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Mao's Position—An Assessment

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Mao's Position--An Assessment

by [REDACTED]

In a letter to his wife, which was required reading during the anti-Confucius campaign, Mao Tse-tung remarks that his is a compound personality, accommodating both the bold and aggressive spirit of the tiger and the sly and adaptable spirit of the monkey. Right now, the spirit of the monkey predominates.

Mao has not been "placed on the shelf like an old Buddha," as he described his situation in the early 1960s, but he has only a limited time to achieve his current political aims.

The absence of Mao Tse-tung at the recently concluded National People's Congress in Peking has struck nearly all observers, Chinese and foreign. This gesture may ultimately turn out to have political implications as important as any development at the congress itself.

Some observers attribute Mao's absence to health problems; others note that he was involved in preliminary planning for the meeting and say he was not strictly speaking required to attend a governmental function; still others suggest that Mao had been angered by the short shrift given to policies and personalities identified with the extreme left.

There are serious problems with these interpretations. There is no evidence that the Chairman is especially troubled by health problems. He has been seeing a stream of foreign visitors in recent weeks and months, and their reports of his physical condition do not suggest there has been a significant change in the past year.

Mao has also been consulting with a large number of Chinese officials during his long sojourn in the provinces, indicating that he remains a major participant in the decision-making process. Mao has kept in close touch with Peking through a daily air shuttle, and he presumably has telephonic and other means of communication at his disposal.

The published material connected with the congress does not depict a Mao who is merely an impotent figurehead, although it is not inconsistent with such an interpretation—or with the portrait of a politically active chairman.

None of this means that Mao could easily afford to absent himself from the people's congress. The symbolic nature of the act has not been lost on the average Chinese, on Chinese officials, who already are busy trying to explain it away, on the Chairman himself, or on other major Chinese leaders.

Even if Mao in theory did not need to attend the congress, he was, as chairman of the party, required to attend the Central Committee plenum that preceded it.

He did not simply miss these two important meetings; he has been out of Peking for nearly seven months. This prolonged absence is itself a political act and makes it very difficult not to conclude that strains have developed between Mao and some of the other Chinese leaders.

Chinese policy has generally been made by consensus, with the Chairman the most important—but by no means the only—element in its formation. Official Chinese party history indicates that he has not always had his way; when this has happened, he has sometimes chosen to precipitate a major showdown and sometimes chosen to retreat for the moment.

His recent stay in the provinces suggests that he has been attempting to build a new consensus. His absence from the recent meetings in Peking indicates that on at least one issue of importance to him he has failed and has consequently disassociated himself from the "majority" decision.

What was the issue that caused Mao to sulk in his tent? It is likely to have been whether it was advisable—or possible—to

purge important military figures with whom Mao has been at odds for several years.

The evidence does not suggest the Chairman has been arguing for the appointment to important positions of individuals closely associated with the extreme left in Chinese politics or for greater radical experimentation in Chinese policy.

He was deeply involved in the return of Teng Hsiao-ping, a *bete noire* of the extreme radicals, a year ago; Teng, in fact, was elevated to the Politburo at the personal nomination of the Chairman, who remarked at the time that Teng would make "a good chief of staff."

Mao was evidently also involved in the rehabilitation of other victims of the cultural revolution, a process that continued without significant pause through 1974. If these rehabilitations, pleasing to the pragmatists and displeasing to the extreme left, were made over Mao's objections, it is hard to see why he waited until the summer of 1974 to disassociate himself by moving to the provinces.

The propaganda associated with the anti-Confucius campaign does not seem to link Mao with a new turn to the "left." Its main line, couched in historical analogy, has consistently been that China must modernize, that centralization and discipline are essential to this task, that foreign expertise is an important adjunct to this process, and that the process itself is made doubly important by a threat from China's northern neighbor, a threat which can be partly balanced by a program of "making friends with distant states."

These programs are attributed to a far-seeing Prime Minister, who had the full backing of the "Emperor"—i.e., Mao himself. The two are said to have been opposed by "Confucians" concerned with

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abstract and empty rites and by "feudal princes."

It is hard to escape the conclusion that these oppositionists are "leftist" ideologues and provincial military commanders, respectively. In fact, the shape and ultimate outcome of the National People's Congress was foreshadowed by propaganda as early as the autumn of 1973.

There are indications that a number of authoritative articles connected with the anti-Confucius campaign were written or immediately inspired by Mao himself. In any case, no counter-argument surfaced to claim that the "Emperor" did not really support the Prime Minister.

Even last winter and spring when scattered leftist counter-attacks against conservative policies and perhaps against Chou personally were appearing, leftist broadsides frequently seemed to be saying that Mao should support the position of the ideologues—the clear implication being that he did not.

All this almost certainly does not mean that Mao has abandoned the ideas he pushed in the 1960s. Rather, his priorities seem to have shifted. For one thing, his obsession with the Soviet threat has grown over the years, and he seems to believe that China must modernize and expand its economy more rapidly if it is to face the long-term challenge from the north successfully.

Mao appears to see two main obstacles to success:

- Ideological carping over the programs necessary for modernization threaten the programs themselves and give rise to differences among Chinese leaders that can in time be exploited by Moscow.

- The political power acquired by regional and provincial military figures during the cultural revolution could threaten centralized direction of the



Mao receives Maltese Prime Minister Minto on January 9

program; the Lin Piao affair of 1971 highlighted the danger of indiscipline within the armed forces and raised the spectre of a military coup against the central civilian authorities.

Of the two problems, that posed by the military almost certainly presents the greater danger in Mao's eyes. Anti-Confucius propaganda fulminated with particular harshness against regional and provincial military commanders. These soldiers were said to want either less acrimony in China's relations with Moscow or a greater share of the budget and a more rapid development of China's advanced weapons program.

