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**Note Number 399 from Pierre Cerles to Michel  
Debré, 'China and Eastern Europe'**

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**Summary:**

Pierre Cerles provides an assessment of Chinese foreign policy toward Eastern Europe during the 1960s within the context of the Sino-Soviet split, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Cultural Revolution, and China's own internal leadership divisions.

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Note number 399

Pierre Cerles

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to

His Excellency Michel Debré

Foreign Minister

- Asia-Oceania Department -

China and Eastern Europe

From the long and dull foreign policy report given by Lin Biao in front of the delegates of the 9th Congress, one small sentence reflects the current evolution of Chinese diplomacy: 'Since Stalin's death, Soviet leaders have moved from a phase of opportunism to one of imperialism'. Between 1959 and 1968, Chinese propaganda went on the offensive and denounced a great power that had become conservative, which had sacrificed in Camp David or elsewhere the interests of world revolution and that of its Chinese and Cuban protagonists.

This evaluation, which inspired the famous editorials of April 1960 on Leninism and the dispute of both parties in 1963, remains valid. But the tone adopted here has taken on a far more defensive character: the Kremlin leaders, they claim here, are not confining themselves to maintaining 'chauvinistic' positions by seeking accommodation with Washington; they are engaged in a fierce competition with the United States, they are trying to develop their sphere of influence in the Middle East as in South Asia, and are increasing their grip on Mongolia and Eastern Europe. China is not solely defending the cause of world revolution against former Bolsheviks that have become bourgeois; it is claiming its solidarity with the nations that are threatened by the hegemonic tendencies of the 'new Tsars': so Lin Biao's report established a constant parallel between the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet 'encroachments' in the Ussuri region.

Seeking the support of nations which have, for various reasons, grievances against the USSR, Beijing is naturally compelled to attach more importance than previously to Moscow's difficulties in Eastern Europe. Since 1963, Chinese policy has sought in vain for a pressure point: Mao Zedong encouraged the formation of an 'intermediate zone' that could act as a counterweight for the Soviet-American hegemony; Zhou Enlai tried to rally the support of 'proletarian nations'. Yet, the results of these two openings remain limited: since 1965, Chinese influence has receded in Asia and, despite repeated commitments of financial assistance, has not experienced for the moment a spectacular development in Africa.

The Beijing leaders have not managed to get the Third World interested in their anti-Soviet dispute; and they were certainly impressed, during the invasion of Czechoslovakia, by the relative indifference of African and Asian governments. Mentioning the Prague events on 23rd August 1968, the Prime Minister had declared: 'that a great power was able to treat a smaller country in that way, this should serve as a profound lesson for those who have any illusions about American imperialism and Soviet revisionism'. This warning, sent in particular to Arab leaders, was barely followed, with the exception of a fairly useless protest from Dar es Salaam. In the same way, during the incidents in March 1969, the Chinese leaders were unable to stir an anti-Soviet campaign abroad.

The relative apathy of the Afro-Asian world has thus encouraged Beijing to show a renewed interest in Eastern Europe. In his speech on 23rd August, Zhou Enlai mentioned the division of this region in 'spheres of influence', he assured Romania of China's 'support' and he noted that the invasion of Czechoslovakia was a lesson for the people's democracies. This attention to the USSR's Western flank comes across in three ways:

1. Chinese propaganda has effectively stopped criticizing the Yugoslav leaders and seems to favor a Balkans agreement;
2. China hints that the 'betrayal' of the Soviet leaders justifies a re-examination of the USSR's Western borders;
3. The Maoist doctrine and China's example must convince the nations subjugated by Moscow that there is a more effective means of action than the Czechs' passive resistance.

During the active phase of the Cultural Revolution, propaganda barely distinguished the Soviet Union from its allies. The incidents of 1967 affected the embassies of East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Mongolia; Polish and Bulgarian diplomats were scolded by the Red Guards. In April 1967, during the Karlovy-Vary conference, the Chinese press attacked the 'leading cliques' of all the people's democracies, including the 'Ulbricht clique of East Germany'. The Yugoslavs were not spared: their embassy was subjected to loud protests in 1967, and a correspondent from 'Tanjug' was expelled; the press and official speeches continued to stigmatize 'Tito's revisionism'. Only Romania was spared, but relations between both states remained formal and the Albanian press did not hesitate to criticize certain decisions by Bucharest, including the exchange of ambassadors with Bonn in February 1967.

