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Imagined Solidarity, Revolution, and Pragmatism

China's Evolving Role in Postcolonial Africa

(1950s-1970s)

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Imagined Solidarity, Revolution, and Pragmatism. China's Evolving Role in Postcolonial Africa (1950s–1970s)

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TFG Abstract

This study explores the evolution of China's engagement with Africa from the 1950s to the 1970s, highlighting shifts from imagined postcolonial solidarity to revolutionary support, and finally to pragmatic diplomacy and economic cooperation. The early foreign policy of the People's Republic of China emphasised shared anti-imperialist struggles and solidarity with newly independent African states, based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. However, the 1960s brought a more militant phase influenced by Maoist ideology and the Sino-Soviet split, as China actively supported African rebellions. Following the end of the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, China returned to pragmatic policies, focusing on international recognition and broadening economic ties. The research draws on diverse primary sources, including speeches, propaganda posters, biographies, and government records, to reveal how the international context, in interplay with China's domestic developments, shaped its African policy. By adopting a multi-perspective approach, the study also highlights the important role of African states in navigating their relationships with China amid Cold War dynamics.

Solidaritat imaginada, revolució i pragmatisme. El paper canviant de la Xina a l'Àfrica postcolonial (1950–1970)

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Paraules clau

Postcolonialisme, relacions sinoafricanes, Tercer Món, Bandung, maoisme

Resum del TFG

Aquest estudi explora l'evolució de la implicació de la Xina amb l'Àfrica des dels anys cinquanta fins als setanta del segle vint, tot destacant els canvis d'una solidaritat postcolonial imaginada cap a un suport revolucionari i, finalment, cap a una diplomàcia pragmàtica i una cooperació econòmica. La política exterior inicial de la República Popular de la Xina feia èmfasi en les lluites compartides contra l'imperialisme i en la solidaritat amb els estats africans recentment independitzats, basant-se en els Cinc Principis de Convivència Pacífica. Tanmateix, els anys 1960 van portar una fase més militant influïda per la ideologia maoista i la ruptura sino-soviètica, en què la Xina donava suport activament a les rebel·lions africanes. Després del punt àlgid de la Revolució Cultural, la Xina va tornar a adoptar polítiques més pragmàtiques, centrant-se en el reconeixement internacional i en l'ampliació dels vincles econòmics. La recerca es basa en fonts primàries diverses, com discursos, cartells de propaganda, biografies i documents governamentals, per mostrar com el context internacional, en interacció amb els desenvolupaments interns de la Xina, va donar forma a la seva política africana. Amb un enfocament multiperspectiu, l'estudi també posa en relleu el paper important dels estats africans a l'hora de gestionar les seves relacions amb la Xina enmig de les dinàmiques de la Guerra Freda.

Solidaridad imaginada, revolución y pragmatismo. El papel cambiante de China en el África poscolonial (1950–1970)

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Palabras clave

Poscolonialismo, relaciones sinoafricanas, Tercer Mundo, Bandung, maoísmo

Resumen del TFG

Este estudio explora la evolución del compromiso de China con África desde los años cincuenta hasta los setenta del siglo XX, destacando los cambios desde una solidaridad poscolonial imaginada hacia un apoyo revolucionario, y finalmente hacia una diplomacia pragmática y una cooperación económica. La política exterior inicial de la República Popular China enfatizaba las luchas compartidas contra el imperialismo y la solidaridad con los estados africanos recientemente independizados, basándose en los Cinco Principios de Coexistencia Pacífica. Sin embargo, la década de 1960 trajo consigo una fase más militante, influida por la ideología maoísta y la ruptura sino-soviética, durante la cual China apoyó activamente las rebeliones africanas. Tras el final del punto álgido de la Revolución Cultural, China regresó a políticas más pragmáticas, centradas en el reconocimiento internacional y en la ampliación de los lazos económicos. La investigación se basa en una variedad de fuentes primarias, incluidos discursos, carteles de propaganda, biografías y documentos gubernamentales, para revelar cómo el contexto internacional, en interacción con los desarrollos internos de China, dio forma a su política hacia África. Adoptando un enfoque multiperspectivo, el estudio también resalta el papel fundamental de los estados africanos en la gestión de sus relaciones con China en el marco de las dinámicas de la Guerra Fría.

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Linguistical Clarifications

This project includes historical figures of diverse linguistic backgrounds, and a Romanised version spelling of the names will be used. In East Asian cultures, the family name is written first, followed by the given name, which differs from Western naming conventions. This order reflects the cultural importance of the family name and will therefore be respected in this text. Furthermore, the forms utilised will follow the *Pinyin* romanisation system, which was officially adopted by the People's Republic of China in 1958 and has since become the international standard for transcribing Chinese names into the Latin alphabet. Therefore, the spellings Mao Zedong (毛泽东) and Zhou Enlai (周恩来) are used. Earlier Western sources often used Wade-Giles romanisation, leading to variants such as Mao Tse-Tung and Chou En-lai (Casas Tost and Rovira-Esteva 2015). To maintain consistency, the *Pinyin* forms will be used in the text, however, some of the older source titles use the Wade-Giles romanisation.

For the Romanisation of names coming from Arabic, the most widely recognised and commonly accepted English form of the name will be used to prioritise familiarity. Therefore, this project follows the spelling used in the English versions of the bibliographies quoted in the text. For example, the spelling of the name Gamal Abdel Nasser (جمال عبد الناصر).

All translations from non-English sources are the author's own, unless otherwise indicated.

Abbreviations

AAPSO	Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAPFA	Chinese-African People's Friendship Association
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale (Algerian National Liberation Front)
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
KMT	Kuomintang, Chinese Nationalist Party
MPLA	Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China (established in 1949)
ROC	Republic of China (1912-1949: on the Chinese mainland. After 1949: on Taiwan)
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Socialist Soviet Republics
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union

Introduction

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) calls the relationship with Africa “a partnership of equals”.¹ It describes China as the largest developing country in the world, while Africa is the continent with the greatest number of developing countries. Furthermore, in 2024, China remained Africa's largest trading partner for the sixteenth consecutive year (Zhang 2025). However, global discussions are divided on whether these dynamics generate new dependency relations or provide genuine opportunities for transformation (Colom-Jaén and Mateos 2022, 61). The Chinese official narrative is that shared experiences and similar aims have brought China and Africa together, as the countries supported each other in the fight for national liberation and independence. History is instrumentalised as the foundation for today's partnership and economic expansion.

This project explores the evolution of China's engagement with Africa from the 1950s to the 1970s. The first section focuses on the notion of an imagined solidarity, examining how Chinese leaders sought to build a postcolonial alliance with newly independent African states during the 1950s, and the political aims behind this initiative. Entering the 1960s, the second section focuses on the exported revolution, investigating how China's foreign policy shifted from rhetorical solidarity to material support for armed rebellions and liberation movements in Africa, and how this was influenced by the Sino-Soviet split and Maoist revolutionary ideology. Finally, the third section describes the return of pragmatism in the 1970s, after the end of the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, and the abandonment of radical policies in favour of international recognition and economic cooperation with governments of all ideologies.

The study focuses on the Chinese domestic political development and the formation of the PRC's foreign policy under the leadership of Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong, and how this defined China's role in Africa. It is a study of primary sources, where the first part includes speeches found in the selected works of Zhou and Mao, as well as the keynote addresses from the Bandung Conference. The African response is primarily found in biographies and political essays written by African leaders of the time. In the second part, Chinese propaganda posters play a key role in the study, as they provide a vivid understanding of the values and imagery central to Maoism and the Cultural Revolution era. The third part focuses on United Nations

¹ See the page *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*, published in 2021. Found at https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/gb/202405/t20240531_11367447.html

resolutions and debates, joint statements, political reports and manifests, as well as biographical depictions by Chinese, US, and African leaders.

Alongside the primary sources, several works by historians and political commentators, from the 1950s to the present, have been crucial to the analysis. In particular, Shao Kuo-Kang's *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy*, George T. Yu's articles, and Julia Lovell's *Maoism: A Global History* have been especially valuable for understanding the roles of key Chinese political figures and how the Chinese foreign policy unfolded on the African continent. The study follows the historiographical framework of New Cold War History, in which the works of Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Li Danhui, Xia Yafeng, Lorenz Lüthi, and Julia Lovell utilised widening PRC declassification during the 2000s, before the clawback began again in 2011. Consistent with this tradition, it adopts a multi-perspective approach to the Cold War, emphasising China as a central actor and highlighting the role and agency of African countries. The period from the Russian Revolution in 1917 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 spanned seventy-four years. In 2024, the People's Republic of China turned seventy-five, surpassing the lifespan of its Communist counterpart and rival. Over time, we may come to see October 1949, rather than October 1917, as the defining revolutionary moment of the 20th century (Lovell 2019, 18).

Primary sources for this study were obtained from multiple digital archives. The Chinese Posters Foundation in Amsterdam maintains Chinese posters.net, and the archive includes propaganda posters from the collections of Stefan Landsberger, the International Institute of Social History (IISH), as well as private collectors. The Internet Archive, a non-profit digital library, has been fundamental to the research due to its digitisation of mid-20th-century paperback biographies. The Maddison Project, from the University of Groningen, provided historical economic data, and the Marxist Internet Archive, a non-profit online encyclopaedia, provided access to speeches and works of communist and socialist leaders. The archives of the Ministry of External Affairs of the Government of India, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, and the Office of the Historian, Department of State, United States, have made joint statements and historical declarations available for research. Furthermore, the Nasser Bibliotheca Alexandrina hosts an archive of two decades of Nasser's speeches, a unique insight into the leader's own words. The United Nations Digital Library has been used to find resolutions and transcripts of speeches from the General Assembly, and the Wilson Center Digital Archive was an essential resource, as it hosts documents from governments across the globe. Finally, Theory China has provided crucial access to the *Selected Works* of both Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, translated and published by the Foreign Languages Press.

1. Imagined Solidarity: Constructing China and Africa's Postcolonial Alliance (1950s)

1.1 China and Africa in 1949

China entered the 19th century as the world's leading economy,² but its market was forcibly opened after defeat by European powers in the Opium Wars, beginning in 1839. The Europeans got together to wage war against China to ensure that "Western capitalists would make profit while the Chinese were turned into dope addicts" (Rodney 1972, 91). A century later, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was founded on October 1, 1949,³ after the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War. Mao Zedong famously stated that "the Chinese people have stood up" (Mao 1977, 1-4) and explained that China had dropped behind in modern times, because of "the oppression and exploitation of foreign imperialism and domestic reaction". But from now on, China will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation.

By the time the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, nearly the entire African continent remained under colonial rule, with only a few exceptions. Ethiopia, the only African country which was never fully colonised, had been briefly occupied by Mussolini's Italy but restored its sovereignty in 1941. Liberia declared independence by the mid-19th century but remained an economic colony of US interests, and the British Government declared Egypt independent in 1922, formally ending the British protectorate, but the country remained under the British sphere of influence until the 1950s. Finally, the Statute of Westminster granted legislative independence to the dominions of the Commonwealth, including the Union of South Africa (Arnold 2005, 8-10). Consequently, entering the 1950s, Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves (2008, 47) conclude that "not only did China have no negative record on the African continent but it also benefited from an important leverage due to a common past under the hardship of western imperialism." This laid the foundation for the future relationship between China and Africa. The establishment of the PRC coincided with the emergence of Africa's independence movements, offering Chinese leaders a unique opportunity to build new and dynamic partnerships.

² *The Maddison Project* estimates China's share of World GDP to have been close to 30% in 1820, making it the by far largest economy in the world, more than three times greater than the United Kingdom. See more at <https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/>

³ See *Image 1* for a picture from the proclamation of the PRC

1.2 (Re)articulation of the PRC's Foreign Policy (1949-1954)

Mao Zedong became Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee during a restructuring of the leadership in 1943, further reinforced his power at the Seventh Congress in 1945, and assumed the role of paramount leader of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Second to Mao was Zhou Enlai⁴ who entered the position as the inaugural Premier, in charge of running the government and overseeing the domestic administration. He remained in that position until he died in 1976, symbolically the same year Mao passed away,⁵ and acted as the Minister of Foreign Affairs until 1958. Crucial for Zhou's longevity in the Party was that he could demonstrate that he had no ambition to unseat Mao. While Zhou could argue heatedly with the Chairman and disagree with him in the Central Committee, he would never organise a faction against him. British journalist Dick Wilson concluded that "Of all the men who had been senior to Mao in the Party hierarchy, only Zhou survived as a continuous member of Mao's team. It would be going too far to say that Mao trusted Zhou, but over the years the two did grow to need each other more and more" (Wilson 1984, 298). Though the relationship may not have been based on trust, Mao had great confidence in Zhou's knowledge and judgment on matters of foreign policy. Former CCP leader Zhang Guotao wrote that Mao and Zhou cooperated well, with "one making plans inside, and the other negotiating outside" (Shao 1996, 145). Their relationship had the beneficial effect of bringing together the two men's distinctly different approaches. Zhou understood that the vitality of Chinese Communism had to come from a rural leader who knew how peasants thought and lived. Meanwhile, Mao needed a diplomat who could represent the movement to the world. Consequently, Zhou became known for his pragmatism, while Mao held a strictly doctrinaire approach.

