several times, to a moment in the conversation in which Che referred to the meeting he had recently had with Mikoyan: ‘I told him [...] that a defeat is a defeat and calling it a victory is simply wrong. He said that the United States does not have the courage to inspect Soviet ships because they are afraid. I started to laugh and he became furious.’ In ‘Conversation Between Ernesto Che Guevara and Ambassador Shen Jian,’ 1 December 1962, PRC Embassy in Havana to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AMAERPC, No. 111-00353-06.

³² Report on the coordination of the external political activities and on the exchange of information on international questions in 1960–1963, Soviet Foreign Ministry, Far Eastern Department (17 April 1963), list 50. Cited in Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 32. Ambassador Wu Lengxi later declared in his memoirs that ‘of course, we did not support Khrushchev’s policy on the deployment of the missiles to Cuba, but at the same time we did not oppose it.’ L. Wu, *Shinian Lunzhan, 1956–1966: Zhong Su Guanxi*

support, expressed in *Pravda* on 25 October, in favour of Chinese positions in the ongoing border conflict with India.³³ According to a current opinion among scholars and Chinese diplomats, the Soviet statements were the result of Khrushchev's need at that stage to secure Beijing's support in the most delicate moment of the Cuban crisis. Once the agreement was reached with Washington, the Soviet position on the Sino-Indian conflict would become more balanced and neutral, as demonstrated by the editorial in *Pravda* on 31 October.³⁴ After the agreement reached on 28 October – and perhaps even following the change of Soviet positions on the border conflict with India – the Chinese propaganda machine became openly vehement in their criticism towards the Soviet decisions on Cuba. In the early days of November, while Chinese newspapers accused Khrushchev of 'adventurism' for sending missiles to Cuba and criticised him for having 'caved in' before the imperialist aggression, millions of Chinese took to the streets in cities across China to show their solidarity with the Cuban revolution.

The fierce tones of the propaganda machine were balanced though by the approach taken by Chinese diplomacy. The Foreign Ministry in Beijing feared that the harsh criticism against Moscow's position in Cuba could be seen abroad as a cynical Chinese effort to use the Cuban crisis as a way to score points against Moscow. A series of documents drawn up by Chinese diplomats in early November helps shed light on this aspect. After a meeting with the Propaganda Department, the Liaison Department, the Xinhua agency and Shen Jian, the Chinese ambassador to Cuba, Qiao Guanhua, China's deputy foreign minister, submitted a detailed plan to minister Chen Yi and prime minister Zhou Enlai on 1 November 1962, aimed at supporting the Cuban cause. The plan included the suggestion that the party's Central Committee send a letter to the Soviets openly criticising Khrushchev's policy and urging Moscow to support their Cuban comrades in their fight against imperialism. According to the

Footnote 32 continued

Huiyilu [A Ten-Year Dispute, 1956–1966: Memoirs on Sino-Soviet Relations] 2 vols. Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe (Beijing: Central Party Literature Publishing House, 1999), 504.

³³ 'V interesakh narodov vo imia vseobshchego mira', *Pravda*, 25 1962, Cited in Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 30.

³⁴ In those days, for instance, the Chinese deputy foreign minister Zhang Hanfu, in referring to the change in the Soviet position, explained it by linking it to the fact that on 25 October – when *Pravda* had expressed support for the Chinese comrades against India – the Cuban crisis had reached its climax and Khrushchev seemed to be in desperate need of China's support. According to Zhang, once the tension in the Caribbean subsided, Khrushchev turned his back on the Chinese and betrayed them. In D. Wang, *The Quarrelling Brothers: New Chinese Archives and Reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet Split*, Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, 2005, Working Paper 49, 63–64. The same opinion seems to be supported also by M.Y. Prozumenschikov: after Kennedy's speech on 22 October – when the American president forced Khrushchev to choose between a likely nuclear conflict or retreat – the Soviet leader thought that China would momentarily suspend its criticism towards Moscow and unite with the Soviet Union against imperialism as it had previously done in 1956 during the Polish and Hungarian crises and in 1961 during the Berlin crisis. Prozumenschikov 'The Sino-Indian Conflict', 253. For the *Pravda* editorial: 'Vopreki Veleniiu Vremeni', *Pravda*, 31 October 1962, cited in Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, 33.

