

September 3, 1968
**Note Number 291 from the Department of
Asia-Oceania, 'China and the Events in
Czechoslovakia'**

Citation:

"Note Number 291 from the Department of Asia-Oceania, 'China and the Events in Czechoslovakia'", September 3, 1968, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, France. Obtained by Enrico Fardella and translated by Garret Martin. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/116446>

Summary:

The Department of Asia-Oceania analyzes shifts in Chinese foreign policy toward Eastern Europe following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and connects the apparent changes in Beijing's diplomacy to the Sino-Soviet split and the Vietnam War.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from MacArthur Foundation

Original Language:

French

Contents:

Translation - English

Paris, 3 September 1968

Note number 291, Department of Asia-Oceania

Note

China and the events in Czechoslovakia

Since the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, the worsening of the Sino-Soviet dispute has led Beijing to harden its positions towards 'modern revisionism' and to treat all the people's democracies that gravitate in Moscow's orbit with the same suspicion. Only Romania, because of the independent policy it practiced towards the Kremlin, had received a preferential treatment from China. Czechoslovakia was lumped together with the Soviet Union. The incidents provoked in Prague in early 1967 by Chinese students, who were later declared *persona non grata* by the Czechoslovak authorities, as well as the expulsion in December 1967 of the correspondent of the CTK agency in Beijing, had only further aggravated relations between both countries. The preparation of the world conference of communist parties, to which the Prague leaders had participated actively by hosting various meetings in Karlovy-Vary, had given a chance for the Chinese press to virulently stigmatize Czechoslovakia's attitude.

The process of liberalization started by M. Dubcek early this year had only reinforced the mistrust of the Chinese leaders towards a new manifestation of revisionist decay in a socialist country. However, until these last few weeks, China, torn between refusing to back any liberal evolution within the communist movement and its desire to take advantage of Soviet difficulties, had taken a cautious stance. The brutal occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies would push China to go on the offensive.

After the customary delay in China, tied to the difficulties of getting the heavy bureaucratic machinery going, the Chinese radio and press unleashed on the 23rd August against the 'monstrous crime' and the 'atrocious repression' perpetuated by the Russians in Czechoslovakia. On the same day, these attacks were taken up and officially sanctioned by Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, during a speech at a reception hosted by the Romanian Ambassador for his country's national holiday. Until the end of August, not a day has gone by without the press condemning the 'fascist invasion' of Czechoslovakia and, after the Moscow compromise, the 'betrayal' of the Prague leaders. In a very unusual fashion, the Xinhua news agency went as far as publishing a special issue on 30th August on the events in Czechoslovakia which included all the main dispatches published since the intervention by the troops from the Warsaw Pact countries.

An analysis of the dispatches and the official Chinese reactions gives an insight into the scale of the new anti-Soviet campaign initiated by Beijing. To be fair, this was a good opportunity for the Chinese leaders to bring up all the grievances that they had been developing for years against the Kremlin leaders and to draw, once again, some conclusions.

The violence of the attacks by the press and the Chinese leaders against the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies contrasts with the ambiguity of the position adopted by Beijing.

Virulence of the tone: Zhou Enlai's speech attacks the 'savage fascist nature' of the 'renegade and traitorous clique' of the Soviet revisionists. He compares the surprise attack of Czechoslovakia to 'Hitler's aggression' of 1939 and the American intervention in Vietnam. The tenor taken by the Prime Minister set the tone for the

stream of insults spread by the press.

Ambivalence of the attacks: the Chinese leaders find a way to tie together 'the revisionist Soviet leading clique' and 'the revisionist Czechoslovak leading clique'. It is the fear of seeing the latter try to establish contacts with the American and West German imperialists that supposedly provoked the Soviet intervention. After the Moscow compromise, 'Dubcek's clique' is accused of having betrayed their country's interests by openly calling on their people to submit to the occupier.

Skill of the polemic: the Chinese press contrasts the acts of resistance from the population with the 'shameful capitulation' of the Czechoslovak leaders who allegedly sacrificed their state's sovereignty by agreeing to 'Moscow's dirty bargain'. So the ideological requirements, which forbid any complacency towards revisionist deviations, are reconciled with the desire to take advantage of Soviet difficulties. Relying on the Maoist theory of armed struggle, Beijing is calling for a national resistance movement that would undo the Moscow agreement and bring to an end the revisionist bloc.