Combining Marxism with a strong sense of Chinese nationalism, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had emphasised national unity and downplayed strict communist ideas in favour of patriotic, anti-imperial resistance. The strategy of the United Fronts, of uniting with as many people as possible to isolate and destroy the enemy, was used by the Chinese Communists to great advantage in their revolutionary civil war. This strategy would later transcend from the domestic to the international arena (Ogunsanwo 1974, 3). However, the PRC would initially align to the side of the Soviet Union in the new dichotomy of the Cold War that began to shape the international arena. After suffering from unequal treaties and colonial exploitation for more than a century, the priority of the new government was to eliminate the remaining political,

⁴ See the official portrait of Zhou Enlai in Image 2

⁵ Zhou Enlai died on January 8, 1976, while five year older Mao Zedong died on September 9th. Zhou died of natural causes as he had suffered from bladder cancer for many years. See more in section 3.5

economic, and cultural influence of colonial powers in China. Mao referred to this as “cleaning up the house before hosting guests” (Chen 2017, 178). The United States, allies to the Republic of China (ROC) and the Kuomintang, who retreated to Taiwan after the loss in the Civil War, intensified its confrontation and containment policy against China.⁶ This continued by direct hostility between the two countries in the Korean War, where US and UN forces reached the Yalu River in several locations by the fall of 1950. Located only a few kilometres from the Chinese border, they posed a direct threat to the PRC. In a speech on October 24, 1950, Zhou stated that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea must be victorious. “China and Korea are neighbouring countries as closely related as lips and teeth. If the lips are gone, the teeth are exposed to the cold. If the DPRK is subjugated by U.S. imperialism, there will be no security for northeast China” (Zhou 1989, 60). Meanwhile, on the southern border, imperial France fought the Việt Minh in the First Indochina War from 1946 to 1954.

The unfavourable international environment facing China upon its independence forced the new leadership to choose the pragmatic option of siding with the communist camp, even though the nation had never been really comfortable with communism. In a major pronouncement on foreign policy in June 1949, *On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship*, Mao put forward the policy of “Leaning to one side”. Referencing the experiences of the last decades, he stated that “all Chinese without exception must lean either to the side of imperialism or to the side of socialism. Sitting on the fence will not do, nor is there a third road” (Mao 1967, 417). The decision of alignment resulted in the USSR being the first country to recognise the PRC on October 2nd, 1949, one day after its proclamation. The relationship was reinforced by the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance in February 1950. Zhou concluded that “The People’s Republic of China resolutely sides with the world camp of peace and democracy headed by the Soviet Union and has established the closest fraternal relations with that country” (Zhou 1989, 44). It is important to acknowledge that this alliance was, from China’s perspective, based on the struggle against imperialism rather than strictly communist ideals. Zhou confirms this in 1952 when referencing back to Mao’s declaration on leaning to one side, concluding that “By taking a clear-cut stand in favour of the camp of peace and democracy, China has dissipated the illusions of the imperialists. If we had not stated our position explicitly, the imperialists would still have indulged the vain hope that they could count on us” (Zhou 1989, 95-96).

⁶ US diplomat George F. Kennan authored the concept of containment in “The Long Telegram” in 1946, with the aim to contain Soviet expansion. See more at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/remembering-george-f-kennan>

The Korean War Armistice Agreement was signed in July 1953, and the Geneva Conference began in April 1954 to settle the outstanding issues of the Korean War and the First Indochina War. The strategic aim of China was to secure the withdrawal of Western military powers in Asia and increase the security of China by creating areas of peace and neutrality. China had reemerged on the world stage as a great power, exhibiting its military strength in the Korean War, and the country's prestige in Asia was enhanced by the Korean armistice. Furthermore, Zhou acted as a spokesperson and negotiator for the postcolonial states at the Geneva Conference, emphasising China's role in the world. This led to the development of a new foreign policy approach, as a pragmatic Zhou Enlai internationalised the United Front policy of the Chinese civil war. The strategy of winning over the domestic "neutral" or "third" forces to successfully gain national power was expanded to the world arena. Zhou acknowledged the importance of international neutral forces in promoting China's prestige and influence abroad and proposed the neutralisation of Indochina, concerned about the conflict crossing the border into China. The Geneva Conference was the first exhibition of China's new role and policy direction, where Zhou managed to win over support from Asian leaders (Shao 1996, 211-216).

In addition to the threat of imperialism at its borders, the recently proclaimed Central People's Government found itself facing a legitimacy problem. By September 1950, a year after its founding, seventeen countries had established diplomatic relations with the PRC. These were mainly communist countries in Europe and Asia, but also Sweden, Denmark, the UK, and Switzerland, as well as strategically important neighbours Burma (Myanmar) and India (Zhou 1989, 44). However, the UN membership remained in the hands of the Kuomintang and the ROC, who continued to harvest the US recognition and support. Furthermore, the four earliest independent African states were pro-Western, illustrated by their recognition of the ROC. This dual threat showed the Chinese Government that the two-bloc division of the world had to be temporarily abandoned, and Beijing identified that the newly independent countries in the former colonial world were both natural allies and a potential solution to the legitimacy problems. It was evident that Africa could play a vital role in the international recognition of the PRC as the sole legal government and thereby undermine the ROC's international standing. This led to a major policy initiative, where China in the mid-1950s decided to "expand its foreign policy arena beyond Asia and the Communist bloc into the new world of Africa" (Yu 1988, 850). The new policy was not so much to isolate the United States and destroy her, but to prevent the isolation of China by showing neighbours and other postcolonial countries that they had nothing to fear, and that China was prepared to be on friendly terms with them (Ogunsanwo 1974, 6).

1.3 Intermediate Zone and Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence

In 1946, Mao articulated the first stage of his theory of international strategy, known as the Intermediate Zone. In the following decades, this evolved into the Two Intermediate Zones and, subsequently, the Three Worlds Theory. Mao applied Marxist philosophy as an analytical tool, looking at the interest relationship between the political entities of the international community, identifying “who is our enemy, who is our friend” (Yin 2018, 202). According to Mao, there existed a vast unaffiliated zone between the United States and the Soviet Union in the postwar world. US imperialists could not attack the Soviet Union until they had conquered that zone. Furthermore, the “principal contradiction” in the world was the struggles between people in this intermediate zone, especially China, and the “reactionary American ruling class” (Chen 2024, 253). Central to the chairman’s theory was the belief that the CCP would play a central role in bridging the world revolution and the global trend of decolonisation. Zhou embraced Mao’s thesis and urged party members to study the idea and apply it to their analysis of the international situation. Consequently, the rearticulation of China’s foreign policy was continually shaped by the leadership’s interpretation of China’s role in the international context and its balancing between great powers and postcolonial states.

China began to see itself as part of a broader global movement of decolonisation from the mid-1950s, and solidarity with newly independent states became a basic principle in Chinese foreign policy. To be successful, Zhou had to examine the views of third forces and develop a strategy of approaching neutral and nonaligned states in the international arena. He believed that a global united front against neocolonialism and imperialism could be a decisive factor in changing the bipolar balance of power, and sought to develop a sense of common interest and solidarity rather than relying on dogmatic revolutionary rhetoric. China could be far more influential among the newly established nations if its international behaviour and image were less militant, and diplomatic trust focused on improving state-to-state relations. Thus, Zhou became convinced that economic reconstruction and diplomatic manoeuvrability should take precedence over proletarian internationalism and revolutionary rhetoric. He envisioned a more central role for China in world affairs and redirected the focus towards the postcolonial states. This Chinese diversification was previously stopped by Mao’s Soviet-leaning approach, but the expansion of the Cold War and the US policy of containment made it desirable for the CCP to adjust the interpretation of international relations to the new reality. Diplomatic historian Shao Kuo-kang (1996, 213) concluded that “pragmatic adaptation and strategic flexibility were key to Zhou's foreign policy, and China's own interests overrode ideological considerations related to the international Communist movement.”

With this background, Zhou developed the Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence,⁷ a “response to a world asking for a new set of principles for the conduct of international relations that would reflect the aspirations of all nations to co-exist and prosper together in peace and harmony”.⁸ It was a diplomatic approach that was based on the understanding that the decolonising states desired political independence and economic progress. Zhou argued that countries must avoid military conflicts between the two superpowers and instead develop their own economies. The Five Principles were first formally enunciated in the Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between the Tibet region of China and India, signed on April 29, 1954. Expressing his high hopes in the new policy, Zhou stated that “It is inevitable that there should be some problems between two big countries, particularly when, like China and India, they have a common border. But all unresolved problems can be discussed, provided the negotiators abide by these principles” (Zhou 1989, 128). The Geneva Conference began the same month, during which a pragmatic Zhou advocated for the neutralisation of Indochina, thus continuing to implement the new agenda in Southeast Asia, an area where many local wars of liberation had taken place in the post-war era. This marked the beginning of a process whereby the Five Principles became foundational norms guiding the development of state-to-state relations that transcend social systems and ultimately gained acceptance by an overwhelming majority of countries worldwide. The principles are expressed as: 1) Mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. 2) Mutual non-aggression. 3) Non-interference in each other's internal affairs. 4) Equality and mutual benefit. 5) Peaceful coexistence.⁹

1.4 The Bandung Conference (1955)

Between the 18-24th of April in 1955, the delegations of 29 countries¹⁰ met in the Indonesian metropolis of Bandung for the first Afro-Asian conference.¹¹ Most of the participating countries had already attained independence, though some representatives were under the last remnants of colonial rule. This included the Gold Coast, which would become the first sub-Saharan colony to achieve sovereignty as Ghana in the following year, and Sudan, that would also

⁷ In Chinese, the name of the five principles are 和平共处五项原则. The Hindi name *Panchsheel* refers to the same.

⁸ See page 1 in the *Panchsheel* information pamphlet published by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. Accessible at https://www.mea.gov.in/uploads/publicationdocs/191_panchsheel.pdf

⁹ See the page *China's Initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence* by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/zy/wjls/3604_665547/202405/t20240531_11367542.html

¹⁰ The participating countries in the Bandung Conference of 1955 included Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), People's Republic of China, Cyprus, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gold Coast (Ghana), India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Saudia Arabia, Syria, Sudan, Thailand, Turkey, Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North), State of Vietnam (South), and Yemen.

¹¹ See Images 3-7 for pictures from the Conference

become an independent republic in 1956. Others had imperial legacies of their own, such as Japan, though the country in recent memory suffered a complete occupation by the United States. Thus, the participants constituted a diverse spectrum of backgrounds, sizes, cultures, and religions, causing a certain diplomatic complexity. However, the common ground among the members was the history of Western imperialism, and the public atmosphere embraced a belief in a new era of world history. That was not a belief taken out of thin air, since the present nations together represented 1.5 billion people, more than half the global population at the time. Afro-Asian scholar Christopher J. Lee (2010, 3) concludes that “Bandung contained both the residual romance of revolution, as well as the realpolitik of a new world order in the making.”

Concerned with Cold War tensions in Southeast Asia, intensified by the founding of the US-sponsored Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954,¹² Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo proposed the idea of an African-Asian conference, and India’s recently established diplomatic relations with China caused Prime Minister Nehru to insist on China’s inclusion. As the host, Indonesian President Sukarno welcomed the international visitors with a speech¹³ emphasising the shared background of the participants, the historical significance of the conference, and the future possibilities stemming from the newly established relations. His perspective was fundamentally anti-imperialist when he stated that “For many generations our peoples were the voiceless ones in the world, disregarded and living in poverty and humiliation. Then our nations demanded - nay fought - for independence and achieved independence, and with that independence came responsibility”. He continued by clarifying that colonialism is not something far off and distant; no, the poverty they experience is a direct inheritance of its ruthlessness. Furthermore, colonialism has a modern dress in the form of “economic control, intellectual control and actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation.” His proposed way forward was a united Asia and Africa. Therefore, he referred to the gathering as a “Brotherhood Conference”, a moment when countries with shared experiences, united by a common desire, stand up and show that a new Asia and a new Africa have been born.

The Bandung Conference was the genesis of knowledge transfer in the Third World. The conference illustrated that the ideas of Afro-Asian unity across political ideologies was not only an idea of Zhou Enlai but shared by many postcolonial leaders. However, though China was

¹² On September 8, 1954, the United States, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Pakistan formed the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization with the goal to prevent Communism from gaining ground in the region. Burma and Indonesia preferred to maintain neutrality rather than join the organization. See more at <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato>

¹³ See *Opening Address at the Bandung Conference* on pages 1 to 6 in *Selected Documents of the Asian-African Conference*, 1955. <https://archive.org/details/selecteddocument00asia/page/2/mode/1up>

not the organiser of the conference, and not even a neutral country as the Soviet partnership was still intact, Zhou's participation played a central role as representative of the largest developing country in the world. Liu Hong (2022, 11) argues that China's participation "constituted historical capital in legitimating its (leadership) role in the Global South and as an alternative modernity". Furthermore, the recently formulated Five Principles for Peaceful Coexistence would be an inspiration for the Ten Principles for Conducting International Relations¹⁴ that were adopted in the final communique of the conference. In his speeches,¹⁵ Zhou expressed the fundamentals of China's new foreign policy approach, underlining the idea of peaceful coexistence when quoting a Chinese proverb saying "Do not do unto others what you yourself do not desire. We are against outside interference; how could we want to interfere in the internal affairs of others?" He acknowledged the shared suffering of Asian and African countries from the calamities of colonialism and argued that participating countries must seek common grounds, while keeping their differences. He claimed that peace is the goal of China, and that they have come to seek unity and not to quarrel. Even though they consider the socialist system a good system, there is "no need at this Conference to publicize one's ideology and the political system of one's country". Nigerian diplomat and scholar Alaba Ogunsanwo (1974, 8) concluded that in Bandung, Zhou Enlai "gained prestige with a triumph of personal diplomacy. Disarming all hostility with a display of moderation and benevolence, he held aloof from all wrangling and steadfastly identified China with the common cause."

