

CHINA AND THE
AFRICAN LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to examine China's relations with the African Liberation Movement. Emphasis will be put on China's support for the national liberation struggle in Africa and the sino-Soviet dispute as it affects this struggle.

Essentially, the term "African liberation" does not merely signify the termination of colonial rule. It also connotes effective political, economic, social and cultural decolonization.

* The author of this paper has visited the Peoples Republic of China on several occasions. In 1969 he served as his country's Ambassador in Peking. The author has also had extensive and close association with the African Liberation Movements both in his former capacity as Director of African and Middle East Division of the Tanzanian Foreign Ministry and in his current position as Chairman of the United Nations' Committee on Decolonization - a position which he is occupying for a third successive year. Accordingly the author's personal experience will be made use of in this paper as far as possible. Furthermore, his contacts with leaders of the liberation movements will at times be the primary source of his data.

This concept of effective decolonization as opposed to formal or legal decolonization, has led many ruling African political organizations in independent African States to consider themselves as liberation movements.¹ At the same time, in the name of the same principle of effective decolonization, there have emerged in several independent African States dissenting political organizations with the avowed objective of overthrowing established authority. This latter category, which at times also received support of the Chinese leadership, was particularly manifested in the Congo (now Zaire) in the 1960s through the supreme Council² of the Congolese Revolution.

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1. In a special declaration issued in 1971 by the ruling Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) following the overthrowal of the Government of President Obote in Uganda in January that year, the Party declared, "...Ruling Revolutionary Political Parties in Africa today, like TANU, are still liberation movements" MWONGOZO WA TANU (TANU GUIDELINES), 1971, published by the Government Printer, Dar es Salaam, 1971, p. 3.
 2. A number of scholars on China have referred to China's role in support of this liberation movement in the former Belgian Congo. See for example, Peter Van Ness, Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1970, pp. 93 & 145; Bruce D. Lapkin, CHINA AND AFRICA-1949-1970, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1971, pp. 179-183; and Vidya Prakash Dutt, CHINA'S Foreign Policy 1958 - 1962, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1964, pp. 281 - 285.

The present study will however, confine itself to the liberation movement as it relates to the liberation struggle of the colonial territories from the yoke of foreign domination. Specifically, the study will focus on the liberation movement in Southern Africa and on China's position and role in the liberation struggle there. The area covered will include the Portuguese dominated territories of Angola and Mozambique; the British colony of Southern Rhodesia whose white settler community proclaimed a Unilateral declaration of independence in November 1965; the international territory of Namibia, which is still under the control of South Africa despite the United Nations decision to terminate the latter's mandate over the territory in 1966; and the apartheid state of South Africa. Guinea-Bissau will also be considered though the liberation movement of that territory, the Partido Africano De Independencia Da Guinea E Cabo Verde (PAIGC) proclaimed the nation's independence on September 24, 1973 and which has todate been recognized by over eighty States and which had earlier been endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly.³ Reference to Guinea Bissau is relevant and pertinent

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3. General Assembly Resolution 3061 (XXVIII) of 2 November 1973 entitled "illegal occupation by Portuguese military forces of certain sectors of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau and acts of aggression committed by them against the people of the Republic." Operative paragraph 1 of this resolution reads: "Welcomes the recent accession to independence of the people of Guinea Bissau, thereby creating the sovereign state of the Republic of Guinea Bissau."

due to the fact that notwithstanding the independence proclamation, Portugal continues to control certain areas of the territory and more particularly the islands of Cape Verde. Consequently, the PAIGC is involved in a serious armed struggle against Portuguese colonial troops.

There are also other pockets of colonial rule in Africa in which the liberation movements are fighting for the freedom of their territories - with the involvement of China in assisting them in varying degrees. These endeavours however relate primarily to political and constitutional struggle with some of them entailing claims or counter-claims over sovereignty and/or territorial integrity and are thus, for the purpose of the present study, excluded from examination.

Another reason for concentrating on southern Africa is the extremely serious and dangerous nature of the conflict which exists in the region and its international dimension and repercussions. In this connection, it is relevant to bear in mind the various observations and warnings on the subject given by a number of African leaders, who are most intimately related with the area. For example, the President of Zambia, Dr. Kenneth Kaunda has observed that a race conflagration in Southern Africa would make the Middle East conflict look like a 'picnic'.⁴

4. Anthony R. Wilkinson, Insurgency in Rhodesia, 1959-1973: An Account and Assessment, ADELPHI PAPERS NUMBER ONE HUNDRED, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, 1973 p.25.

Tanzania's President, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, has warned of the danger of Africa becoming "a hot front to the cold war," cautioning that "the freedom struggle of Southern Africa will become confused by a power conflict which is irrelevant to it."⁵

Theoretical basis of Interaction

Reviewing the situation of the armed struggle in Africa in 1973, The Peking Review stated that that year "saw sustained fresh victories for the African people against imperialism, old and neo-colonialism, and racism; the flames of the armed struggle raged."⁶ The Review then went on to identify those areas where the "flames of war" have been going on unabated: "Apart from Guinea-Bissau in Western Africa, the popular armed struggles were mainly concentrated in the south, embracing Angola, Mozambique,

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5. "Speech by the President of the United Republic of Tanzania to the United Nations General Assembly on October 16, 1970." published by the Information Services Division, Ministry of Information and Tourism, Dar es Salaam, 1970, p. 6.
 6. PEKING REVIEW, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 4, 1974, "1973 in Retrospect: Popular Armed Struggles in Africa." p. 25.

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Zimbabwe and Namibia."