plan, ambassador Shen, who had been called back to Beijing at the height of the crisis to study the situation together with China's leaders, would have had to return immediately to Cuba to deliver the letter criticising Khrushchev personally to Castro, while Chen Yi would have shared the letter's content with the Cuban representative in Beijing. Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi called for caution and suggested taking time to discuss with Shen on the best way to face the crisis. In particular, Chen Yi replied that much had already been done and that there was no need to continue criticising Moscow.³⁵ The reason for this caution was revealed in a document written by ambassador Shen the next day, in which he urged his colleagues not to speak openly of Cuban and Soviet relations and to simply support the Cubans: 'Their relationship between them (Cubans and Soviets) is too complicated. We need to avoid that foreigners think that we are interested in this aspect.'³⁶ The Foreign Ministry followed Shen's advice. On 4 November, all Chinese diplomatic delegations around the world received a directive to support the Cuban cause according to Chen Yi's instructions, while they were ordered 'not to speak, but listen' when it came to relations between Cuba and the USSR.³⁷

The editorial published the next day in *Pravda* – in which Moscow questioned Beijing's stance in the conflict with New Delhi, openly contrasting with the editorial of 25 October – probably led Chen Yi and the others to be less 'cautious'. On 7 November, during a speech delivered at the Soviet embassy in Beijing on the forty-fifth anniversary of the October Revolution, the Chinese foreign minister lectured the Soviet diplomats about the inadmissibility of any 'wishy-washiness' in relations with the imperialist aggressors.³⁸

The caution called for by Chen Yi and Shen Jian belonged more to the sphere of diplomatic tactics rather than strategy. It was evident in fact that the Chinese were trying to capitalise on Cuban frustration towards Moscow. In this regard, the meeting on 1 December 1962 between the Chinese ambassador to Cuba, Shen Jian, and Che Guevara is quintessential. In the last meeting between the two before the crisis broke out, on 13 October 1962, Che Guevara had been very satisfied with the aid from Moscow and appeared to be confident about the 'total' protection that the Soviets would grant Cuba in the event of a US attack.³⁹ Instead, on 1 December, Che shared

³⁵ 'The assistant foreign minister Qiao Guanhua asked opinion of Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chenyi about supporting Cuba to do three kind of things, and Zhou and Chen reply', 1 November 1962, AMAERPC, No. 111-00595-03.

³⁶ 'Sulle relazioni tra Cuba e USSR' 2 November 1962 in 'La situazione delle relazioni tra Unione Sovietica e Cuba prima e dopo il ritiro dei missile da parte dell'USSR da Cuba, il nostro approccio (contiene anche le opinioni di Chen Yi e Zhou Enlai)' AMAERPC, No. 111-00601-05.

³⁷ 'Risposta al precedente telegramma sulle relazioni tra Cuba e l'USSR e il nostro foreign statement' 4 November 1962, in *Ibid.*

³⁸ Report of the USSR Embassy in the PRC about the Position of the Leadership of the CPC in Regard to the Cuban Crisis, quoted in Prozumenschikov 'The Sino-Indian Conflict', 255.

³⁹ Memorandum of the Conversation between China's Ambassador to Cuba Shen Jian and Cuban Finanwith enemies re frienly mies and comprades, hhe giorno dopo, il 15 zionil ritiro dei missili YI. "er

with Shen all his frustration towards Moscow and regretted having been so naive and having yielded to Soviet blandishments. Shen took advantage of the occasion and, by drawing a parallel between the damage caused to the Cuban revolution by the withdrawal of the missiles and that inflicted on China by the withdrawal of Soviet experts in 1960, he suggested that the Cuban leader – in line with the new framework of the two intermediate zones – follow the Chinese model and rely on his own strength. Shen stressed to the Cuban leader that there was no way of trusting Moscow. The Soviet Union seemed naturally inclined to be harsh with true Marxist-Leninists and accommodating with imperialists and the enemies of the revolution.⁴⁰