Only six African countries participated in the Bandung Conference: Egypt, Ethiopia, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Liberia, Libya, and Sudan. South Africa was already an independent country, but was excluded because of its apartheid policies (Lee 2010, 11). Nevertheless, the conference may be considered the foundation of the relationship between China and Africa, and the number of potential allies would skyrocket as soon as the doors of the Gedung Merdeka building closed. In the five years after the conference, twenty-four African countries gained independence, and in less than two decades, the number of UN Member States had doubled. Thus, the Bandung Conference took place at a pivotal moment in history, between the colonial and post-colonial periods. On the Conference, the Third World was embraced as a positive term and virtue, an alternative to past imperialism and the power of the US and the USSR. Additionally, the Bandung Spirit, as it would be known, was the feeling of political possibility presented to this first occasion of Third World solidarity. Indian historian Vijay Prashad (2007, 45-46) concludes that "the colonized world had now emerged to claim its space in world affairs, not just as an

¹⁴ Formulated in the Final Communique of the Asian-African Conference. See pages 29 to 35 in the *Selected Documents of the Asian-African Conference*, 1955.

¹⁵ On April 19 and 25, 1955. Found on page 21 to 28 in *Selected Documents of the Asian-African Conference*.

adjunct of the First or Second Worlds, but as a player in its own right. Furthermore, the Bandung Spirit was a refusal of both economic subordination and cultural suppression—two of the major policies of imperialism”.

Benedict Anderson’s concept of *imagined communities* offers a framework for understanding how collective identities are socially constructed (Anderson, 1983). Nations are not natural entities, but communities imagined through shared language, narratives, and media. Furthermore, a community is imagined in relation to the outsiders, as the “other” is crucial for building a sense of “us”. What becomes unique about the moment of the Bandung conference is that it was not merely the creation of an Afro-Asian alliance, but it took place in the era of independence, thus shaping the construction of national identities alongside the construction of an imagined solidarity. Alden and Alves (2008, 44) argue that “The conscious management of national identity, while a feature of all societies, is perhaps more visibly recognised in newly independent states determined to break with the previous regime and in search of new sources of domestic and external legitimacy.” Similarly, Chinese scholar Chen Yifeng (2017, 191-192) finds that the Conference had a lasting influence on the construction of China’s self-identity as a member of the Afro-Asian unity, introducing an Afro-Asian idea into China’s self-understanding. The same would be true for other newly independent participating countries.

The Bandung Spirit created a community based on shared experiences, hopes, and struggles, as well as a differentiation from the “others”: the imperialists. Therefore, the outcome of the Bandung conference was not mainly the establishment of a political alliance, but the construction of a postcolonial identity in opposition to imperialism and in aspiration toward a more just international order. The great success of Zhou Enlai was to locate China at the centre of this new identity, a member of the postcolonial world order founded on the idea of imagined solidarity. This would influence China’s relationship with newly independent nations throughout the 20th century.

1.5 The North African Response

China had extended a hand of solidarity to the world’s postcolonial states, and the North African leaders were quick to accept it. Though Egypt gained formal independence from Britain in 1922, its real independence from foreign domination came with the overthrow of King Farouk in the Egyptian Revolution of 1952. Gamal Abdel Nasser consolidated power and emerged as the first Prime Minister, and later President, of the newly proclaimed Republic of Egypt. His participation in the Bandung Conference elevated him to a position as a leading figure among

non-aligned nations and the most influential African representative in the Afro-Asian alliance. Robert Stephens concludes in his biography of Nasser that “His experience in Bandung gave his political picture of the world new dimensions. He heard an echo from the leaders of more than a billion people of Egypt's - and his own - deep hatred of colonialism and European imperialism” (Stephens 1971, 156). He also made his first contact with a Communist leader, and Nasser would come to develop an intimate relationship with Zhou Enlai. Advisor and journalist Mohamed Heikal calculated that Nasser and Zhou spent a total of seventy-four hours sitting and talking to each other. The Chinese were indeed watching Egypt's behaviour closely, knowing that as an emerging leader of the Arab world, Egypt's attitude towards China meant a whole area's attitude, not just their own (Heikal 1972, 265-266). Nasser himself expressed in a speech in 1956 that the Bandung Conference “was the beginning of contact and the consolidation of relations between China and Egypt, and my meeting with President Zhou Enlai was a major factor in increasing understanding between the two countries.”¹⁶

The relationship paid off and China harvested an inaugural triumph of the new foreign policy, when Egypt became the first African country to recognise the People's Republic of China in 1956, consequently breaking relations with Taiwan (ROC). Nasser's status was enhanced by the global support Egypt garnered during the 1956 Suez crisis, standing up to the imperial powers of Great Britain and France, and as a practical symbol of the countries' new partnership, China offered substantial material help (Wilson 1984, 230). The first Chinese embassy in Africa was established in Cairo in May 1956, and the same year, Chinese cultural missions visited Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Ethiopia. Commercial inroads into Africa were also made with large Chinese cotton purchases from Egypt, followed by the first commercial contracts with other African nations, beginning with Sudan and Morocco (Ogunsanwo 1974, 9). Diplomatic missions were sent back and forth between China and North Africa, and the new postcolonial alliance was met with idyllic words of brotherhood by the North African leaders. The sentiments of the time are well described by the words of Ferhat Abbas, first president of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic, during a state visit to Beijing at the end of the 1950s. Seeing a decorated airfield with the colours of Algeria and China, Abbas described that “when the military band played the Algerian national anthem under a clear sky, surrounded by a sea of flowers, I felt a pang in my heart that I will never forget. Tears filled my eyes. All at once, I felt like a free man among free men” (Abbas 2011, 284).

¹⁶ President Gamal Abdel Nasser's *Speech to the Cultural and Artistic Mission of the People's Republic of China* on February 28, 1956. Found in the archive Nasser: Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

Between 1955 and 1965, postcolonial solidarity among Asian and African countries reached its peak (Chen 2017, 175). However, China's policy in Africa was not carried out in a vacuum. Newly independent African states had their individual aspirations and desires to carry out economic development. Furthermore, both the international order and Chinese domestic policies underwent drastic changes by the turn of the decade. Soon, the upholding of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence would be a challenge, as friction emerged between the principle of non-interference and geopolitical interests.

2. Exporting Revolution: From Peaceful Coexistence to Armed Rebellion (1960s)

2.1 The Sino-Soviet Split and the Leftist Turn in China (1956-1962)

The People's Republic of China began the 1950s leaning to one side. Motivated by the threat of US imperialism at their borders, Mao and his newly established government willingly accepted Stalin's leadership, as the CCP was in no position to challenge Moscow at the time. But trouble began in February 1956, three years after the death of Stalin, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The party's new First Secretary, Nikita Khrushchev, denounced Stalin's cult of personality in a secret speech and began a process of de-Stalinisation. Furthermore, he launched a new foreign policy direction, a "peaceful coexistence" with the US and other capitalist countries. He argued that the Communist bloc was not unavoidably destined to clash with capitalism through violent revolution. Rather, they would persuade other states through a successful example (Lovell 2019, 130). Nine months later, Mao coined a phrase that would define the split with the Soviet Union, claiming that de-Stalinisation is simply de-Marxification. "It is revisionism" (Lüthi 2008, 63).¹⁷

Chinese historians Li Danhui and Xia Yafeng (2018, 273-281) find that the changes in Sino-Soviet relations determined the fate of the socialist bloc and had a deep and lasting impact on the course of international politics. They conclude that there was no mechanism for compromise in socialist bloc relations, instead, a dichotomy existed. When countries were on good terms, they called each other brothers and emphasised the spirit of proletarian internationalism, but once they had a falling out, they would fight each other to a bitter end, resorting to arms. In

¹⁷ Central to Lorenz Lüthi's research is the personal recollection of Wu Lengxi, who attended many Politburo meetings relevant to foreign affairs as the semi-official notetaker. The original quote can be found in Wu Lengxi, *Shinian lunzhan*, 1956–1966 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1999) p. 68

socialist bloc relations, the nations were either inseparable friends or life-and-death enemies. Thus, Li and Xia argue that the Sino-Soviet split cannot be explained solely based on the personalities of the leaders. Rather, an inherent structural defect in socialist state-to-state relations was the contradiction between international ideals and nationalist aspirations. As revolutionaries, the communists had no conscious projection of any particular national sovereignty. However, after coming to power and institutionalising, the Communists felt themselves trapped in a dilemma between advocating the norms of internationalism and the safeguarding of national interests. Another structural defect within the socialist bloc was that the state-to-state relationship was a continuation of party-to-party relations. The relationships between Communist states was thus mixed up with the relationships between the Communist parties. This allowed for a contest for leadership in the international Communist movement, where the most important issue was ideological authority. When Khrushchev initiated a form of self-criticism at the 20th Congress, it damaged the CPSU's prestige and undermined its leadership in the international socialist bloc. This created an opening for the CCP, previously unable to challenge Moscow's authority, to ascend. British historian and sinologist Julia Lovell (2019, 131) concludes that "This upsurge of confidence in Mao and the boundless possibilities of his revolution were the foundation of Mao's two flagship campaigns of the 1950s and '60s: the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution."

In 1956, the brief openness of the Hundred Flowers Campaign encouraged criticism of the government of China. But Mao and the CCP abruptly reversed the course and launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign the following year, crushing dissent and persecuting intellectuals who had expressed criticism. This reasserted ideological control and paved the way for a move to the left in Chinese politics, domestically and internationally. Furthermore, desperate to surpass both the West and the newly found enemy, the Soviet Union, Mao attempted to demonstrate that China's pace and path in economic construction was the fastest by launching the Great Leap Forward in 1958. A reform aiming to rapidly transform agrarian China into a modern, industrialised communist society, which resulted in one of history's largest famines. Cold War historian Lorenz M. Lüthi (2008, 346-352) finds that the mutual influence of domestic and foreign policy was a two-way street. The extremism of the Great Leap Forward demanded a foreign policy crisis for mobilisation purposes, and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis¹⁸ in 1958 was Mao's deliberate challenge to Khrushchev's strategy of peaceful coexistence.

¹⁸ During the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, the PRC shelled the islands of Kinmen and Matsu along the east coast of mainland China in an attempt to take them from the Kuomintang on Taiwan, thus challenging the American commitment to defend the ROC. The US provided naval and air support to the Kuomintang.



Poster 1: “The most important tasks of the Cultural Revolution”¹⁹

The Great Leap Forward was not merely an industrialisation campaign and economic reform, it was a major social campaign aiming at completely revolutionising Chinese society. A telling example of this is Poster 1 from 1958, which describes the reform as a cultural revolution. The poster proclaims that some of the main tasks are to sweep away illiteracy, eradicate the four pests, change habits, nurture a new intellectual class, and awaken people’s spirit.

Additionally, the international perspective of the Great Leap Forward was evident in the increasing foreign aid provided by the PRC. While Chiang Kai-Shek and the ROC had always been recipients of external assistance, Mao was determined to be generous, to advertise his domestic and global successes. Chen Yi, one of Mao’s closest lieutenants, stated on National Day in 1959 that China’s achievements were “a tremendous encouragement to all oppressed nations and people of the world fighting for their liberation. In the Chinese people they see their own tomorrow” (Liu 2011, 186). While the famine reached its worst point in 1960-1961, Mao remained uncompromisingly open-handed and China’s foreign aid grew by more than 50 per cent, with great values reaching Africa. In Algeria alone, the year 1960 saw 50.6 million yuan in aid from the PRC, compared to 600,000 the year before (Lovell 2019, 134).

It may seem like Khrushchev’s pronouncement on peaceful coexistence could conform with the Chinese adoption of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence and the Bandung Spirit. However, Khrushchev wanted to ease tensions with the West, avoid nuclear war, and compete with capitalism peacefully through economic and ideological superiority. The Soviet Union believed that the current epoch was a period of transition from capitalism to socialism, a time

¹⁹ Published in June, 1958, by Sichuan renmin chubanshe (四川人民出版社). BG E15/750 (Landsberger collection, <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-750>)

of struggle and coexistence between the two antagonistic systems. China's Five Principles were principally about mutual respect and sovereignty in relations between newly decolonised countries, a promotion of Third World solidarity. It became evident that Khrushchev attempted to do everything necessary to avoid a Third World War, while Mao claimed that the world was still in the epoch of imperialism and the main task for the socialist bloc was to prepare for war and support revolution. Thus, their political lines were incompatible. Khrushchev wanted a peaceful environment, while a revolutionary Mao believed it was possible, and necessary, for him "to assume a greater responsibility for the future of all humanity" (Li and Xia 2018, 280).

2.2 Zhou Enlai's Africa Tour (1963-1964)

In the aftermath of the Bandung Conference, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) was founded in Cairo, Egypt, by the end of 1957. At the second AAPSO conference in Conakry, Guinea, in 1960, the Chinese delegation strengthened its relations with the growing number of independent countries and called for an international united front against imperialism. By the time of the third conference in Moshi, Tanzania, in 1963, China was openly opposing the participation of the Soviet Union, and African representatives were alarmed by the dispute's corrosive effect, as they were reluctant to take sides. Additional organisations were established by China to manage its Africa focus, such as the Chinese-African People's Friendship Association (CAPFA). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs set up a special Africa section to handle diplomatic relations with the over twenty African nations that gained independence in 1960 and 1961 (Eisenman 2018, 7-12). The funding of a China Islamic Association helped the CCP to use Islam as a means to develop relations with African Muslims, and China sent at least one delegation annually to the hajj, the sacred pilgrimage to Mecca, from the time of the Bandung Conference in 1955 until the brink of the Cultural Revolution in 1964 (Bin Huwaidin 2005, 215).

