

October 30, 1975

**Conversation between Federal Chancellor Schmidt
and the Chairman of the Central Committee and the
Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao
Zedong, in Beijing**

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Summary:

Federal Chancellor Schmidt and Mao Zedong discuss the potential for attack by the Soviet Union and European security.

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Conversation

between Federal Chancellor Schmidt and the Chairman of the Central Committee and the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao Zedong, in Beijing

October 30, 1975[1]

German participants: Federal Minister [for Transportation, Post and Telecommunications Kurt] Gscheidle, Ambassador Dr. [Rolf] Pauls, Department Head Dr. Sanne.

Chinese participants: Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping, Ambassador Wang Shu, Deputy Minister [female] Wang Hai-jung, Department Head Europe Hsü Wie-chin, Department Head [female] Tang Wen-sheng, Mao's personal secretary.

I. The conversation was held by the Federal Chancellor in English. Mao's statements were translated into English.

While intellectually fully present, Mao was physically very weak. He could stand and sit, but not get up or sit down on his own. He said that speaking is hard for him and his legs are not well. Until almost the end he was relaxed, vivid, and humorous.

The three women sitting around him had major difficulties to understand him. Often they discussed what he could have meant and asked him when they could not agree among themselves. He then tried to repeat words or reached for the notepad. There he wrote quickly and legibly what he wanted to say. All this happened without any embarrassment, often interrupted by laughter. One never had the impression the interpreter [female] said something that did not convey his intentions.

Apparently Mao's thinking has a fixation on the period after the break with the Soviet Union.[2] Current events of global policy he either does not notice, or only to the extent they fit into his perspective. On the other hand he enjoys without any doubt full authority in this regard: Deputy Prime Minister Deng deviated in his statements the next day[3] not even in nuances from the line drawn by Mao.

II. In the context of initial welcoming words, Mao declared the Germans are good. After a short break, he added this to a sentence: The West Germans are good!

The Federal Chancellor referred to his talk with the Deputy Prime Minister.[4] In the Federal Republic of Germany there exists enormous respect for the achievements of the Chinese people under Mao's leadership during the past 25 years.

Ms. Parliamentary State Secretary [Marie] Schlei, who has a special fondness for Mao's poems, has given him a volume of these poems in preparation for his visit to Beijing.

Mao said the achievements reached would have been too small. Besides, he cannot write poems. However, he knows how to conduct and to win wars.

The Federal Chancellor said Mao could do both, and in addition he would be a leader of his people.

Mao replied: No, we have to learn from you!

After a remark referring to Ambassador Wang Shu [former Xinhua Bureau Chief in Bonn], Mao explained he had been a journalist himself and studied at Beijing University. Therefore there would be two correspondents in this room.

The Federal Chancellor reminded that temporarily he had also dealt with reporting. He would have written two books that deal at least half with strategy towards the Soviet Union.[5] The Chinese communists have special experiences and their own specific judgment of this subject. Here they can learn nothing from us. However, a comparison of positions would be interesting to the German side.

Mao interjected, this would be interesting indeed.

The Federal Chancellor explained that, according to his impression, during the last 15 years one would have to differentiate between what the Soviets write or say, and what they actually do. In their conduct of foreign affairs since the Khrushchev era there is much more caution than in their statements. The last adventurist act occurred 13 years ago when missiles were sent to Cuba.[6]

This does not exclude that the Soviets can behave badly, if you allow a favorable situation to them to occur. Then it might very well happen that they apply their overwhelming power.

However, one must not be afraid of this but rather maintain an acceptable balance of power. As long as you are doing this, the Soviet will not overstep their boundaries. However, if somebody would become weak in its defenses, it might be possible that they act accordingly.

The most important European states in NATO, as well as the United States, would not offer any openings that invite attacks. One has indeed listened to the warnings of the Chinese leaders and took them into serious consideration. Still, one is not afraid of a potential attack because one has a sufficiently strong defense to turn any policy of pressure, or even an attack, into an enormous risk for the Soviet Union.

Mao interjected this would be all nice and good, but the situation will change in the next ten to twenty years.

The Federal Chancellor replied changes are happening constantly and everywhere.

Mao commented on this: Your policy is based on a hypothetical situation.

The Federal Chancellor said he would call the joint ability of defense and deterrence by no means hypothetical. It would be highly effective and an actual ability. We build the other half of our policy on this: to have enough freedom of action vis-a-vis the Soviet Union and its allies in order to arrive at good and friendly neighborly relations with them.