However, it is safe to assume that Chinese diplomats probably suspected, though unable to express it openly, that the compromise between the superpowers ended up being favoured by Beijing's intransigence: the potential influence that Chinese maximalist stance could have played on the Cubans seemingly pushed the superpowers to be more reasonable. By neutralizing the threat of escalation, in fact, they reaffirmed their bipolar leadership and tamed at the same time 'the tiger' of Chinese radicalism. This element emerges clearly enough from the talks between the Americans and the Soviets during the crisis. The Americans, and the assistant secretary of state for far eastern affairs, W.A. Harriman, in particular, had sensed that Chinese maximalism was a thorn in the side of Khrushchev's Cuban policy, a goad that forced him to expose himself further with Castro to prevent the spread of Maoist sympathies among his fellow Cubans.⁴¹ During talks with the Soviets, in their arguments for bipolar dialogue, the Americans often used Beijing as a bugbear, as a symbol of a form of radicalism that could destabilise world peace. Exemplary in this regard is the exchange on 18 November 1962, between the US diplomat John McCloy and Soviet deputy foreign minister Kuznetsov:

McCloy said he was very concerned about the Sino-Indian war, an event that seemed to be progressively reaching large proportions. The clashes might have escalated further and caused both [the US and the USSR] severe damage in the future; so he

Footnote 39 continued

dooni diplomatiche cinesi nce Minister Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, Havana, 13 October 1962, doc. No. 9, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 78–82.

⁴⁰ 'Conversation between Ernesto Che Guevara and Ambassador Shen Jian', 1 December 1962, cited, No. 111-00353-06. Shen's position was taken up in an editorial published in the *Renmin Ribao*, which was personally reviewed by Mao Zedong himself a few days later: 'Some people are friendly with enemies and tough with brother parties. That is the opposite of what a Marxist-Leninist should do', in 'Proletarians of the world should unite in opposition to our common enemy' in *Renmin Ribao*, 15 December 1962, quoted in Mingxing, Shu Zhanlan, 'Maozedong yu 1962 nian guba daodan weiji', [Mao Zedong and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962], 5.

⁴¹ Summary Record of the 33d Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, Washington, 6 December 1962, 11 a.m., Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, Executive Committee, Vol. III, Meetings 33–37, 12/5/62–12/17/62. Top Secret; Sensitive. Summary Record of the 3rd Meeting of the Standing Group of the National Security Council, Washington, 30 April 1963, 10:30 a.m. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, Standing Group Meeting, 4/30/63. Top Secret; Summary Record of 7th Meeting of the Standing Group of the National Security Council, Washington, 28 May 1963, 5 p.m.; Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Meetings and Memoranda Series, Standing Group Meeting, 5/28/63. Top Secret; Sensitive.

asked what the Soviet Union thought about it. It's never too early to share some thoughts about it also to avoid harsh reactions [...] as a result of events that are likely to threaten peace in the world. What did Kuznetsov think about China and how was it possible to contain this conflict to avoid a new threat to peace? Kuznetsov said that this situation had given rise to much concern. He said it was an issue that worried them and that perhaps it could have been discussed sooner or later. [...] Finally, he added that similar situations indicated the need to solve the Cuban problem as quickly as possible so they could then devote themselves to other common problems.⁴²

While Chinese radical antagonism helped to strengthen bipolar dialogue, Chinese courtship of the Cuban leadership did not seem to bear any fruit in the meantime. While Che Guevara had appeared ideologically closer to the Chinese position, the Cuban president Roa seemed less inclined to yield to their blandishments. In a meeting between Shen and Roa on 30 November, after emphatically stressing the support of the government and people of China to the Cuban revolution, the Chinese ambassador tried to obtain in exchange Cuba's support for the Chinese position on the conflict with India:

Our policy towards the Sino-Indian border conflict is the following: the main enemy of our people is not so much US imperialism and not even Indian reactionary nationalism. [We have tried to solve the problem by peaceful means] but we both know from experience that when we face capitalism we must never make concessions; at times it is necessary to fight [...] We know that Cuba as a brother country supports us [in this matter].