Thus, by the mid-1960s, China's Africa policy was well launched, and Beijing assigned a high priority to the African theatre. This culminated in Zhou Enlai's Africa tour from December 1963 to February 1964. Accompanied by an entourage of more than fifty official dignitaries, he visited ten African countries: Algeria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Morocco, Somalia, the Sudan, Tunisia, and the United Arab Republic. Zhou's tour represented a pivotal moment in the evolution of China's policies toward the Third World, and he stressed a number of foreign policy themes which became the general principles governing China's Africa policy. One central principle was the full commitment to the goal of revolutionary struggle (Yu 1988, 851-852). According to Zhou, political independence was only the first step in the fight against

imperialism, for a nation is still vulnerable to aggression and infiltration by imperialists. Only through the final defeat of old and new colonialism would African nations achieve liberation and true independence. Therefore, he also stressed the principle of self-reliance as a means of independence (Shao 1996, 230). Based on this conceptual framework, Zhou formulated the Eight Principles for Economic and Technical Assistance to Other Countries in January 1964. They stated that the Chinese Government abides by the principle of equality and mutual benefit and strictly respects the sovereignty of recipient countries and never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges when providing aid. The fourth principle proclaims that “the purpose of the Chinese government is not to make the recipient countries dependent on China but to help them start on the path of self-reliance and eventual independence in economic development” (Zhou 1989, 446-447). The tour resulted in Beijing signing eight agreements with six African nations in 1964, and in the same year, China extended its aid and economic assistance so that it accounted for 53% of the loans given to the African continent (Alden and Alves 2008, 49).

2.3 The End of the Afro-Asian Movement (1965)

The first established diplomatic contact between the People’s Republic of China and Africa was represented by Zhou’s and Nasser’s warm-hearted relationship, and the Bandung Spirit embodied the optimism of the early postcolonial era. However, it would not take long until this spirit faced the limits of reality, and it became evident that the imagined solidarity was indeed imagined. Already in the late 1950s, a friction between the policy of non-interference and national interests emerged. The principles of peaceful coexistence would be challenged by Mao’s belief in continuous revolution and the struggle against Soviet revisionism.

Soon after Egypt recognised the PRC in May 1956, the Suez crisis emerged as a consequence of Nasser’s decision to nationalise the canal on July 26. When Egypt was invaded by Israel in October, later supported by Britain and France, the PRC offered material help, further reinforcing the relationship between the countries. But as the Soviet Union used their superpower capacities to push forward a ceasefire and the withdrawal of invading forces, it gained an even greater influence in Egypt. This was the first instance of Soviet engagement on the continent, followed by aid efforts in West Africa. However, by the early 1960s, a fierce competition for influence in Africa emerged between the Soviet Union and China, following the split between the two Communist powers (Arnold 2005, 60). Nasser found himself like a child caught in the middle of a bitter divorce, claiming support from both sides, and he was worried that the Sino-Soviet quarrel was hindering the national liberation movements and harming the people of Asia and Africa. During Zhou’s visit to Cairo, as part of his Africa tour,

Nasser made it clear that his friendship with China could not be at Russia's expense, and that the African countries did not want to import revolution from anyone else, but settle their own problems in their own way (Stephens 1971, 407). As Khrushchev's power was declining, Nasser pledged to his dear friend Zhou to reconcile with the Soviet Union. But Heikal recalls how Zhou replied by stating that "Russians are Europeans and the Europeans, the whites, are alike and they look on us as inferiors". When Nasser tried to explain that the Soviet Union was indeed helping Egypt, Zhou replied: "They are not going to help you. They are only interested in helping themselves" (Heikal 1972, 269, 271). These comments express the disdain and distrust that Zhou felt towards the Soviet Union and confirmed the Chinese view of China as part of the decolonial world, opposite to European and Western imperial powers that look down on Asia and Africa as inferior. From now on, China saw Soviet Union as part of that imperial group.

Ogunsanwo (1974, 2, 22) emphasised the importance of acknowledging that China's policy in Africa was not carried out in a vacuum. The newly independent African states also had their aspirations, their desire for welfare and economic development. Thus, their responses to Chinese initiatives depended on how far they considered their national interests to be served by dealing with China, and their evaluation of the adequacy of the Chinese model of development for their countries. In Egypt, Nasser's philosophy of Arab socialism was based on his identity as an Arab nationalist, and it became incompatible with Communism. Emerging as a global leader of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a wedge was driven between Egypt and an increasingly left-leaning China, starting in the late 1950s. When Syria joined Egypt in a United Arab Republic, Zhou found himself backing the Syrian communists and claimed that Nasser was "obstructing the cause of Arab national independence" (Wilson 1984, 224-225). When Nasser launched an attack on the Egyptian and Syrian Communists in 1958, the Sino-Egyptian relations deteriorated tremendously.

While China's relations with Egypt took a turn, Beijing began to focus on the relationship with the Algerians, as well as the strategic neighbours in Tunisia and Morocco. The Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) was a brutal anti-colonial struggle between Algerian nationalists and French colonial forces. China supplied the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) with arms and recognised the Front's provisional government during the years of struggle. After independence was achieved through the victory of Ahmed Ben Bella in 1962,²⁰ Beijing upheld Algeria as a model for insurgency in the Third World, and Algeria became a centre of Chinese influence in North Africa (Lawrance 1975, 150-151). Pursuing Arab socialism, Ben Bella

²⁰ Image 8 shows Ben Bella in the UN General Assembly on October 9, 1962, the day after independent Algeria was welcomed as a member of the United Nations.

referred to himself as a Nasserist, and sharing the anti-imperialist views, he was sympathetic to communism. In a pseudo-autobiography written by Robert Merle (1967, 146), Ben Bella admits that “from the humanitarian point of view, I feel great respect for militant communists ... They are ready to sacrifice everything at a moment’s notice for the sake of their political ideals, including their liberty and their lives. I feel very close to them on this score. I also admit the force of their economic reasoning. I only part company with them over their philosophical beliefs: they are atheists, and I believe in God.” However, in a few years after gaining independence, the relationship between China and Ben Bella’s revolutionary government deteriorated, in part due to Algeria’s increasing cooperation with the Soviet Union. The Chinese Foreign Ministry called Ben Bella’s anti-imperialism “tough talk, weak action”, and the Chinese embassy questioned if he “had the courage to use revolutionary means to overcome Algeria’s economic difficulties” (Westad 2012, 352). Ben Bella’s government was overthrown by a military coup led by Houari Boumédiène in June 1965, and China immediately recognised the new government. According to Cold War historian Odd Arne Westad (2012), this was the first of many times in the following decades that China recognised a military regime in the Third World simply because they were seen to be anti-Soviet. Which even proved to be wrong in the Algerian case.

The early 1960s saw the planning of a second Asian-African conference. The selection of the host was left to the newly established Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which chose Algeria because it had been a focus for Afro-Asian solidarity during the Algerian independence war (McGregor and Hearman 2017, 174-175). However, an Indian proposal to invite the Soviet Union to the conference was met with fierce resistance by China, claiming that the Russians were not qualified to participate in the conference because the Soviet Union was a European country. The Russians had not been invited to the conference in 1955 and had not objected, as they could afford to be absent. But after the bitter rivalry with China had begun for the leadership of the newly independent nations, the situation had radically changed. A number of Asian and African countries could not afford to lose the goodwill of the Soviet Union, as it provided half of the total economic aid from the communist bloc to non-Communist countries in Asia and Africa in 1964 (Pauker 1965, 427). After a period of uncertainty, the conference was rescheduled to June 29, 1965, but when Ben Bella’s government was overthrown in the military coup on June 19, the organisational uncertainty reemerged. Devoted to the cause of the conference, Nasser proclaimed in a speech on the day after the coup that “The Second Asian-African Conference must succeed. It must accomplish the mission to which it has dedicated itself and fulfil the hopes of many peoples who aspire to a world of true peace, under whose protection they can pursue their political, social, and cultural development, free from the threats

of power politics and the dominance of colonial monopoly.”²¹ But the second Asian-African conference was cancelled three days before it was due to open in Algiers in a beautiful new auditorium built specifically for the event. Katharine McGregor and Vanessa Hearman (2017, 175) claim that it was the military coup that stopped the conference, while Heikal (1972, 272) stated that “the Chinese were so opposed to Russian participation that they wrecked the conference.” There were certainly safety concerns in Algiers in the days after the coup, but Bandung faced severe security problems in April 1955 as well, especially from heavily armed terrorists of *Darul Islam*. With all the ideological struggles leading up to the second conference in mind, Guy J. Pauker (1965, 430) made a compelling argument when concluding that “the ousting of Ben Bella and the minor incidents resulting there from were eagerly seized upon by various countries to get rid of a bothersome reunion.”

If the organising countries really wanted the conference to take place, they would have overcome the difficulties. But the Afro-Asian movement, which was rooted in hopeful ideals of anti-colonial solidarity, neutralism, and cooperation, began to falter in the face of geopolitical realities. The Sino-Soviet split also split the Third World, and domestic issues in postcolonial countries saw the independence leaders being ousted in military coups. Not just in Algeria, but also in Ghana, where pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah was overthrown by a military coup in 1966 while he was visiting China. Furthermore, countries began to be concerned about China’s power intentions, as China departed from its policies of non-interference and advocated armed struggle, while aspiring to assume the leadership of the socialist camp. In the clash between postcolonial idealism and Cold War power dynamics, realpolitik killed the Bandung Spirit.

2.4 Maoism and the Three Worlds Theory

In 1937, Edgar Snow’s book *Red Star Over China* turned Mao into a political leader with global name recognition through a humanising portrayal of the leader of the Chinese Communist Movement. Snow described Mao as an interesting and complex man, encompassing the simplicity and naturalness of the Chinese peasant mixed with being an ardent student of philosophy, well informed on world politics, a hard worker with an iron constitution, and a man of considerable depth of feeling. In one of the earliest portrayals of what would be called Maoism, Snow concluded that “The role of his personality in the movement was clearly immense”(Snow 1937, 69-72). Moving on from the caves of Yan’an, Maoism became an

²¹ The address by President Nasser at a banquet held in honour of the President of the People’s Republic of China on the occasion of his visit to Cairo on June 20, 1965. Found in the archive Nasser: Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

international force in the era of decolonisation. However, the term Maoism is in no way static, it is only a useful term if we acknowledge that the ideas and experiences it describes are living and changing, as Mao would become an example of the flexible adaptation of Communism to national contexts. From the beginning, Maoism styled itself as a rural religion representing and fighting for toiling farmers. After the war carried Mao to absolute power in the 1940s, he imposed military discipline on the Chinese society to achieve rapid industrialisation, motivated by global ambitions. The collapse of the Great Leap Forward in 1960 led to a short period of reform where Mao was forced to take a step back, just to return to launch a revolution against “counter-revolutionaries”, in which political violence was normalised (Loyell 2019, 30-31).



Poster 2: “Revolution is no crime, to rebel is justified”²²

Mao and his lieutenants portrayed themselves as heroic foot soldiers in a global People’s War, and this vision of Maoism would turn him into the architect of defiant guerrilla warfare against professional armies of colonial powers and established states. Legitimisation of violence for political purposes became closely associated with Mao. Poster 2, published in 1966, proclaims “Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong Thought to wage the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the end - Revolution is no crime, to rebel is justified”.

In the book *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, commonly known in the English-speaking world as *The Little Red Book*, Mao’s beliefs are clearly stated when proclaiming: “Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” He continues by explaining that “The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution. This Marxist-Leninist principle of revolution holds good universally, for

²² Published in 1966 by Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe (上海人民美术出版社). BG E13/764 (Landsberger collection, <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e13-764>)

China and for all other countries ... Yes, we are advocates of the omnipotence of revolutionary war; that is good, not bad, it is Marxist” (Zedong 1966, Chapter 5).

In the 1960s, Maoism emerged as an internationally widespread ideology of revolution. The title Mao gave to China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution contained the words that could be found in student demonstrations from Europe to Latin America (McAdams 2021). Depicting the “spirit of ‘68”, Gerd-Rainer Horn (2007, 159) finds that “Inspired by a limited and selective understanding of China’s Cultural Revolution, encouraged by Chairman Mao’s public break with the Soviet Union, significant portions of an entire generation of politicized activists of the ‘1968’ generation sought salvation in the Red East.” From China, a global revolutionary wave arose. A large, young group of people formed a new left, critical towards established socialist and communist parties, calling for a more just society. Surely, 1968 was “the year in which the world could change” (Vinen 2018). Chinese scholar Liu Kang finds that Maoism attempted to transform Marxism into a universal vision of modernity. As Marxism is an ideology of modernity within a Western historical context, Maoism became an ideology of modernity within the Third World context. This alternative modernity, achieved through revolution and self-reliance, was seen by many as a plausible option to both Western capitalism and Soviet communism. Thus, Maoism began to attract revolutionary rebels, anti-colonial fighters, and intellectuals in Africa and across the globe (Liu 2015, 13), and Mao claimed that Beijing had become the centre of world revolution (Lüthi 2008, 349).