Our own situation would be more difficult than the situation of other European peoples. Our country is divided, and the old Reich capital is surrounded by the territory of a state that is under Soviet pressure. This cannot be changed now. We do not surrender hope, however, to overcome the current situation some day with the objective that the Germans can live again together under one roof. In the meantime, we undertake efforts to create a more friendly atmosphere. Nobody knows how the Soviet Union will turn out within the next twenty years.

Mao said, he does know it: there will be war! The Federal Chancellor seems to him to

be a disciple of [German philosopher Immanuel] Kant.

The Federal Chancellor interjected there would be something to that.

Mao said, he would be a disciple of Marx who had learned from [German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel. Hegel would be good, idealism not so. [German military theorist Carl von] Clausewitz has put it correctly. He [Mao] would be interested in Hegel, [German biologist and philosopher Ernst] Haeckel, and [German philosopher Ludwig] Feuerbach.

The Federal Chancellor said Clausewitz was a genius, one of the few German military officers with a political talent. Marx, Engels, and Lenin would have used the Clausewitz dictum that war is the continuation of policy [Politik] by other means.[7] Yet there also is a second lesson to be learned from Clausewitz: in war the political leadership has command over the military. From this second lesson, he [Schmidt] would draw the personal conclusion that the ability to conduct a war is only one of the alternatives available to those with political responsibilities. One must not stare at war as the only option.

Mao countered, a defensive war is better since the attacker usually suffers defeat. You can look at the American attack on Vietnam, the attack of [German Kaiser] Wilhelm II on France, and also on Hitler's attack against Europe. The result was always that the defenders won. It was the same with Jiang Jieshi who was the attacker.

The Americans would be afraid that their people get killed. They had sent 500,000 men to Vietnam. Of those, 50,000 are dead and more than 100,000 are wounded; and they have made great clamor about this.

The Federal Chancellor asked for the Chairman's opinions on the development of the powers China, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Mao repeated, there will be war. Eternal peaceful coexistence is unthinkable. Europe is too soft and divided, and also full of deadly fear about war. As examples he would name the Danes, the Belgians and the Dutch, and also the United States. The Germans and Yugoslavs in comparison are somewhat better. If Europe will still remain unable during the next ten years to unite politically, economically, and militarily, it will suffer. The Europeans have to learn to rely on themselves. Would it not be possible that the sixty million of West Germans can achieve the same as the North Vietnamese?

The Federal Chancellor expressed his conviction that in case of an emergency the Germans will defend themselves. The German military belongs to the best trained and equipped armed forces in the world. This also holds true when it comes to their spirit.

He now wants to ask what kind of experience did change the Chairman's opinion of the Soviet Union. Today it is fundamentally different from the one 20 or 30 years ago. What is the reason for this change in judgment over the course of a life?

Mao explained it is the Soviet Union that changed. You no longer have to deal with men like Stalin, but with the Khrushchevs and Brezhnevs who are traitors to Lenin.

The Federal Chancellor continued, Mao seems to want to say that the process is dependent on the men at the top. However, Khrushchev has already resigned and also Brezhnev will not stay forever. Does the Chairman exclude that future

generations in Moscow can return to the principles of Lenin? For example, he [Schmidt] only wants to mention the treatment of minorities in its own area, or the principles through which the politicians can remain superior to the bureaucracy?

Mao exclaimed: No, they will not [return to Lenin], no, no, no!

To the question from the Federal Chancellor, why not, he responded: Because they possess too many nuclear weapons.

The Federal Chancellor interjected that the Soviets are afraid of these weapons.

Mao said, the Russians are afraid of them, but on the other hand they are not. In any event, they have four million soldiers.

The Federal Chancellor remarked that we have half a million soldiers, but we are only a small country. Mao retorted here: You are not small. You have 60 million people, in one word: Europe is divided in too many countries, and it is too soft.

The Federal Chancellor indicated there have been numerous countries in Europe for one and a half millennia. It would be an immense task to unite them under one roof. This is a task for at least one, if not two generations.

One fact is often overlooked: The nine members of the European Community follow different strategic concepts. He wants to mention Great Britain and France who possess nuclear weapons. Under de Gaulle, but still so today, France has refused to enter these arms into the integrated military organization. Even more important, France's fundamental strategic positions are very different from those of the other Western Europeans. France is almost as much interested in independence from the United States, as it is interested in its own defense against the Soviet Union.

If from time to time French visitors come to Mao, it would not be bad if he provides them with the same insights into his philosophy he gave the Federal Chancellor. Mao remarked, the French do not listen to him, just as a little as the Americans.