Beijing had some personal reasons to complain about the intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia. During the first week of occupation, it seems that the Soviet troops had only limited respect for diplomatic immunities. On 26th August, the Chinese Foreign Ministry made a 'serious protest' to the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Beijing about the repeated intrusion of Soviet troops in the buildings of the Chinese embassy in Prague. The Chinese government expressed its indignation about these 'very serious actions' that directly threaten the security and activities of its embassy. The protest has stayed at this formal stage. It is noteworthy that Beijing has not engaged in any great collective rallies in retaliation, as had happened in early 1967 in front of the Soviet embassy.

The Chinese seem more comfortable today remaining on the field of doctrinal disputes. The campaign orchestrated by the press and the Beijing leaders has sought to discredit the alleged reasons put forth by Moscow to justify its intervention, and to instead reveal the real motivations driving Moscow.

The People's Daily on the 23rd August sarcastically denounced the motivations put forward by the 'Soviet revisionists': defending the gains of socialism, preserving peace in Europe, and the strategic interests of the socialist camp. How can they talk of defending the gains of socialism, an indignant commentator stated, when they have spread 'modern revisionism' throughout a great number of socialist countries? How can they reinforce peace by pursuing a policy of aggression? How can they pretend to preserve the solidarity between parties, when their camp is riddled with 'deception and blackmail', tugging and internal struggles?

According to Beijing, imperialism and colonialism are the real motivations of the Soviet policy. Moscow is openly accused of wanting to build a 'colonial empire' so to divide the world with the United States. As for the nature of the ideology in Kremlin, Zhou Enlai described it as 'social-imperialism' and 'social-fascism' in his 23rd August speech. Using Leninist terminology, a doctrinal article, published on 31st August in the People's Daily, defined 'social-imperialism' as 'imperialism under the banner of socialism'.

Chinese commentators are claiming that the Prague events will serve as a 'new lesson' for the Czechoslovak people. For its part, China drew two lessons – always the same – from the Soviet intervention: it confirmed once again the decay of the revisionist bloc and the policy of open collaboration between the United States and the USSR.

The Czechoslovak events proved the 'complete bankruptcy of modern revisionism' (Xinhua on 23rd August). By only supporting the Czechoslovak people in their desire to resist the occupier, the Chinese leaders were careful not to take sides with either of the two 'cliques' in power in Prague and Moscow. This is a 'dog fight': true revolutionaries can only be indifferent in front of this 'grand brawl between revisionist cliques'.

The Chinese press has tried, with greater difficulty, to show that the Soviet aggression against Czechoslovakia is a product of Soviet-American collusion. The armed occupation of the country, which follows the logic of the 'sinister Glassboro meeting', supposedly happened with the 'tacit consent' of the United States (Beijing Radio on 26th August). It is true that three days earlier, the same source was claiming that the 'clique of Czechoslovak renegade revisionists' were only thinking about establishing contacts with the American imperialists and that the Soviet intervention was trying to prevent that from happening. We can see that Beijing's propaganda is not bothered by contradictions.

To be fair, the Chinese are trying to make a connection between the situation in Czechoslovakia and Vietnam. Picking up on the argument of a major English newspaper, Xinhua does not hesitate to claim that 'the United States gave carte blanche to Russia in Czechoslovakia, just as Russia gave carte blanche to the United States in Vietnam'. For his part, Zhou Enlai declared on the 2nd September during North Vietnam's national holiday: 'Since American imperialism recognized that Czechoslovakia and the rest of Eastern Europe were in Soviet revisionism's sphere of influence, returning the favor would naturally mean that Soviet revisionism recognize the Middle East, South Vietnam and the rest of South-East Asia as being part of American imperialism's sphere of influence'. By insisting on the connections between the Czechoslovak and Vietnamese problems, it seems that the Beijing leaders are also trying to criticize Hanoi's support for the Kremlin's approach.

The position adopted by China during the Czechoslovakia affair has allowed Beijing to make a spectacular comeback on the world's political stage. It is clear that the expressions of support for the Czechoslovak people are only circumstantial. The aim of the approach is both to add to the Soviets' embarrassment, by condemning their adventurous initiative, and to indirectly criticize the peace negotiations between Hanoi and Washington by firmly emphasizing the necessity of 'armed resistance'.