Mao’s advocacy for continuous revolution would lead to a theoretical reconceptualisation of China’s role in the international context and the balance between great powers and postcolonial states. The Intermediate Zone thought was developed in the post-World War II context and the emerging bipolar world of the Cold War. But after the Sino-Soviet split, Mao realigned the nations of the world and divided them into politico-economic camps marked by patterns of exploitation, rather than ideology or diplomatic allegiance. In the 1960s, the African national liberation movement reached its climax, and the Non-Aligned Movement was booming. At the same time, the imbalance of economic and political development allowed Western capitalist countries to become more and more independent from the United States (Yin 2018, 205). Constantly assessing the changes in the international situation, Mao developed his Three Worlds Theory, where he placed both nuclear superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, in the “First World”, with their allies in the “Second World”. In a conversation with Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda in 1974,²³ Mao clearly stated that “The US and the Soviet

²³ February, 22, 1974. *Mao Zedong, 'On the Question of the Differentiation of the Three Worlds'*. Wilson Center. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/mao-zedong-question-differentiation-three-worlds>

Union have a lot of atomic bombs, and they are richer. Europe, Japan, Australia and Canada, of the Second World, do not possess so many atomic bombs and are not so rich as the First World, but richer than the Third World ... All Asian countries, except Japan, belong to the Third World. All of Africa and also Latin America belong to the Third World.”

Though the theory was publicly announced in the early 1970s, the idea of aligning China in the Third World camp alongside the world’s exploited people began with the Bandung Conference and developed during the 1960s. However, Mao’s Three Worlds Theory did not follow the Cold War dynamics and no longer considered the primary contradiction to be between socialism and capitalism, but the threat of global imperialism. The first world powers were in a struggle for global hegemony and threatened to conquer the world with US imperialism or Soviet social imperialism, or to destroy it in a nuclear holocaust (Cook 2010, 296-297). Mao viewed the Third World as a rising tide, where the world’s peripheries would surround and overwhelm the cores of the First and Second World (Galway 2022, 79-80). Lin Biao, a prominent Chinese military leader and close ally of Mao, put this perspective into words in the propaganda pamphlet *Long Live the Victory of People’s War*, where he called the Western capitalist countries “the cities of the world” and the Third World countries “the rural areas of the world”. He explained that world revolution presents a picture of the encirclement of cities by the rural areas and found that “the whole cause of world revolution hinges on the revolutionary struggles of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples who make up the overwhelming majority of the world’s population. The socialist countries should regard it as their internationalist duty to support the people’s revolutionary struggles in Asia, Africa and Latin America” (Biao 1965).

2.5 Maoist Revolution in Africa (1966-1970)

The cancelled second Asian-African Conference in 1965 was a major setback for Chinese-African relations. Two African states, the Central African Republic and the Republic of Dahomey (renamed Benin in 1975), broke diplomatic relations with China. Furthermore, relations with previously friendly states, like Ghana and Kenya, became seriously strained (Yu 1966, 461). Alongside this setback, Mao launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China in 1966, a radical sociopolitical movement aiming to reassert Mao’s control over the CCP and purge capitalist and traditional elements. Poster 3 is a vivid example of the spirit of the time, where a young man in army-like clothes read the words of Mao, a weapon in the criticism of the old world and the guidance for building the new one. Alongside the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, the *Little Red Book* became a vehicle for exporting Maoist ideology and spreading revolutionary ideas across borders, and it would soon be found in the pockets of a

great number of African revolutionaries. China put in great effort to build a global book distribution network through the International Bookstore,²⁴ which included a lot of African countries in the late 1960s. In Tanzania, English and Swahili translations of the book were advertised for sale, as can be seen in Figure 1, an order form published in *The Nationalist* in Tanzania in 1968. The Chinese eagerness to spread Mao Zedong Thought is exemplified by one small bookstore in Africa that ordered 50 copies of *The Little Red Book*, but were instead sent 500 copies, leading to extra custom costs and later resentment (Xu 2014, 85-90).



Poster 3: “Criticise the old world and build a new world with Mao Zedong Thought as a weapon”²⁵

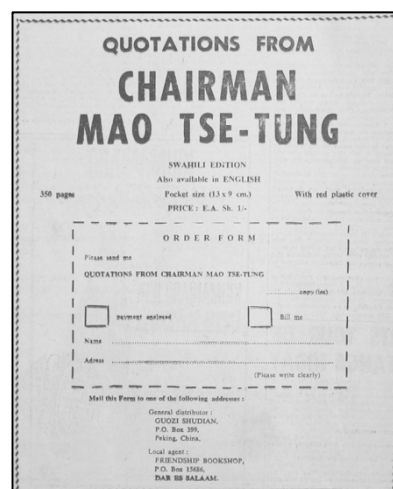


Figure 1: Order form for Swahili edition of the Little Red Book²⁶

The Cultural Revolution marked the beginning of what Lovell refers to as “high Maoism”, a peculiar form of internationalism that was universal in theory but parochial in practice. While claiming to offer a global model for revolution, China’s approach was limited and often tailored to serve its own national interests rather than genuinely supporting international solidarity. Still, regardless of its contradictions, high Maoism was deeply productive of history. Domestically, it would generate the energy and emotion that kept the Cultural Revolution, and internationally, it was the motor for the global cult of Mao (Lovell 2019, 125-126). The doctrinal disputes with the Soviet Union, which was designated the principal enemy in Africa in the 1960s, profoundly influenced the increasingly aggressive Chinese Third World-policy. Searching for anti-Soviet groups to promote its Maoist doctrine, China’s rhetoric was radicalised, and the PRC became

²⁴ The International Bookstore was founded in 1949, and the Chinese regime described it as “a trade organization for the importation and exportation of books and journals, there to satisfy the needs of nation-building and the people’s cultural life, and also to strengthen international propaganda”. See Xu (2014) page 83.

²⁵ Published in September, 1966, by Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe (上海人民美术出版社). BG E15/699. (Landsberger collection, <https://chinese posters.net/gallery/e15-699>)

²⁶ Found in Xu (2014) page 89, who cites *The Nationalist* (Tanzania), February 20, 1968. (Priya Lal.)

deeply involved in African rebellions and independence struggles in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, Mozambique, Ghana, Niger, and Burundi (Alden and Alves 2008, 48-49). Although Zhou Enlai was the architect of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, he decided to support Mao's radical foreign policy line. Third in rank after Mao and Lin Biao, Zhou remained at the centre of every foreign policy decision and managed to maintain his pragmatic attitude, even during the radical upheavals of the Cultural Revolution (Shao 1996, 148-149). However, Joshua Eisenman (2018, 17) finds that "During the Cultural Revolution, seasoned CCP foreign affairs leaders, including Zhou and Chen [Yi], understood that aggressive revolutionary diplomacy would not enhance CCP legitimacy or effectively counter the Soviets, yet they implemented it anyway." A telling depiction of the contradictory characteristics of China's international involvement during the later part of the 1960s, and the precarious position that the CCP leaders found themselves in, navigating between Maoist radicalism and diplomatic necessity.



Poster 4: "Long live Chairman Mao"²⁷



Poster 5: "Chairman Mao is the great liberator of the world's revolutionary people"²⁸

Chinese African propaganda of the time portrayed Mao as the genius saviour of the world revolution, and in turn, of the African people. Poster 4, from 1968, depicts an African family revering a portrait of Mao. With the baby lifted towards Mao, it elevates him to a messianic figure, he is the saviour and the hope for the future generations of Africa. The text underneath, "Long live Chairman Mao" reinforces the idea of Mao as an eternal ideological figure. Furthermore, on the left we find a Chinese barefoot doctor, a symbol of the Cultural Revolution

²⁷ Published in April, 1968, by Gansusheng qunzhong yishuguan (甘肃省群众艺术馆), Lanzhou. PC-1968-s-001 (Private collection, <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/pc-1968-s-001>)

²⁸ Published in April, 1968, by Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe (上海人民美术出版社). BG E16/339. (IISH collection, <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e16-339>)

commonly used by state media propaganda (Guo, Song, and Zhou 2006, 10). They were part farmers and part doctors, known as barefoot doctors because they wore no shoes while working in the wet rice fields. The barefoot doctors are present in many Chinese propaganda posters about Africa, thus representing the exported ideals of the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, poster 5 depicts what appears to be African guerrilla soldiers, as they are bearing arms while most of them are wearing civilian clothes. They joyfully read the *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* and the text proclaims: “Chairman Mao is the great liberator of the world's revolutionary people”. An example of the understanding of Maoism as an ideological fundament and inspiration for revolutionary movements in Africa.

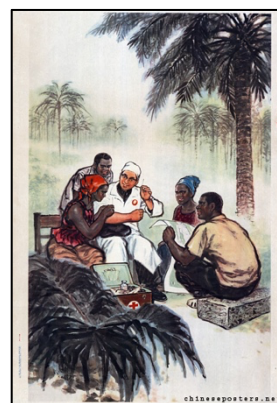
The premise of the Cultural Revolution was to attack the “four olds”, including old thinking, old culture, old morality, and old customs. This led to the CCP carrying out hard practices against Muslim minorities, to solve the “nationality problem” and achieve ethnic uniformity in China. This saw the end of the Chinese delegations to the hajj, which had taken place to develop relations with African and other Muslims (Bin Huwaidin 2005, 215). In Bandung, Zhou proclaimed that there is no need to “publicize one’s ideology and the political system of one’s country”.²⁹ But now, the mutual respect for each other’s differences was replaced by a hardline ideological rigidity that left no room for compromise. Religious practices, which were so central to the identities of many Africans, as expressed by Ben Bella, were harshly repressed during the Cultural Revolution.

The persecution of Chinese leaders also led the CCP to recall one-third of China’s embassy staff and all ambassadors in 1967. They were brought to Beijing to “remould their ideology” and China’s diplomats in Africa were replaced by less experienced, and more radical, cadres with the goal to promulgate Maoism in the countries they served (Eisenman 2018, 13). Zhou instructed the new revolutionary diplomats to “form militant local Red Guard units to purify the revolutions in Africa as the Chinese Red Guards have purified and perpetuated the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (Larkin 1971, 137). The new diplomats were able to channel CCP support towards African revolutionary forces fighting guerrilla wars. However, most of China’s aid to revolutionary movements in Africa was kept low-profile. Instead, as seen in posters 6 and 7, medical aid could be advertised more freely, and the barefoot doctors were a common figure in the Chinese propaganda about their involvement in Africa.

²⁹ Zhou’s speech on April 19, 1955. Found on page 21 in *Selected Documents of the Asian-African Conference*.



Poster 6: “The feelings of friendship between the peoples of China and Africa are deep”³⁰



Poster 7: “Seas and oceans are not separated, the silver needle passes on friendship”³¹

The Maoist revolutionary ideas were adopted by several African leaders and began to shape their rhetoric and leadership. In 1966, two years after the United Republic of Tanzania was born, President Julius Nyerere embarked on a six-week tour that he symbolically dubbed his “Long March”. It was during this journey that Nyerere inaugurated the policy of *ujamaa*, something he referred to as “The Basis of African Socialism” (Nyerere 1966, 162). The Tanzanian initiative borrowed symbols and ideology from the Chinese developmental model, invoking both the Long March and the Cultural Revolution, and drew on key themes of Maoism such as self-reliance, mass politics, and peasant primacy (Lal 2014, 96-97). In his later book, *Freedom and Development*, Nyerere clearly articulated Maoism on the African continent, when stating that “there is a danger in Africa for some of us to believe that independence is enough. If we really want to move from national independence to the real independence of the people of Africa, and if we really want to make sure that the African Revolution will ever move forward and not degenerate into neo-colonialism, then I say that we should learn from you. Indeed, from what I had seen of China in 1965, I must say that if you found it necessary to begin a Cultural Revolution in order to make sure that the new generation would carry forward the banner of your Revolution, then certainly we need one” (Nyerere 1973, 44).

However, China’s exported revolution largely resulted in troubles regarding its Africa policy, adding controversy to its presence on the continent. The Congo Crisis³² emerged after the independence from Belgium in 1960 and intensified with the assassination of the country’s first

³⁰ Published in May, 1972, by Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe (上海人民美术出版社). BG E15/837. (Landsberger collection, <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e15-837>)

³¹ Published in December, 1971, by Guangdong renmin chubanshe (广东人民出版社) BG E15/755. (Landsberger collection, <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e15-755>)

³² This refers to the previously Belgian colony that on its independence was named the Republic of Congo, later Zaire, and today the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Prime Minister, the anti-colonial pan-Africanist Patrice Lumumba, in 1961. Mao described Lumumba as “the one we supported” (Sun 2022, 459) and moved on to supply aid to Congolese insurgencies that carried on Lumumba’s political legacy to free Congo from imperialist hands. In China, massive rallies and demonstrations were organised in 1964 in support of the struggle of the Congolese against US-Belgian imperialist armed aggression. According to a pamphlet printed by the Foreign Languages Press, 700,000 protestors gathered at Tian’anmen Square, and large demonstrations were simultaneously hosted in Shanghai, Canton, Kunming, and Sian.³³ Looking out over the masses, Mao proclaimed: “Congolese people, you are not alone in your just struggle. All the Chinese people are with you” (‘In Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression’ 1965, 2). The great mobilisation in China in support of a country far away symbolised the centrality of China’s international Third World policies on the domestic political scene.