Roa was elusive, took no position and promised Shen that he would study the issue in depth.⁴³ The Cuban government had never spoken publicly on the Sino-Indian conflict, but had simply shown support to the Chinese in private and informal meetings: due to the Soviet position towards Beijing it would have been too much of a risk for the Cubans to take sides on this issue at such a delicate stage.⁴⁴

⁴² Telegram From the Mission to the United Nations to the Department of State, New York, 19 November 1962, 1 a.m. Department of State, Central Files, 737.56361/11-1962. Top Secret; Priority. Received at 2:32 a.m. Passed to the White House at 2:44 a.m. 1856. Department pass White House. Eyes only for the Secretary. Cuba – meeting between McCloy and Kuznetsov, Sunday, 18 November 1962. Kuznetsov specifies that he is speaking for himself and not on behalf of his government.

⁴³ Chinese Embassy in Havana, Memorandum of Conversation between Shen Jian, China's Ambassador to Cuba, and Raúl Roa García, Cuba's Foreign Minister, 30 November 1962, doc. 43. in Hershberg and Radchenko *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 100–103.

⁴⁴ 'Notes on the problem of the Sino-Indian border' 15 November 1962, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the envoy Huang Wenyou at the PRC embassy in Havana, AMAERPC, No. 111-00596-01. In the document approved by Zhou Enlai, the ministry suggested not to ask for clarification on the Cuban position on this issue. Probably the instructions received later by ambassador Shen Jian – who was visiting Beijing in November – would have been different. It should be noted that on 18 November, the Chinese would launch the final offensive against the Indians and the next day they declared a unilateral ceasefire. As demonstrated by Shen's words in his meeting with Roa on 30 November, this manoeuvre could be used in diplomatic relations with Cuba.

Despite the widespread discontent among Cuban communists with Moscow, it does not seem, however, that they ever trusted Chinese blandishments: while for some diplomatic observers, Cuban intransigence in the days following the crisis seemed to signal a convergence with Mao's maximalist positions,⁴⁵ documents show that it was more a result of frustration with Moscow than a clear sign of Chinese influence. As noticed by Beijing's diplomats as well, the Cubans, while proving to be friendly and grateful for the solidarity expressed by the Chinese, continued not to reveal anything of their conversations with the Soviets even in the most critical moments.⁴⁶ As reported by the Soviet and Polish ambassadors, in some conversations between late October and mid-November of 1962, Fidel Castro himself was very critical of China's position on Cuba. According to these sources, Fidel believed that if the Chinese had really wanted to help the Cuban cause, rather than exacerbate the situation on the border with India, they could have created a diversion in Quemoy and Matsu in order to complicate the US strategic position in the Far East and ease Washington's pressure in the Caribbean.⁴⁷

From this point of view, the thesis of a shift in the Cuban position towards Beijing, supported by Cheng Yinghong, is not entirely convincing. Based on the documents analysed, China's courtship of the Cubans certainly aroused much sympathy in Cuba but yielded few concrete results. As Cheng himself admits, the memoirs of Chinese diplomats, journalists and translators all converge on one point: China did not have the ability to provide any direct military or technological support to Cuba during the crisis.⁴⁸

Even if the heart of some Cuban leaders was beating for Beijing, their stomach inevitably tied them to Moscow. Instead of interpreting Cuban intransigence during the months of November and December as the result of Chinese influence, it could perhaps be argued that the leadership in Havana, aware of Soviet sensitivity towards Beijing's competition and of the structural limits of Chinese solidarity, tried to raise the price for Moscow's attempts to mend the rift with Cuba. However, only Cuban documents may shed additional light on these aspects regarding Havana's leadership.