The first of these alternatives would undermine the rationale of China's foreign policy; the second would distort the effort to modernize the Chinese economy. The argument on these fundamental issues was dangerously complicated by the fact the military controlled guns and troops.

It was against this background that Mao suddenly departed for the provinces last summer. A number of other events coincided with his departure.

- Chou En-lai was compelled to enter the hospital, clearly quite ill.

- The anti-Confucius campaign began to run out of steam, and a new propaganda line emphasizing the need

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for unity within the party was introduced.

• The first slight cracks appeared in the picture of a united "Emperor" and Prime Minister: the merits of the Prime Minister were still stressed, but it was noted that he was too willing to compromise with his opponents.

These opponents were almost certainly military men, since the "unity" theme did nothing to improve the weakened position of the extreme left. At the same time, the budgetary and strategic arguments against the soldiers were spelled out in greater detail, and the invective against them increased in harshness.

It is entirely possible that Chou's hospitalization created a new political situation in Peking. With Chou unable to supervise the myriad details of a volatile and politically charged campaign, many of the Premier's supporters and perhaps Chou himself may well have concluded that a frontal assault against the entrenched military was simply too dangerous. They could not afford a repetition of the Lin affair.

Such a conclusion would not necessarily mean that the military's budgetary and strategic arguments were to be accepted or that the military's role in politics was not to be curbed; it would mean that the effort to circumscribe powerful military figures would stop short of drastic personal action against them.

There were some signs that the military felt themselves to be in a stronger position in the autumn of 1974. Several important regional military commanders who had been under heavy attack in the spring and had long been out of sight reappeared in early autumn. Rumors that the military were making a comeback swept China in the late autumn.

One story, which gained wide currency, claimed that Mao had called a meeting in

Wuhan of the 13 regional military commanders and that all but two managed to stay away. If not exact in detail, the story probably contains more than a grain of truth.

It seems to have been shortly after this rumored affront that Mao issued his dictum that eight years of cultural revolution were enough and that army and party must unite.

This pronouncement may well have been a tactical retreat on the Chairman's part, for signs continued to crop up that he himself was not ready to "unite" with the military. The November issue of *Red Flag* carried another of the authoritative articles associated with the Chairman, making a case against the military commanders in especially vehement terms.

It spoke of "feudal princes" and a "dowager empress" who collaborated with them—an apparent reference to Chiang Ching, the Chairman's leftist wife—and called them traitors for their willingness to give up claims to territory along China's northern border. The charge of traitor strongly suggested that a case for a purge was being made. The Prime Minister was once again accused of weakness and willingness to compromise.

A response to this tirade appeared in the Hong Kong communist newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* on the very day that a delegation from Peking went to Hunan, apparently to discuss with the Chairman details of the congress.

The response praised a far-sighted Prime Minister, loyal to the "Emperor," not only for his ability to "control the empress' family" but also for his ability to unite opposing factions—specifically, the bureaucrats and the military. It painted the portrait of another, rash "Emperor" who persisted in his plans for battle, despite advice to the contrary from experienced ministers. It went on to note

that the battle proved a disaster for the "Emperor."

Thus, on the eve of the plenum and the congress, the positions were clearly drawn.

• A consensus group, including Chou En-lai, seemed prepared to push forward with the meetings, which would codify the policies of the early 1970s and make relatively conservative personnel appointments, without first risking a frontal assault against entrenched military commanders.

• The Chairman, on the other hand, seemed prepared to run those risks and was apparently demanding a purge of leading military personalities. His deliberate identification with the pragmatic policies of the past four years indicates that he was not pushing for a new turn to the left in the style of the mid-1960s; his quarrel with the Premier appeared to be carefully circumscribed and seemed to rest entirely on the narrow ground that Chou and the consensus group were unwilling to take extreme measures against a potentially disruptive military.

Both the extreme left and the military suffered a considerable defeat at the plenum and congress, but the former may have been hurt more than the latter.

Chou's enunciation of economic priorities—agriculture first, light industry second, heavy industry third—indicates that the military had lost the budgetary battle, but his brief and circumspect treatment of the problem of civilian-military relations strongly suggests that this issue had not been settled to anyone's satisfaction.

In short, the role of the military remains a contentious—perhaps the most contentious—issue in Chinese politics.

If it is, Mao probably still has considerable room for maneuver. He appears

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to remain concerned that compromise with the military establishment threatens his policy of political confrontation with Moscow, and he may see opportunity for renewed pressure against the soldiers.

The expulsion of several Soviet diplomats from China for espionage activities a year ago raised the possibility that the Soviet "spies" would be linked to high-level figures in the Chinese regime. Despite the turmoil of the anti-Confucius campaign, this shoe was never dropped; nor have the three members of the Soviet

helicopter crew captured last winter ever been brought to public trial.

Relations with Moscow certainly have not been improved as a result of the decisions taken at the congress, but a move on either of these fronts could easily worsen relations. This could be a further bone of contention, perhaps pitting the Chairman against the military establishment.

If, however, the consensus against an all-out assault on the soldiers holds and if Mao continues to press for further action against them, the lines of cleavage within

the Chinese leadership could become much sharper and deeper than they now appear to be, perhaps creating a situation analogous to that in the early and mid-1960s.

In such circumstances the Chairman may simply wait for a political opening he can turn to his advantage. He is, however, 15 years older, and time is surely not on his side. On the other hand, he seems to agree with the consensus group on a wide range of issues, and he apparently hopes to avoid an open split with them. [REDACTED]

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