However, accusations that China provided arms to members of the National Liberation Committee in Congo, led by Pierre Mulele, who were supposedly trained in guerrilla tactics by the Chinese, as well as to the group of Gaston Soumialot, added controversy to China’s presence in Africa. Furthermore, the outlawed Sawaba opposition forces carried out nine subversive guerrilla attacks in Niger between 1964-1965, and when some members were arrested, they admitted that they had been trained in guerrilla warfare in China. This affiliation with revolutionary groups frightened many African leaders, who resented Beijing’s attempt to export revolution (El-Khawas 1973, 25-26). Chinese experts in guerrilla warfare were also training rebels from Guinea-Bissau fighting the Portuguese, and equipped nationalist in Tanzania, Ghana, and Congo-Brazzaville. The CCP supplied arms to Eduardo Mondlane’s Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) and hosted their fighters in China, as well as trained Robert Mugabe’s Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) forces. Military training for African revolutionaries was also provided via the OAU, and the CCP had links to the MPLA, the initially Marxist-Leninist Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (Eisenman 2018, 9). Consequently, China’s policies of the 1960s were far from the non-interference so highly advocated in the 1950s. The inherent contradictions of high Maoism, the support of revolutionary guerrilla groups, and the replacement of Chinese diplomats, many of whom were expelled by suspicious African countries, characterised a period of troubles in China’s involvement in Africa. Alden and Alves (2008, 49) summarise the epoch by stating that “The most controversial aspect of China's involvement in Africa, and curiously the least spoken of, is precisely the one under the category of 'covert instruments deployed during this phase' ...

³³ See images 9-13

[China's links to African liberation movements] were also the least effective instrument in its pursuit for a long term influence over Africa, mostly because they turned out to be counterproductive.”

3. The Pragmatic Turn: From Revolution to Recognition (1970s)

3.1 Post-Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution changed the direction of China's policy and behaviour globally, including in Africa. The radical domestic policies were combined with a militant international posture, symbolised by Lin Biao's call for the Third World countryside to surround the Western Industrial cities. But this approach did not win China any new African friends, rather, it led to suspension or termination of diplomatic ties and marked the end of the Afro-Asian movement. Thus, the late 1960s saw the low point of Sino-African relations, however, the 1970s would witness the reemergence of China in Africa (Yu 1988, 854). Westad concludes that “Since the early part of the nineteenth century, China had never been more isolated in international affairs than it was during the 1960s. The CCP revolution, which had promised to make China rich and strong had, it seemed, ended up making it poor and weak” (Westad 2012, 363).

The youth organisations formed in 1966, known as the Red Guards, shocked the world with their radical communist idealism as they popularised Mao's belief that “to rebel is justified”. Inspired by Lin, they launched the “Destroy the Four Olds” campaign against traditional culture as they exhibited an extreme defiance of authorities and brutally persecuted dissidents. When the Red Guards were dissolved by the summer of 1968, it marked the end of the most militant phase of the Cultural Revolution (Guo, Song, and Zhou 2006, 239-241). Thus, even if the Cultural Revolution is commonly considered to have ended with the death of Mao in 1976, the peak of its social upheaval and its influence over China's foreign policy finished by the end of the 1960s. As intraparty struggles abated, the CCP could normalise its relations with African political organisations. In 1969, Mao directed four prominent CCP officials, known as the ‘Four Marshals’, to produce a report on foreign affairs based on an evaluation of the global war situation.³⁴ They concluded that “We have made full preparations, and we are ready to defeat any enemy who dares to invade our territory. However, it is more beneficial to us to postpone

³⁴ July 11, 1969, “Report by Four Chinese Marshals, Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen, to the Central Committee, 'A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation' (excerpt)”. See <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/report-four-chinese-marshals-chen-yi-ye-jianying-xu-xiangqian-and-nie-rongzhen-central>

the war ... We should continue to expose and criticize the Soviet revisionists and the US imperialists. We should enhance our embassies and consulates in other countries, and actively carry out diplomatic activities. We should expand the international united front of anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism.” This marked the end of waging war and revolution, and Chinese diplomats returned to Africa to rebuild political partnerships.³⁵

In classical revolutions, the alienated intellectuals, together with people’s rising expectations, play crucial roles in bringing about the upheaval. But in the Cultural Revolution, the intellectuals, who were alienated by Mao but supported by the Party organisation, became its first victims, and the rising expectations of most social groups were denounced as morally wrong” (Tsou 1969, 91). Thus, the Ninth National Congress of the CCP in 1969, the first national Congress in eleven years, began to attempt to repair the Party organisation and institutions that had been destroyed (Bridgham 1970, 13-15). The Congress settled the post-Cultural Revolution political hierarchy, with a new constitution proclaiming Lin as the heir to Mao, and Zhou being listed third in the new five-man Politburo, elected Secretary General of the Party (Wilson 1984, 271). Mao’s continuous revolution was written into the Party Constitution, which formalised the achievements of the previous years and declared victory, rather than calling for more violent mobilisation. The Party leadership emerged as a combination of the Maoist Left, the moderates of the old Party and state apparatus around Zhou, and Lin’s central military machine. However, the Left became steadily weaker in this new power structure after the Ninth Congress, as it was deprived of its organisational basis through the Red Guard movement. Power had been recentralised, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had restored order, leading a transition from street-level chaos to top-down control. This allowed the major burdens of political and economic reconstruction to fall upon Zhou, who oversaw a renewed emphasis on government-to-government relations in Chinese diplomacy. When Mao and Lin began to struggle against each other after the Ninth Party Congress, divided over the strategy for rebuilding the Party and foreign policy, Zhou once again supported Mao, motivated by their longstanding personal relationship and shared views in assessing the global situation (Shao 1996, 149-150). The partnership was a balance between Zhou’s pragmatism and Mao’s strictly doctrinaire approach. After the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence had been trumped by the rebellious ideals of Maoist revolution in the 1960s, the reversed course of the 1970s saw the reemergence of Zhou’s pragmatic approach as the foundation of China’s foreign

³⁵ In 1969, Chinese ambassadors were sent to Guinea, the Congo, Tanzania, and Mauritania; in 1970, Mali and Somalia; in 1971, Morocco and Algeria; in 1972, Ghana, Uganda, Burundi, Tunisia, and Zambia; in 1973, Zaire and Benin; in 1974, Kenya, and in 1976, the Central African Republic. See Ma, Jisen. *The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2004, pp. 320-321

policy. The Communiqué of the Second Plenary Session of the Ninth Central Committee, held in Lushan in August 1970, declared that “China's foreign relations are daily developing. On the basis of adhering to the five principles, we strive for peaceful coexistence with countries having different social systems and oppose the imperialist policies of aggression and war, and have continuously won new victories. We have friends all over the world.”³⁶ This was the first time in more than five years that Zhou’s Five Principles had been mentioned in public. Once again, his foreign policy line was endorsed by the Party, and Zhou was the principal voice of China’s external affairs.

At the National Conference on Foreign Affairs in May 1971, Zhou criticised “self-glorification, using inappropriate language, the language of exaggeration, to impose China’s ideas on others” and called for the CCP to work with organisations across the political spectrum (Ma 2004, 314). This speech paved the way for China to build relations with several conservative African governments. The CCP stopped supporting revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow independent regimes (with the exception of Ethiopia) but continued to assist liberation movements that were fighting colonial authorities (Eisenman 2018, 16). Without offending radical leaders, this new flexible approach reassured a number of moderate and conservative governments that China will respect the status quo in Africa. In return, more African nations expressed interest in establishing, or resuming, diplomatic relations with Beijing, increasing from the low point of fifteen in 1967 to twenty-eight in 1972 (El-Khawas 1973, 26)³⁷. The normalisation of CCP relations with African parties reflected its transformation from a revolutionary party to a ruling party, a domestic transition which reoriented its approach to Africa. The CCP no longer touted itself as the centre of world revolution. Rather, Eugene Lawson found that “China was careful to grant ideological autonomy, and when African countries seemed to embark on a policy closely akin to Chinese thinking, Beijing refrained from claiming that the Africans were following a Maoist path” (Lawson 1980, 172). While the Chinese found delight in the increasingly militant stance of Africans in general, the Chinese press was careful to describe revolutionary achievements as African achievements.

³⁶ ‘Communiqué of the Second Plenary Session Of the Ninth Central Committee of the Communist Party of China’. *Beijing Review*, no. 37 (6 September 1970). https://www.bjreview.com/90th/2011-06/30/content_373111.htm

³⁷ In 1970, China established diplomatic relations with Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia; in 1971, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, and Senegal; in 1972, Mauritius, Togo, Madagascar, and Chad; in 1973, Burkina Faso; in 1974 Guinea-Bissau, Gabon, Niger, and the Gambia; in 1975, Botswana, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, and the Comoros; and in 1976, Cape Verde and the Seychelles. Ma, Jisen. *The Cultural Revolution in the Foreign Ministry of China*, pp. 321-322

3.2 Entering the United Nations

The 1970s was a fundamentally transformative decade for the PRC, marked by two historic shifts in its international position. Since its founding in 1949, the struggle with the ROC for international recognition has shaped the foreign policies of the PRC and motivated the establishment of relations with newly independent states. Due to the mutual exclusivity, where both the PRC and the ROC claim sovereignty over the entirety of China, other states are compelled to recognise only one government as the legitimate representative. This also means that only one can occupy China's seat in the United Nations. As a founding member of the UN, the Republic of China had held that position since 1945, firmly backed by the United States.

It was evident to Beijing that the African vote in the General Assembly could be a determining factor in the international recognition of the PRC and to achieve its goal of replacing the ROC in the UN (Yu 1988, 851). Thus, China's policy shift to pursue friendly relations with all African governments was seen by many observers as a result of the fact that as many votes as possible were necessary for the UN effort (El-Khawas 1972, 277). Western diplomats were alarmed that if such a policy was successful, the number of African votes could be decisive in reversing the long-standing China debate, which would reshape the international community. The assumptions turned out to be true when the historic General Assembly Resolution 2758³⁸ was admitted to the United Nations on October 25, 1971. Twenty-three Member States,³⁹ of which ten were African, submitted draft resolution A/L.630,⁴⁰ labelled the "Restoration of the lawful rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations". The General Assembly voted 76 to 35, with 17 abstentions, in favour of the resolution, proclaiming that the representatives of the government of the PRC were the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations, and to "expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-Shek from the place which they unlawfully occupy". The global implications of this decision may not be underestimated, as the PRC not only replaced the ROC as a UN Member State after twenty-six years, but also replaced them as one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, thus holding veto power. Thomas Weiss describes the possession of veto power as an "example

³⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*. A/RES/2758(XXVI), October 25, 1971. United Nations Digital Library. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192054?v=pdf>

³⁹ The 23 countries were Albania, Algeria, Ceylon, Cuba, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea, Iraq, Mali, Mauritania, Nepal, Pakistan, People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, People's Republic of the Congo, Romania, Somalia, Syrian Arab Republic, Sudan, United Republic of Tanzania, Yemen, Yugoslavia, and Zambia

⁴⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations: Draft Resolution A/L.630 and Add.1*. October 25, 1971. United Nations Digital Library. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3979538?ln=en&v=pdf>

of inequality” (Weiss 2012, 20), and the widespread exceptions and routine violations of, for example, the UN, led Stephen Krasner to characterise the notion of sovereignty as “organised hypocrisy” (Krasner 1999). Surely, the UN veto power is not merely a procedural tool, but a geopolitical instrument of domination. Communist China had attained a license to protect national interests and an instrument of great power privilege. Consequently, they had been promoted to a global diplomatic superpower, symbolically on the same veto-level as its imperial enemies in the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union.

Tanzanian President and Chinese ally, Julius Nyerere, argued years before the decision that the maintenance of peace requires that the United Nations should be universal. He stated that “If any state is then excluded from the United Nations it can only be because the other members have unanimously decided that they do not wish to keep the peace with that state; they have outlawed it from world society” (Nyerere 1966, 276). He concluded that some states were excluded because the United Nations was conceived and brought to birth by the allied powers in the Second World War, thus hosting a Western-centred foundation. Mr. Kufuor, representing Ghana on the day of the vote, also used the argument of universality as the basis of Ghana’s decision to support the admittance of the PRC, stating that “the best way to ensure that this Organization continues to represent the best hopes of mankind is to be guided, as far as its membership is concerned, by the concept of universality.”⁴¹ Indeed, the PRC became the first and only postcolonial country with veto power in the UN, thus being able to further promote itself as a leader of the Third World on the international stage. However, the support from Third World countries was in no way unanimous or free from scepticism. Of the seventy-six countries voting in favour of the resolution, twenty-five were African states.⁴² But fifteen African states chose to vote against the resolution, and one abstained.⁴³ Furthermore, the treatment of the ROC worried several African delegations. Mr. Rabetafika, representing Madagascar, voted against the resolution, arguing that “If the regime on mainland China were to renounce its ideological expansionist views, with all their inherent dangers, then perhaps we could consider expressing ourselves with less concern about its rights and with more assurance as to its obligations”.⁴⁴ Senegal’s representative, Mr. Fall, presented a similar concern. On the one hand, he stated that

⁴¹ United Nations Digital Library, *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*, p. 29

⁴² African countries voting in favour: Algeria, Botswana, Cameroon, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Libyan Arab Republic, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, People’s Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia. Ibid, p. 41

⁴³ African countries voting against: Central African Republic, Chad, Congo (Democratic Republic of), Dahomey (Benin), Gabon, Gambia, Ivory Coast, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, South Africa, Swaziland (Eswatini), and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). Mauritius was the only African country to abstain. Ibid, p. 41

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 24

his government considered the PRC the sole representative of the Chinese people, but on the other hand, he was not convinced that its authority should be automatically exercised over the island of Formosa.⁴⁵ Mr. Fall summarised many African leaders' concerns about China's growing expansionist tendencies, when stating that "The people of Senegal, which for almost three centuries knew the constraints of colonization, would certainly find it paradoxical if [the PRC's] Government were to consider itself justified in giving its unreserved endorsement to the proposition that Formosa should be considered an integral part of the territory of China without the indigenous population of that island being given an opportunity to exercise its right to self-determination."⁴⁶ Consequently, the PRC had finally achieved its long-term goal of international recognition and had become a major diplomatic actor with UN veto power. Its policy shifts post-Cultural Revolution and the return of the ideals of the Five Principles welcomed great support in the Third World. But the leaders of postcolonial countries raised concerns about the expansionist intentions of Communist China, and were often caught in the Cold War crossfires, having to balance their relations with the PRC, the US, and the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, Communist China won the battle against Taiwan in Africa. By 1975, thirty-seven African states had recognised the PRC, as opposed to eight who maintained relations with the ROC (Yu 1988, 855).