After the Czechoslovak crisis, criticisms against the governments of the people's democracies progressively diminished in intensity. President Svoboda and M. Dubcek were described as 'Quislings' during the Moscow agreements, but since then a slightly disdainful silence has replaced this violent denunciation. Moreover, if the ambassadors of the 'socialist' states are still treated coldly - the East German representative was not invited the previous 1st May to salute Mao Zedong at the Tiananmen platform - the propaganda only concentrates its attacks on the Soviet Union. Thus, the 'Communist Party from Poland' led by M. Mijal in Tirana refrained, in its recent message to the 9th Congress, from making any references to M. Gomulka.

But this reserve is particularly obvious for Yugoslavia, which has stopped being vilified since the 20th August 1968. In 1967, Zhou Enlai had stigmatized 'Tito's treacherous clique' during Albania's national holiday. One year later, the Prime Minister refrained from making any offensive remarks towards Belgrade, and the Chinese press only covered in brief and moderate terms Albania's grievances in regard to the Albanian minority of Kozmets. Since that date no official speech has denounced 'Yugoslav revisionism', and some criticisms that appeared in the People's Daily were not taken up by Xinhua. On 15th March, at the height of the Sino-Soviet tension, Beijing and Belgrade signed a commercial agreement; a month earlier, the Chinese negotiators had suddenly accepted the Yugoslav negotiation proposals and had agreed to be more flexible on the settlement of exchanges. Trade between both countries, which only amounted to a million dollars in 1968, could undergo significant development in the next few years.

It is of course an exaggeration - and even ridiculous - to allude, like the Soviet press did, to a Sino-Yugoslav 'collusion'. But the Chinese leaders are certainly willing to spare a government determined to resist Soviet pressures. Last April, 'Zeri i Popullit' reluctantly admitted that Albanian-Yugoslav solidarity could become necessary in case of a brutal Soviet interference; M. Zhou Enlai had hosted the Albanian

ambassador for a long meeting a few days before the publication of this editorial. The Prime Minister had evoked in September 1968 the threats that the 'Balkan nations' faced from Moscow. The Chinese press mentioned several times the presence of Soviet military units in Bulgaria; it also cited the Albanian declaration of support for Romania, but abstained from reproducing the passage about the 'ideological differences' between Bucharest and Tirana.

Most observers agree that China is doing its utmost to overcome Tirana's reticence and is trying to promote a 'resistance zone' in the Balkans. By thus favoring a tactical rapprochement between Belgrade, Bucharest and Tirana, Beijing could avoid making too stringent commitments towards its Albanian allies and could try to preserve Romanian independence.

In regard to the Balkans, with three countries maintaining a relative or total independence towards Moscow, the Chinese leaders are therefore sacrificing the purity of doctrine for the necessities of politics and are discretely pushing for the establishment of a 'common front'.

Moreover, the leaders from the Cultural Revolution are not insensitive to the Romanians' exhortations, who are trying at all costs to prevent a complete break between Beijing and the international communist movement. The Lin Biao report avoided feeding Soviet propaganda by either announcing a formal split with the traditional parties or by suggesting the formation of a new international movement. Instead, the Vice-President insisted on the independence and equality between parties; his speech referred to 'authentic Marxist-Leninist movements', but did not claim that the parties which ignore 'Mao Zedong's ideas' should be ostracized. Indeed, the messages sent by the Romanian and Vietnamese Communist Parties for the 9th Congress were published prominently, even though they include no reference to the ideas of the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese Communists, who cannot prevent the convening of the Moscow meeting planned for June, do not seem willing to pursue a policy of pushing for the worst case scenario. They are tacitly encouraging the efforts of M. Ceausescu and are very concerned to spare the Italians who are opposed to any condemnation of the 'Mao Zedong group'; the message sent to the 9th Congress by the 'Marxist-Leninists' of Italy avoided any explicit criticism of M. Longo and his friends. Beijing refrains from discouraging the parties that refuse to espouse its dispute, but which are nonetheless opposed to any formal condemnation of the CCP. China is aware that by its own existence, it encourages the progressive emancipation of the parties and nations of Eastern Europe; it thus avoids any sudden initiatives, which could isolate its supporters in Moscow on 5th June, and would allow the Kremlin leaders to consolidate their grip on the people's democracies.

China's delayed response to the Soviet offers of negotiation on the Ussuri conflict can probably be explained by the same tactical concerns. On 22nd March, the Chinese Foreign Ministry told the USSR chargé d'affaires that China was willing to examine any proposal sent by diplomatic channels; on 14th April, a representative of the Chinese Foreign Minister told this same Soviet diplomat 'that there was no reason for concern'; Beijing is preparing a response to the Soviet memorandum of 29th March; Lin Biao was supposed by the way to mention this in his report to the 9th Congress. After months of silence, China suddenly agreed on 11th May to have the mixed commission in charge of determining navigation on the Ussuri river meet in June.