⁴⁵ Telegram from Brazilian Ambassador in Belgrade, Bux Ribeiro Courto, 19 November 1962, in 'Brazil and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Documents from the Foreign Ministry Archive in Brasilia', doc. n. 62 in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 278; Report from Hungarian Embassy, Prague, on Czechoslovak-Cuban relations, 25 June 1963, in 'Hungary and the Cuban Missile Crisis: Selected Documents, 1961–63', introduction by Csaba Békés and Melinda Kalmár, *Ibid.* 404–406.

⁴⁶ 'Report on news obtained on the occasion of the national holiday of the Soviet Union', 8 November 1962, the PRC Embassy in Havana to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, AMAERPC, no. 111-00601-05.

⁴⁷ Telegram from Soviet Ambassador to Cuba Alekseev, 23 October 1962, No. 1643–1644, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 326–7; Telegram from Polish Embassy in Havana, 12 November 1962, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 493–494. The idea of an attack on Quemoy and Matsu was not entirely groundless. In August 1958, Mao had justified his decision to bomb the islands as an attempt to indirectly help the anti-imperialist forces who had just risen to power in Baghdad – pushing the Americans to concentrate their forces elsewhere.

⁴⁸ Y. Cheng, 'Sino-Cuban Relations during the Early Years of the Castro Regime, 1959–1966', 102.

Conclusion: the realpolitik of Maoist internationalism

While the Chinese were unable to move Cuba to their positions, it could probably be concluded, along with Feng Yunfei, that Mao was able to benefit from his handling of the Sino-Indian conflict and from his position on the Cuban crisis.⁴⁹ The resolute Chinese response to India's 'forward policy',⁵⁰ the subsequent withdrawal of troops across the border and the solidarity expressed to the Cuban comrades, if compared to Khrushchev's surrender to US pressure, to the withdrawal of the missiles at the expense of the Cubans and to the change of the Soviet position towards the Chinese in the Sino-Indian conflict, seemed to consolidate the status of the Great Helmsman within the country and in the communist pantheon, especially among the parties of the third world countries.⁵¹

It is interesting to note that this success was achieved, as Castro himself seemed to point out,⁵² even at the expense of the Cuban cause. Beijing's solidarity with Cuba clearly responded more to the logic of *realpolitik* rather than that of genuine proletarian internationalism. While the Warsaw Pact reacted immediately to Kennedy's famous speech on 22 October by putting its forces on alert, the Chinese hesitated for days and moved only in response to Khrushchev's announcement of the withdrawal of the missiles. As the Soviet ambassador to Havana emphasised in his reports of those days to Moscow, the Chinese seized every opportunity to exploit the apparent acquiescence shown by the Soviets towards Washington to their advantage.⁵³ Beijing and its diplomats in Cuba vented their finest rhetoric in an effort to demonstrate their solidarity with the Cuban people and push the country to firmly resist the aggression of US imperialism. However, it was 'empty' solidarity, which was basically limited to classical mass demonstrations in major

⁴⁹ Y. Feng, 'Guba daodan weiji yu sulian dui zhongyin bianjie wenti lichang de zhuanbian' [The Cuban missile crisis and the change of the soviet position towards the Sino-Indian border issue], 5 and notes 41 and 42.

⁵⁰ In 1961, the Indian Army started sending patrols into disputed areas with China with the intention of creating garrisons behind Chinese lines to cut off their supplies and push them north of the disputed line. For background on the Indian 'forward policy' and the Sino-Indian clashes in 1962, see Neville Maxwell, *India's China War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

⁵¹ In February 1963, at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping seemed to notice a favourable trend for the party and emphasised how the Soviets were to make commitments in order to recover sympathisers among brother parties. In T.J. Christensen, *Worse than a Monolith, Alliance Politics and Problems of Coercive Diplomacy in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 175.