3.3 The Sino-American Rapprochement

In the early 1950s, the PRC had defined its foreign policy based on the evident threat of US imperialism at its borders. However, the Sino-Soviet split led to a realignment of China's position in the international arena, as their socialist ally had turned into their greatest enemy. Westad (2012, 360) argues that a "main reason why Mao Zedong, assisted by Zhou Enlai and the army, pulled China back from almost total chaos of the Cultural Revolution in 1968 was the increasing fear of war with the Soviet Union." Ideology was the only significant aspect of life during the Maoist revolution, which had driven all attention to political divergence among Communists, both domestically and internationally, elevating the conflict with Moscow. As mistrust grew, both countries deployed hundreds of thousands of troops along their shared border (Brazinsky 2017, 308). In March 1969, armed clashes broke out between Chinese and Soviet border guards on the disputed Zhenbao Island in the Ussuri River in Manchuria. Thomas Robinson described that the Chinese had allowed extremist partisans of the Cultural Revolution

⁴⁵ Formosa is a traditionally European term for Taiwan, coined by 16th century Portuguese sailors. In the mid-20th century it was still a commonly used name in international contexts, such as in the speeches in the UN

⁴⁶ *Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations*, p. 26

to cross at will over the border, while the Russians overreacted to Cultural Revolution incursions by fortifying their borders beyond the necessary level to cope with Chinese propaganda demonstrations (Robinson 1972, 1201). The crisis continued to escalate, and in October 1969, Mao thought a Soviet attack to be so imminent that he alerted China's nuclear force and ordered all leaders, except Zhou, who needed to run the government, to disperse across the country. However, tensions eased over the course of the year, and the immediate threat of war diminished (Kissinger 2011, 219-220). Nevertheless, it was evident that the ideological struggle had taken on military terms, threatening open war for the first time between the two Communist giants.

When the Chinese leaders concluded that the Soviet Union posed the greatest immediate threat to China, they felt that some sort of US military presence in Asia and the Pacific region would be desirable to create a counterweight to the Soviet Union. China was desperately weak in military terms after the ravages of Mao's political campaigns and needed to break out of its self-imposed isolation. The communications with the outside world had to be repaired (Wilson 1984, 270). Thus, as Zhou grew older, he put more and more effort into improving China's relations with the US, revising the threat of US imperialism based on its declining influence in Asian international relations. Zhou advocated a flexible Chinese diplomacy that must address the dual problems of Soviet expansion and US commitment to Taiwan (Shao 1996, 206). The ideological foundation of the US rapprochement laid in the development of the Three Worlds Theory, which was officially presented by Deng Xiaoping to the United Nations in April 1974 (Cook 2010, 296). With the US and the USSR both considered imperialist First World countries in China's eyes, the Soviet Union was the most immediate threat due to geographical proximity, ideological revisionism, and military pressure. Hence, the CCP once again utilised the socialist practice of a united front that put aside ideological convictions to pursue a common political goal. This time, the United States became a partner in the struggle against the social-imperialist Soviet Union. This political and rhetorical shift was fully implemented following the mystical death of Lin Biao in a plane crash in September 1971. In an interview in 1972, Zhou stated that "We may say that 1969 was the turning point in Sino-US relations. However, it was delayed for domestic reasons" (Eisenman 2018, 16), suggesting that the Lin Biao affair delayed China's foreign policy shift.

Richard Nixon took the oath of office as US President on January 20, 1969. A lucky timing for Mao and Zhou, as Nixon was the only US Cold War leader who believed that building broad alliances beyond Europe and Japan was essential to countering the Soviet Union. Domestic unrest and the war in Vietnam convinced President Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry

Kissinger that an opening to China was an option for American diplomacy, and the intensification of the Sino-Soviet conflict accelerated the wish for contact with Beijing. The first attempt was made via the Pakistanis in October 1969, but Beijing was slow to respond (Westad 2012, 368). Nixon and Kissinger understood that they needed to avoid doing anything that could damage Chinese prestige, such as making the opening to dialogue look like a show of charity or American benevolence. After months of back-and-forth exchanges of messages, with discussions about which topics the talks would cover and guarantees that the other would not lose face, Kissinger finally departed on a secret trip to Beijing in July 1971 (Brazinsky 2017, 310-313). After the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles had refused to shake hands with Zhou at the Geneva Conference in 1954, Kissinger's handshake with the Chinese premier was a symbolic gesture of the beginning of a new era of dialogue between Chinese and American officials.⁴⁷ Kissinger was full of praise for Zhou, later concluding that "In some sixty years of public life, I have encountered no more compelling figure than Zhou Enlai" (Kissinger 2011, 241). Both sides were clear that confrontation made no sense for them, furthermore, neither side could afford failure. Thus, the new relationship was made public by Nixon's official visit in February 1972, resulting in the Shanghai Communique, which stated that the principle of peaceful coexistence should be applied to the mutual relations between China and the US.⁴⁸

After the US had voted against the PRC's seat in the UN in October 1971, Nixon's visit was a week that changed the world, though it was difficult to determine in which way.⁴⁹ It took almost the rest of the decade to decide the content of the Sino-American rapprochement, as Kissinger labelled it. The Chinese wanted the new relationship to result in an increase in trade, which got underway quickly, and military technology, which took a longer time to arrive. The US was helped to get out of the Vietnam War, and the two countries began a limited cooperation against the Soviet Union in the Third World. However, opening one door meant closing another, and Westad (2012, 369-370) concludes that a "great majority of the world's left-wing movements, saw Mao's willingness to work with Washington as treason, and the most important effect in the Third World was probably to drive radical regimes and movements closer to working with the Soviets. China was no longer an alternative for those who wanted world revolution." The leadership of both countries would change in the following years, and the ultimate symbol of China's departure from its Maoist revolutionary past came when Mao's successor, Deng

⁴⁷ See Image 14 for Kissinger's meeting with Zhou

⁴⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Joint Statement Following Discussions With Leaders of the People's Republic of China (Shanghai Communiqué)," February 27, 1972, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume XVII, China, 1969-1972*, Document 203, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d203>

⁴⁹ See Image 15 and 16 from Nixon's visit to China in 1972

Xiaoping, oversaw the establishment of diplomatic relations with the US on January 1st, 1979. This meant the recognition of the Government of the PRC as the sole legal Government of China, something President Jimmy Carter explained as “recognizing simple reality”,⁵⁰ when presenting the joint communique.

3.4 Chinese Aid to Africa

With the Three Worlds Theory guiding its foreign policies, practical engagement was stressed over radical principles, in a new attempt to establish alliances of Third World unity. Zhou pushed for diplomatic relations with countries across the ideological spectrum, proclaiming that “We should ally ourselves with all the forces in the world that can be allied with to combat colonialism, imperialism and above all superpower hegemonism. We are ready to establish or develop relations with all countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.”⁵¹ China’s policy shift rarely became as evident as in Zaire (the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Ludo De Witte (2001, xv) claimed that “US President Dwight Eisenhower had instructed his aides to liquidate Lumumba, and a top secret CIA unit was given the task of eliminating him. Brussels wholeheartedly agreed with this objective and also sent out a commando operation.” The US-backed assassination of Chinese-backed Lumumba in January 1961 launched the Congo Crisis and made way for the conservative, pro-Western Mobutu Sese Seko, whose reign developed into a thirty-two-year-long dictatorship lasting until 1997 (Van Reybrouck 2014, 282). China resisted Mobutu’s leadership and supported leftist, revolutionary Lumumbist movements throughout the 1960s, and millions of Chinese citizens joined demonstrations against US imperialism and in support of the Congolese people.⁵² However, from the early 1970s, China reversed its stance and chose to support US-backed Mobutu, a fundamental shift from its opposition in the previous decade and a vivid example of China’s new priorities (Sun 2022, 459). However, Maoism remained an intrinsic part of China’s identity abroad, leading to some peculiar expressions. After Mobutu’s first visit to Beijing in 1973, he imposed a Mao jacket on his cadres, though there was nothing Maoist about his ruling ideology, rather the opposite (Cook 2010, 297-298). Similarly, Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi issued his political treatises in 1975 in a small three-volume set known collectively as the “Green

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, “Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations Between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China”, December 15, 1978, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume I, Foundations of Foreign Policy*, Document 104, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d104>

⁵¹ Zhou Enlai, “Report on the Work of the Government,” January 13, 1975, in *Documents of the First Session of the Fourth National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China*, Marxist Internet Archive; available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/zhou-enlai/1975/01/13.htm>

⁵² See section 2.4 and image 9-13

Book” (Qaddafi 1976). The book presents Gaddafi’s “Third Universal Theory”, taking inspiration from the Three Worlds Theory when grouping together both the US and the Soviet Union as imperialist countries and presenting Arab nationalism as a third way, an alternative to both capitalism and communism (St. John 2023, 356-357). Consequently, in both Libya and Zaire, Mao’s symbolism and tools of charismatic leadership outlived his revolutionary ideology, and China held diplomatic relations with the ideologically different regimes, non-interfering in their establishments of long-term dictatorships.⁵³

China’s overseas development assistance quickly overtook subversive activities in its attempt to spread its influence in Africa (Alden and Alves 2008, 51). From the late 1960s onwards, almost every aspect of the aid was designed on the basis of the struggle against the Soviet Union. In the first half of the 1970s, China provided aid to twenty-eight African states, while the Russians only aided twenty, and the aid commitments of the period are estimated to have equalled \$1,815 million from Beijing compared to \$1,019 million from Moscow (Snow 1994, 295).⁵⁴ Most notably, Africa became the theatre of China’s largest single foreign aid project, the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, commonly known as Tanzam or TAZARA railway.⁵⁵ A \$450 million-plus project,⁵⁶ it constituted almost one-fifth⁵⁷ of all Chinese aid to Africa from 1955-1977 (Yu 1980, 117). China’s most ambitious and costly aid project so far in its history was portrayed as a “Freedom Railway”. The over 1,800 km long railway was built to link the landlocked Zambian Copperbelt with the Indian Ocean port of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. Both Mozambique and Angola were classified as overseas provinces of Portugal until they gained independence in 1975, and Zimbabwe gained de facto independence from British colonial rule in 1980. Therefore, Zambia was surrounded by European powers, and the railway served as a liberation of the Zambian economy from colonial dependence. First proposed in 1965, several requests for assistance from Western donors were made, but all were rejected. Instead, China agreed to fund the project with long-term, interest-free loans, and construction took place between 1970-1975. Although the investment constituted an incredible amount, the Chinese

⁵³ China established diplomatic relations with Gaddafi’s Libya in 1978. See “China and Libya” in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2025. Accessed May 24, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2913_665441/2848_663686/?utm

⁵⁴ Though it is important to acknowledge that it is difficult to estimate exact numbers of provided aid, Snow’s numbers are based on *Marches tropicaux et mediterraneens* (MTM), (Paris), 28 Mar. 1975, and Wolfgang Bartke, *Chinese Economic Aid* (Hamburg: Institute of Asian Affairs, 1975) p. 20, 23

⁵⁵ TAZARA stands for the Tanzania Zambia Railway Authority, a binational administrative body that has overseen the railway since 1976.

⁵⁶ Exact estimated amounts differ. In a later text, Yu (1988, 854) described the costs of the project as over \$600 million, while Monson (2005, 3) calculated costs to amount to over \$400 million. However, regardless the exact amount, all sources agree that it was by far China’s largest aid project yet.

⁵⁷ Yu estimated the total economic assistance to thirty-six African countries between 1955-1977 to have been more than \$2.4 billion. See Yu (1980), ‘The Tanzania-Zambia Railway’, p. 117

framed the relationship with the African recipient countries as “the poor helping the poor” (Monson 2009, 3). The Freedom Railway was a claim to be part of the Third World struggle against the forces of imperialism and neocolonialism, while at the same time posing as a global Cold War power. The Guyanese historian and pan-Africanist Walter Rodney, best known for his anti-imperialist critique *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, argued that Western capitalists “placed obstacles in the way of the building of a railway from Tanzania to Zambia, and it was the Socialist state of China that stepped in to express solidarity with African peasants and workers in a practical way” (Rodney 1972, 118).

The sacrifices of Beijing’s economic aid programme did not go unnoticed. Nyere commented on the railway project, stating that “We are aware that this capital is not surplus to your requirements, nor are your technicians otherwise unemployed”. Likewise, President Bongo of Gabon praised the Chinese promotion of Third World causes by calling China “the tabernacle of justice” (Snow 1994, 289). This was in a time when the phrase “trade not aid” had become a constant in development, and the US and European governments were increasingly reluctant to make financial commitments for projects that African leaders considered vital to their economic development (Arnold 2005, 445). Thus, China’s involvement in the Tanzam railway produced positive results, and more African leaders turned to China for economic and technical cooperation. Mohamed El Khawas (1973, 28) argued that this shift in attitude is what made Mobutu’s visit to Beijing possible in 1973, where the signing of an economic agreement marked the end of the long-standing hostility between Zaire and China. Consequently, the construction of the Freedom Railway helped to put the revolutionary years behind and reestablish China’s relationship with several African countries as a postcolonial brotherhood based on peaceful coexistence and non-interference, sponsored by economic support. However, it was not an unrestrained friendship. Africa is a large continent with vastly different domestic contexts, and even the countries that established diplomatic and trade relations with China had increasing concerns about China’s intentions.