The Federal Chancellor said this is not quite true. Besides, there exists a saying: Constant dropping wears the stone.

Mao remarked here, one is debating these issues but he has not enough water to wear the stone. You have to rely here on the water of the Federal Chancellor.

The Federal Chancellor repeated that the Chairman should not underestimate the importance his thoughts have for most of the political leaders in this world. He [Schmidt] has come to exchange opinions, and judgments and analyses; some have come before him, and some will come after him. All this also bestows responsibility on the one who is asked for advice. People then begin to think and compare their impressions. For him at least, there would be no doubt that the statements of the Chairman are a very precious stone in the mosaic of opinion about the global situation that he, the Federal Chancellor, would have.

If we assume for now, Europe will unite much faster than we expect, then it will project the impression of great strength. Could this not be a reason for the Soviet Union to direct its pressure away from Europe on Central Asia and ultimately also on the Far East?

Mao said this is possible. This is why one has to gear up against their coming.

The Federal Chancellor asked about the role of Japan.

Mao replied Japan will be unable to achieve anything. It neither has enough oil, nor coal, nor iron, nor enough food.

The Federal Chancellor interjected, it has 120 million people. Mao replied that the sheer number of people is not a reliable force.

The Federal Chancellor remarked that Japan then needs a strong alliance with the United States and American forces must thus operate from Japanese territory.

Mao confirmed that this is the current situation. Right now Japan is relying on the United States, but the U.S. tries to extend its protection everywhere, to Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, India, Australia, New Zealand, indirectly also to Thailand, to the Middle East, to Europe, to America, and to Canada. In his view this is not going to work.

The Federal Chancellor said, it is his impression that the United States are preparing for a review of their situation; and that they come to the conclusion to have over-stretched their commitments.

Mao remarked they try to hold down ten fleas with ten fingers.

He continued: You [Helmut Schmidt] will have to rely on your own strength. Counting on somebody else can only be a second rate option !

The Federal Chancellor thanked the Chairman for the profound conversation.

Helmut Schmidt Archive, 1/HSAA 006600

[1] Copy. The memorandum of conversation was drafted by Department Head Sanne, Federal Chancellery, on October 31, 1975.

[2] Among else, because of the economic program of the "Great Leap Forward" initiated in China without consultations with the CPSU tensions arose between the USSR and the People's Republic of China from 1958. They became more aggravated in late 1962. The Soviet government was especially accused for its position during the Sino-Indian border dispute and its withdrawal during the Cuba conflict. See on this Ost-Probleme 1963, No. 3, p. 81.

On June 14, 1963 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party rejected in a "Open Letter" a leading role of the CPSU in the communist movement. It criticized in particular the policy of coexistence with the Western states. In response, the CPSU argued in a "Open Letter" on July 14, 1963 against the course demanded by the Chinese side. For the text of those letters see Europa-Archiv 1964, D 73-138.

During the following years the ideological confrontation continued; in March 1966 relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the CPSU were terminated.

[3] For the meeting of Federal Chancellor Schmidt with Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping on October 31, 1975 in Beijing see document 326.

[4] For the meeting of Federal Chancellor Schmidt with Chinese Deputy Prime Minister Deng Xiaoping on October 29, 1975 in Beijing see document 322.

[5] See Helmut Schmidt, *Verteidigung oder Vergeltung: Ein deutscher Beitrag zum strategischen Problem der NATO* [Defense or Retaliation: A German Contribution to NATO's Strategic Problem], Stuttgart 1961.

See also Helmut Schmidt, *Strategie des Gleichgewichts: Deutsche Friedenspolitik und die Weltmächte* [Strategy of Balance: German Peaceful Policy and the World Powers], Stuttgart 1969.

[6] On October 16, 1962 the United States noted during surveillance flights over Cuba that launching pads had been built and missiles of Soviet origin deployed on the island. On October 22 the United States imposed a naval blockade. After an exchange of letters between Prime Minister Khrushchev and President Kennedy, the USSR declared on October 27, 1962 its willingness to withdraw the missiles, and it began doing so on November 9, 1962. In return, the United States began to withdraw its missiles of type "Jupiter" from Turkey. See here FRUS 1961-1963, Vol. XI, especially p. 235-241, p. 268f., p. 279-283, p. 285f., and p. 564.

[7] The Prussian General von Clausewitz stated: "So we see that war is not just a political act but a true political instrument, a continuation of political conduct, its implementation by other means". See Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* [About War], ed. Werner Hahlweg, Bonn, 19th edition 1980, Reprint 1991, p. 210.