⁵² As reported by the Soviet ambassador to Cuba, Castro strongly criticised Mao's decision to attack India along the disputed border because he believed that it would have a negative impact on the Cuban cause. Telegram from Soviet Ambassador to Cuba Alekseev, 23 October 1962, no. 1643–1644, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 326–7. The Polish ambassador to Cuba, Boleslaw Jelen, in reporting a conversation with Raul Valdes Vivo, editor of *Hoy*, revealed that Castro was deeply upset by the late and uncertain reaction of the Chinese to the break-out of the crisis. Telegram from Polish Embassy in Havana (Jelen) 12 November 1962, in *Ibid.*, 493–494.

⁵³ Ciphared Telegram from Alekseev to CC CPSU, 2 November 1962, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 327–330.

Chinese cities and some theatrical blood donation drives organised by the CCP's propaganda machine. Khrushchev is believed to have said at a CPSU plenum on 23 November, 'If this is their way of fighting imperialism, the imperialists won't give a damn!'⁵⁴

The Chinese had, however, much to gain from a crisis in the Caribbean because they knew that if the United States was engaged militarily in Cuba, it would be weakened on other fronts and especially in Taiwan:⁵⁵ as the Soviet leaders repeated many times, Mao had nothing to lose from a nuclear conflict in the Caribbean and with a simple investment in rhetoric he would be able to secure an easy victory.⁵⁶

In fact, Mao's China not only did not actively participate in Cuba's defence, but – as the Soviets and Cubans pointed out several times – it did not even make the effort to divert US attention away from the Caribbean with an offensive, for example, in an area particularly 'sensitive' to Washington such as Taiwan.⁵⁷ Beijing decided instead to attack India and it did so only after being reassured by the Americans that the US would not support a simultaneous attack by Chiang Kai Shek on the mainland.⁵⁸

Regardless of the internationalist rhetoric, therefore, Mao's aim to curb revisionism both abroad and at home – justified and set within the new theoretical framework of 'two intermediate zones' – seemed to have been reached: while Mao capitalised on Soviet difficulties abroad, propaganda campaigns of mass mobilisation in favour of the Cuban revolution and against Soviet revisionism helped him strengthen his fight against opponents within the party.

As Prozumenschikov has rightly observed, the events in 1962 were a watershed moment in the communist world: for the first time during the Cold War, at a critical moment in the confrontation between the two blocs, China not only did not support Moscow, but actually criticised its actions. This marked a major rift on issues concerning the very ideological foundations of the socialist bloc. Moreover, Beijing was not isolated because of this rift: many fellow parties supported the Chinese stance,

⁵⁴ Nikita Khrushchev's speech at the November 1962 Party Plenum, 23 November 1962, cited in *Ibid.*, 25. [Author's translation]

⁵⁵ 'According to military experts, it would take 7 battalions, from 3 to 6 months, and 50,000 US casualties to invade Cuba. If the United States remains involved in Cuba, the situation around the world will become more tense especially in Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea, Laos, and West Germany. However, since their war strategy is based on naval landings, if it were to engage in Cuba, it would end up being exposed elsewhere,' in Telegram of PRC Embassy in DDR to the 2nd Office of the General Staff, 10 November 1960, AMAERPC, No. 109-03157-01.

⁵⁶ Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, 227.

⁵⁷ Hungarian Legation in Washington (Radványi), Report on Mikoyan's visit to Washington, 5 December 1962, doc. 15, in Hershberg and Radchenko, *The Global Cuban Missile Crisis at 50*, 445–448; Telegram from Polish Embassy in Havana (Jelen) 12 November 1962, in *Ibid.*, 493–494.

⁵⁸ Wang Bingnan, *Zhong Mei huitan jiu nian huigu* [Recollections of Nine Years of Sino-American Talks] Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe (Beijing: World Affairs Publishing House, 1985), 85–90.

leading to the creation of pro-Maoist splinter groups in pro-Soviet communist parties. 'The trumpet call of the revolution became more muffled and unclear', wrote Prozumenschikov 'and Communism itself turned out to be split not only as an ideological credo, but also as a movement which carried out practical work in various countries of the world.'⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Prozumenschikov 'The Sino-Indian Conflict', 256.