3.5 Reform and Opening Up

Alarm bells began to ring for Zhou’s health in the spring of 1974, and he was soon hospitalised for bladder cancer. He continued to be involved in top-level decision-making from the hospital and chaired Politburo meetings, but understood that he was a transitional figure during a transitional period. Zhou died in January 1976, and in September the same year, Mao also died from a heart attack (Chen 2024, 4, 670). This marked the end of an era in China. The Cultural Revolution came to a definitive close with the arrest of the Gang of Four, an alliance of Mao’s

wife, Jiang Qing, and three ultra-leftists within the CCP leadership. Mao criticised the four on several occasions during his last two years. Not concerning their ideology, which was closest to Mao, but for “factionalism” (Guo, Song, and Zhou 2006, 101-103). Deprived of Mao’s personal patronage, the most radical faction of the CCP was purged, and a comprehensive process of derevolutionisation and de-Maoisation began. Deng Xiaoping, who had returned to a leadership position a few years earlier after being purged during the high tide of the Cultural Revolution, emerged as China’s paramount leader. He launched a grand campaign of “reform and opening up” at the end of 1978, and the Chinese leadership gradually adopted a market-oriented socialist economy, which would come to produce phenomenal economic growth in China (Cook 2010, 298). Poster 8 shows the peculiar relationship to Mao adopted by the CCP after the reform in 1978. It explains how Mao’s teachings must be studied to fight the revisionist Gang of Four, which was an ideologically Maoist group. The CCP maintained Mao’s symbolic authority while rejecting many of his policies. Likewise, the symbolism of Mao remained in African countries like Congo and Libya, though his ideology was not present.



Poster 8: “We must earnestly study the writings of Chairman Mao to deepen the criticism of the counterrevolutionary revisionist line of the 'Gang of Four'”⁵⁸

The reform and opening up of 1978 was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, moments in modern Chinese domestic policies. However, the great shift in China’s foreign policy took place a decade earlier, under the leadership of Mao and Zhou. Despite the domestic transition, China sustained a foreign policy based on the Three Worlds Theory, and the established diplomatic

⁵⁸ Published in March, 1977, by Sichuan renmin chubanshe (四川人民出版社). BG E15/36 (Landsberger collection, <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-36>)

relations with the US that were declared under Deng's leadership in 1979 had been initiated by his predecessor. Furthermore, Deng continued to sound the themes of the need for cooperation among developing countries and the evils of imperialism (Brazinsky 2017, 344). Almost every foreign policy campaign was devoted to arguing China's status as a victim, not an activist or aggressor, in international politics. The theory of China's "peaceful rise" was advanced, and Deng told the world that China would "never seek hegemony" (Lovell 2019, 11). Thus, while the domestic arena underwent dramatic changes, China's image of itself in the international arena mimicked the previous decades. Furthermore, this historical narrative would remain a central theme in China's ongoing diplomatic and economic expansion in Africa. This would eventually result in the launch of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in 2000 and the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013.⁵⁹

Conclusion

This study describes how China's foreign policy has been pragmatically shaped and reshaped through constant reevaluation of the changing international context, while also being influenced by domestic developments. Upon the founding of the People's Republic of China, the threat of US imperialism at the borders, as well as Mao and the CCP's clear secondary position in the hierarchy of the Communist world, made an alliance with the Soviet Union both possible and necessary. However, the partnership was not motivated by strictly communist ideals but rather by the struggle against imperialism. This struggle motivated an internationalisation of the United Front policy, as Zhou Enlai developed a strategy of winning over neutral forces on the international arena. This was the foundation of the Bandung Conference of 1955, where an imagined solidarity was formed between postcolonial countries through their shared experiences and their common struggle against imperialism. China managed to successfully align itself with the Third World countries in the 1950s and established foreign relations based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, strictly advocating the concept of non-interference. The solidarity was at its peak during the following decade, and the Bandung Spirit embodied the optimism of the early postcolonial era when China formed diplomatic ties with a rapidly increasing number of independent African states. Their leaders eagerly accepted China's extended hand, as they found the Chinese history of humiliation under European imperialism to be a shared experience legitimising brotherhood, trust, and common goals. Thus, the outcome

⁵⁹ As of 2025, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) includes 53 African nations along with China and the African Union Commission. Eswatini is the only African nation not participating due to its diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. For more info, see: <http://www.focac.org/eng/>

of the Bandung Conference was not primarily the establishment of a political alliance, but the construction of a postcolonial identity in opposition to imperialism and towards a more just international order. Zhou successfully embedded China within this identity.

The revolutionary 1960s represent a largely overlooked chapter in China's engagement with Africa, as it marked a departure from the principles of non-interference and peaceful coexistence, the foundations of China's foreign policy towards the Third World. This period may be quietly omitted from official narratives today, particularly by a Communist Party eager to highlight China's consistently peaceful intentions in Africa. But the changes began with the intensifying rivalry between China and the Soviet Union, where Khrushchev advocated coexistence between the two antagonistic systems of capitalism and socialism, to avoid a devastating war, while Mao claimed that the world was still in the epoch of imperialism and their task was therefore to support a continuous revolution. This demonstrates that China's relation to Communism was not primarily because of socialist ideals, but because of the struggle against imperialism. Furthermore, it led to the development of the Three Worlds Theory, which reframed the primary contradiction not as one between socialism and capitalism, but as one between oppressed nations and the imperialist powers. The Soviet Union was elevated next to the US as imperial First World powers, struggling for global hegemony while possessing tremendously powerful nuclear arsenals. Mao and Lin believed that the Third World peripheries would rise up and overwhelm the cores of the First and Second Worlds. Exporting the revolution and the belief that to rebel is justified, the PRC became deeply involved in African rebellions and independence struggles, searching for anti-Soviet groups to support. The Cultural Revolution's persecution of Chinese leaders led to the recall of a great number of diplomats and embassy staff, while others were expelled by African countries that broke relations with China due to its increasingly aggressive policy. Furthermore, the Sino-Soviet split also split the Third World, with the failure of the Second Asian-African Conference. Postcolonial idealism had fallen victim to Cold War power dynamics, and realpolitik killed the Bandung Spirit. While some African leaders adopted the Maoist revolutionary ideas, China's exported revolution largely resulted in troubles, adding controversy to their presence on the African continent.

The late 1960s saw the high tide of the Cultural Revolution and the low point of Sino-African relations. But as the militant phase of the domestic revolution ended and Mao had consolidated his control of the Party, the idea of an international united front of anti-imperialism reemerged. Zhou's pragmatism once again became the guiding diplomatic light, and the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence returned as the foundation of China's foreign policy. This paved the way for establishing relations with several conservative African governments, leading to the UN

General Assembly vote that resulted in the PRC replacing the ROC as the official representative of China. A tremendous success of international recognition. The reform had achieved one of its goals, and the disturbing memories of the 1960s were further overshadowed by China's sponsorship of economic development projects, most notably the Freedom Railway, framing the relationship in terms of solidarity and progress. Furthermore, the Soviet military threat at the Chinese borders, elevated by the ideological struggle of the Cultural Revolution, allowed for a reassessment of China's alliances and the rapprochement towards the US. During a week that changed the world, Mao shook the hand of Nixon, and China took a further step away from left-wing movements and radical regimes. Consequently, the great shift in China's foreign policy took place under the leadership of Mao and Zhou and was not linked to Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening up. This shows the complexities of Mao's China, an era that should not be reduced to pure ideological revolution but understood as a period of ongoing pragmatic reassessment of China's global role and its interaction with domestic developments. Furthermore, the agency of the African states must not be overlooked. Their responses to Chinese initiatives were shaped by national interests, and the engagement with China depended on whether such ties were seen as beneficial. They also had to navigate the competing interests of the three major Cold War powers, striving to secure the most favourable outcomes despite often limited leverage.

From imagined solidarity to revolution and pragmatism, China's engagement on the African continent reveals how strategic interests can take fundamentally different forms over time. This applies to all actors, and understanding this multifaceted history is essential for interpreting the foundations of Sino-African relations today, where echoes of past solidarities and conflicts continue to shape the present.

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Appendix

Illustrations



Image 1: Mao Zedong's Proclamation of The People's Republic of China during a Speech on October 1, 1949. From: Orihara1. "Mao Proclaiming New China." *Wikimedia Commons*. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mao_Proclaiming_New_China.JPG



Image 2: Zhou Enlai, Premier of China. Official portrait, 1950s. From: Anonymous. "Zhou Enlai Portrait." *Wikimedia Commons*. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zhou_Enlai_portrait.jpg

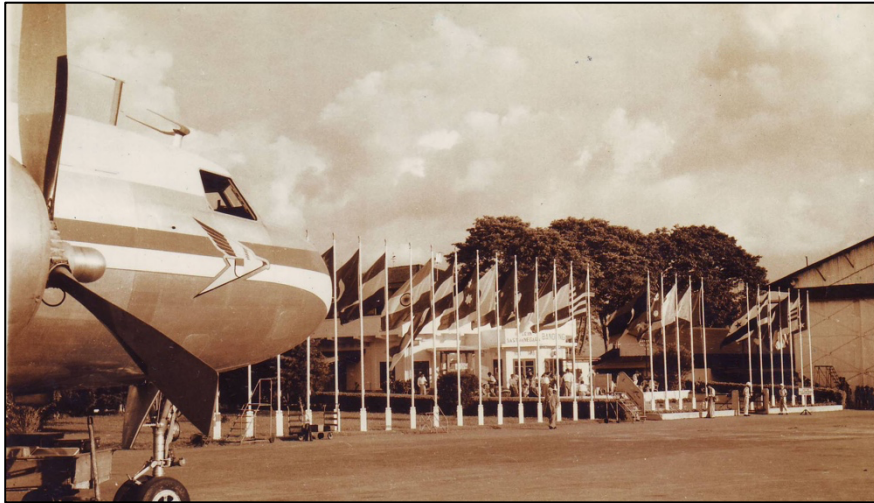


Image 3: Husein Sastranegara Airport, Bandung, decorated with the flags of participant countries of the Asian-African Conference, on April 15th, 1955. From: UNESCO. ‘Asian-African Conference Archives’. Memory of the World. Positive Nr.: 550415 FP 2-1. © National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/asian-african-conference-archives>.



Image 4: Plenary meeting of the Economic Section during the Asian-African Conference in Merdeka Building, Bandung, on April 20th, 1955. From: UNESCO. ‘Asian-African Conference Archives’. Memory of the World. © National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/asian-african-conference-archives>.



Image 5: The Asian-African Conference in Merdeka Building, Bandung, on April 24th, 1955. From: UNESCO. ‘Asian-African Conference Archives’. Memory of the World. © National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/asian-african-conference-archives>.



Image 6: Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (centre), Chairman of the Delegation of the People’s Republic of China, together with the group walking to the Merdeka Building, Bandung. From: UNESCO. ‘Asian-African Conference Archives’. Memory of the World. © National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/asian-african-conference-archives>.



Image 7: The delegations of participant countries of the Asian-African Conference walking to Merdeka Building on April 20th, 1955. From: UNESCO. ‘Asian-African Conference Archives’. Memory of the World. © National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia. <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/asian-african-conference-archives>.



Image 8: October 9, 1962. UN General Assembly, the day after Algeria was admitted to membership in the United Nations. Mr. Ben Bella is seen at his country's desk before he addresses the Assembly. At right is Mr. Mohammed Khemistei, Foreign Minister of Algeria. UN Photo/MH, UN7641315, <https://media.un.org/photo/en/asset/oun7/oun7641315>



Image 9: 700.000 demonstrators gather at Tian'anmen Square and indignantly condemn the US-Belgian imperialists' crime of armed aggression in the Congo (L). From 'In Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression'. 1965. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.



Image 10: The people of Sian hold a demonstration in the snow. From 'In Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression'. 1965. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.



Image 11: People of all walks of life in Shanghai hold a great demonstration. From 'In Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression'. 1965. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.



Image 12: Militia of various nationalities in Kunming express their indignant protest. From 'In Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression'. 1965. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.



Image 13: Chairman Mao Zedong waves to the demonstrators from the Tian'anmen rostrum. From 'In Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression'. 1965. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.



Image 14: US national security adviser Henry Kissinger met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1971. From: Hsu Chung-mao, "Photo Story: Talks between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai," *ThinkChina*, December 21, 2023. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/history/photo-story-talks-between-henry-kissinger-and-zhou-enlai>



Image 15: In 1972, Chinese Chairman Mao Zedong met with US President Richard Nixon, in what was considered the week that changed the world. From: Hsu Chung-mao, “Photo Story: Talks between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai,” *ThinkChina*, December 21, 2023. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/history/photo-story-talks-between-henry-kissinger-and-zhou-enlai>



Image 16: In 1972, President Nixon and his wife attended a banquet in their honour, escorted by Zhou Enlai. From: Hsu Chung-mao, “Photo Story: Talks between Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai,” *ThinkChina*, December 21, 2023. <https://www.thinkchina.sg/history/photo-story-talks-between-henry-kissinger-and-zhou-enlai>