By accepting the principle of a negotiated settlement for the ongoing disputes, China is making no concessions on core issues, but it is strengthening the position of the parties who do not want to be involved in the Sino-Soviet dispute. The Chinese leaders have thus showed, despite the tough and dogmatic tone of Lin Biao's report, more flexibility than they are generally given credit for. Careful to consolidate and

extend their influence in Eastern Europe, it seems they took into account the Romanian positions and avoided any brutal or clumsy initiatives that could be exploited by Moscow.

The tactical approaches do not affect, however, the strategic goal that is being pursued: starting a vast challenge of the Soviet predominance by questioning its state borders and its ideological supremacy. Lin Biao spoke frankly on this point, when he dealt with the 'border question' in front of the Congress. This question cannot be solely explained by the norms of international public law. The Soviet Union's territory acquires a different value, depending on whether it is the 'land of socialism' or a 'social-imperialist' state. Stalin could largely ignore the grievances of the 'Chinese reactionaries'; however, Communist China is determined to oppose the 1920 declaration of the 'new Tsars'. The Beijing leaders are not content with, according to an expression attributed to Mao Zedong in 1965, 'presenting the bill'; they are questioning the ideological basis of the USSR, and the continuity between the old Russian Empire and the federation led by the Bolshevik party.

No official document has taken up, until now, the words used by Mao Zedong on the USSR's Western borders. But Chinese propaganda makes a clear comparison between the Soviet 'encroachments' in Heilongjiang, the military occupation of Czechoslovakia and the threat posed by the Kremlin leaders to the Balkans. The pro-Chinese movements are clearly encouraged along this path: the 'Communist Party of Poland' stigmatized on 24th April the 'treaties that dismembered China and Poland', while the 'Marxist-Leninists' of Hamburg refer to the 'national and social liberation of the German people'.

China thus keeps the option of starting a new irredentism in Eastern Europe and so to prompt a 'leftist' and nationalist movement against the Soviet party. In May 1967, during the Karlovy-Vary conference, the People's Daily observed then: 'the revisionists sleep in the same bed, but do not share the same dreams'. Lin Biao noted, in his report, the importance of 'contradictions' within the revisionist camp. The Chinese offensive is therefore on an ideological and political level: national resistance to the Soviet grip is encouraged; the European proletariat is called on to denounce a new leading class and to adopt revolutionary means of resistance.

Indeed, the Chinese ideologues were impressed by student and worker unrest in Europe, and they are clearly interested by the enduring anti-Soviet feelings in Czechoslovak opinion. The events of May 1968 provided, in their eyes, the proof that a revolt movement and a general strike are feasible on our continent, despite the 'betrayal' of the 'revisionist' communist parties. So a model of revolutionary action could emerge that would apply to countries where 'leftist' protest can go hand in hand with nationalist agitation.

The aim is thus to convince Eastern Europeans that there are other possible forms of resistance than that of the good soldier Svejik when facing Soviet military forces. That is likely what Lin Biao was referring to when he claimed that 'the revisionist is also a paper tiger'. The Chinese film on the Ussuri incidents is rather discrete on the military aspects of the episode; it insists, however, on the means of resistance that fishermen armed with knives can oppose to a 'herrenfolk' with powerful combat weapons.

There is no doubt that the 'Marxist-Leninist' movements of Eastern Europe will be encouraged to follow this example, to encourage the popular resistance against Soviet supremacy and to 'adapt' Mao Zedong's ideas to the struggle conditions in the people's democracies.

Chinese policy towards Eastern Europe thus appears to reflect the combined influence of the ideologues and the politicians. The former probably resort to a superficial and erroneous analysis of the truly revolutionary capabilities of an

industrial proletariat. Mentioning the example of the fishermen of Heilongjiang to the workers of Plzen or Nowa Huta is mostly idiosyncratic. But if the long-term strategy of the Chinese Communists seems largely based on illusions, their tactical behavior does not lack realism.

Indeed, the Beijing leaders seem aware of the risks posed by a real military provocation on the border or a too obvious interference in Eastern Europe. They do not formally discard the option of a bilateral negotiation with the USSR, they only cautiously commit to Tirana, but they are trying to encourage a tactical rapprochement between Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania. Thus they can reduce the chances of a condemnation of the CCP and maybe even reduce, considering the words spoken on 13th May by Marshal Yakubosky, the chances of a true commitment of the Warsaw Pact countries against Communist China.

But this tactical caution does not prevent a real challenging of the socialist nature of the Soviet regime, with a permanent calling into question of its spheres of influence and its borders. It seems unlikely that the Chinese leaders want to abandon their usual caution and push their challenge until breaking point. It is probable, however, that they will try without respite to exacerbate the 'contradictions' between the USSR and the Eastern European nations.