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Note Number 760 from Geoffroy Chodron de Courcel to Michel Debré, 'Chinese Foreign Policy'

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Summary:

The French Ambassador in Great Britain reports new details on border clashes between China and the Soviet Union in Xinjiang-Kazakhstan, Chinese diplomacy in the Third World and with the West, and the state of Sino-British relations.

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London, 12 June 1969
Note number 760

French Ambassador in Great Britain

to

His Excellency Michel Debré
Foreign Minister
- Asia department -

Chinese Foreign Policy

Questioned by one of my collaborators on some recent aspects of Chinese foreign policy, the deputy-director of the Far East department of the Foreign Office provided the following indications:

1. The political and ideological clash with the USSR is increasingly dominating Chinese policy. The Beijing government aims to exploit as much as possible the contradictions of the Soviet camp by encouraging the ‘revisionist’ parties and by systematically confronting Soviet influence in the Third World.

The repeated incidents at the Xinjiang and Kazakhstan border, and the exchange of accusatory notes between Beijing and Moscow, are more likely a vast exercise in propaganda. Each opponent is doing its utmost to make the other appear as a ‘warmonger’ to the parties currently meeting in Moscow. As for the reality of the incidents, they are nearly impossible to verify. The British services tend to believe that most of the incidents brought up by the Chinese are imaginary, as are those that the Russians are blaming on their opponents. That said, it is not impossible that China recently occupied a small fragment of disputed territory, jutting out in its own territory, in Northwest Xinjiang. It was thus tempting for Beijing to modify to its advantage the boundary line before the start of negotiations that could legalize the fait accompli. It would not have been surprising that this would have caused a reaction of the Soviet forces. But this would only have been a minor affair.

I note that the specialist Victor Zorza, in The Guardian of the 12th June, seemed very pessimistic. Indeed, he believes that the Chinese accusations are far from being solely motivated by the desire to influence the Moscow conference. For several weeks, Soviet radio has allegedly been encouraging the non-native populations of Xinjiang to rebel against Beijing. Significant military reinforcements have been sent by both opponents on each side of the common border. M. Zorza therefore feels that the situation can only worsen and lead to more serious fights than occurred on the Damansky/Chenpao island.

The deputy-director of the Far East department is far more skeptical about the prospect of major fight in the heart of Asia. He thinks that the Chinese probably overdid it, knowing fore well that the Russians would never initiate a major operation or reprisals during the meetings of the Communist movement. But Beijing, we are told, still continues to be prudent and this prudence will probably increase after the Moscow conference.

That said, our interlocutor did not believe that the Khabarovsk talks on 18th June could lead to any sort of agreement on fluvial navigation. The grounds on which the Chinese note on this subject is based do not suggest that the parties in this dispute can or want to reach an agreement. The same is true for the overall negotiation on

borders that was proposed by the Chinese in their 26th May note. The Russians will never admit to negotiate on the basis of the ‘unequal treaties’. Moreover, the Chinese note is, according to views here, very well written and the ideas it develops are far more relevant than the Russian ones (see the passage according to which the ‘USSR occupies a portion of Chinese territory that is thirteen times bigger than Czechoslovakia’). The Soviets, like the other Eastern European countries, refused to accept the Chinese note.

2. The Chinese, it is believed here, will thus increase their propaganda towards Third World countries and strengthen some ties with Western countries.

The Chinese Ambassadors, who are slowly heading back to their posts, probably received instructions, we are told, to increase by all means the difficulties between Afro-Asian countries, be they ‘bourgeois’ or not, and the USSR. The Chinese will also continue their efforts to prevent an increase of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia.

As for the West, the Foreign Office does not think that the more conciliatory attitude of China towards certain countries has any real political significance. Beijing does not expect the Western countries to act as a counterweight to the USSR, but instead wants them to supply the technological and economic assistance that is vital for its development. That explains the Chinese courtesy towards Sweden and France (that our interlocutor did not name explicitly). This also explains the attempt to restore relations with Canada, and maybe Italy. It is quite funny, we are told, to note the growing pressure used by the USSR to push Canada to change its mind.

As for the possibility of a coming renewal of a dialogue between Beijing and Washington, this was not excluded by our interlocutor.

3. A certain détente, we are told, has emerged in Sino-British relations. Great Britain has certainly benefited from the greater tolerance recently enjoyed by foreign diplomats stationed in Beijing. Thus, as I indicated already in my dispatch number 623/AS of 8th May, the British Commercial Counselor will be able to go to the Guangzhou trade show. Moreover, the British chargé d’affaires will be making a trip to Hangzhou, Guangzhou and Shanghai. In this last city, he will finally be able to restore contact with the small British colony.

Even more interesting, the Chinese, following discussions in Beijing and London, have finally formally agreed to free M. Anthony Grey, once the last of the 11 communist journalists in jail in Hong Kong will have been released, which will happen in October. However, the fate of the other British citizens held in China has not changed.

We hope here for the return of the Chinese Counselor who had replaced the Chargé d’affaires. This Counselor had been recalled to China recently, leaving the leadership of the Mission to the First Secretary. We do not expect here the return of the Chargé d’affaires, since Great Britain has no intention for the moment to upgrade the level of its representation in Beijing.

Signed Geoffroy Chodron de Courcel