This review of events in the African continent, appears from Peking's point of view, to be clearly in consonant with the Chinese ideological premise that the world situation is excellent "in which countries want independence, nations want liberation and the people want revolution." The "excellent" international situation is predicated on the state of a "great disorder" prevailing in the world in which among other things the "third world has become stronger and more united, (with the escalated struggles of the Asian and African peoples against imperialism and hageomonism), playing an ever more significant role in international affairs." Furthermore, the "great disorder

7. Ibid.

8. A commentary by Hsinhua Correspondent, January 9, 1974, reproduced in PEKING REVIEW, Vol. 17, No. 3, January 18, 1974, p. 9. This particular concept has been repeatedly emphasized by Chinese leaders and spokesmen in different forms. Thus Chiao Kuan-hua, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister referred to this in his first statement in the General Assembly following China's admission to the UN in 1971. Official Records of the GA - Twenty-Sixth Session - A/PV.1983 In his report to the Tenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, delivered on August 24, 1973, Premier Chou Enlai also referred to this when he declared: "Countries want independence, nations want liberation, and the people want revolution - this has become an irresistible historical trend." See, THE TENTH NATIONAL CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF CHINA (DOCUMENTS), Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1973, p. 23.
9. "NEW YEAR MESSAGE" 1974 New Year's Day editorial by "Renmin Ribao", "Honggi" and "Jiefangjun Bao" as reproduced in PEKING REVIEW, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 4, 1974, p. 6.

in the world" is viewed in the context of "imperialism, modern revisionism and reactionaries of various countries have been thrown into confusion."¹⁰

From the above postulation of the Chinese leaders' view of the contemporary world, a number of basic premises underlying the related Chinese policies can be clearly discerned: First, China associates "world disorder" with excellence in the revolutionary situation, obtaining in the region of Africa; secondly, China supports the liberation struggle in Africa and views the escalation of the armed struggle in that continent as eloquent vindication of "Chairman Mao's scientific thesis on the international situation,"¹¹; thirdly, the Sino-Soviet confrontation is clearly brought into focus.

China's revolutionary experience of having waged a protracted war should commend itself to the African freedom fighters who have to undertake a similarly protracted war though in different circumstances.

10. A commentary by Hsinhua Correspondent, January 9, 1974, Op. Cit., p. 7.

11. Peking Review, Vol. 17, No. 1, January 4, 1974, p. 6.

Mao tse Tung's classic on "the protracted war" has found a place on the bookshelves of many ^{an} African freedom fighter. Situations differ but definite similarities exist. Like the Chinese, the freedom fighters of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea - Bissau have had to launch a guerilla warfare on a sustained protracted basis. In Angola, the armed struggle was initiated by the Angolan Peoples Liberation Movement (MPLA) in 1961 and has been going on now for thirteen years with no visible signs of immediate success. The armed liberation struggle in Guinea - Bissau was launched by the PAIGC in January 1961, while the Mozambique Liberation Front unleashed its military resistance in September 1964.

In addition to the protracted nature of the liberation struggle in the afore-mentioned territories, there was another significant similarity. Like the initial exploits of the Chinese Communist Party's Peoples Liberation Army, the liberation movements in these areas have focused their military activities in the rural areas. The peasantry has therefore formed the backbone of the African liberation movements of the Portuguese dominated territories.

Confronted with an enemy with by far superior weaponry and resources, these liberation movements had also to operate

on the premises that in the final analysis their peoples war would be victorious and colonialism would meet its inevitable doom. This strategic conception of the revolution falls in line with Mao tse Tung's conception developed through the Chinese Communist Party experience in the revolution of "despising the enemy strategically" while "taking full account of him tactically." 12

As a logical extension of this theory, it may be deduced that a number of liberation movement leaders also showed understanding of Mao's thesis which was put forward in the summer of 1946, to the American correspondent Anna Louisie Strong: "all ¹³ reactionaries are paper tigers." This should not in any way be taken as an indication that the liberation movements have underestimated the 'power' or the 'ferocity' of their enemy. Far from that. Like the Chinese own behaviour in the light of

12. Peter Van Mess, op. cit. pp. 37-38.

13. Mao tse Tung told Miss Strong:

"All reactionaries are paper tigers. In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality, they are not so powerful. From a long term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are really powerful." Mao, SELECTED WORKS, Vol. IV, Foreign Languages Press, Peking 1961. pp. 100-101.

of this statement, the African liberation movements have refused to be cowed or intimidated by their colonial oppressors.

As a former semi-colonial country which was exploited, oppressed, 'rediculed' and 'humiliated', China's experience has a lot in common with the African countries, both independent and dependent. Peking in her relations with Africa has tended to make maximum use of this 'shared experience' at the hands of the European colonial powers. At times she has also subtly used the racial factor to emphasize closer identification particularly in her attempt to 'expose' Soviet "Social imperialism". Professor Dutt of the Indian School of International Studies asserts that "there is a strong admixture of racial appeal and an advocacy of radical politics in Peking's policy towards Africa."¹⁴

Whether the Chinese leadership have deliberately sought to play up the sentiments of racial affinity even at the point of down grading the ideological factor as their Soviet detractors tend at times to point out may be debatable. But what cannot be contested is the fact China has at times referred to this element. Thus, for example, the Chairman of the Chinese Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity Liao Cheng-Chih in his address to the

14. Vidya Prakash Dutt, CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY 1958-1962, Asia Publishing House, New York, 1964, p. 272.

Second Conference of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization declared:

"The Chinese people entertain specially close and warm feelings for the African people in their struggle against colonial rule and for national independence... We were also regarded by the imperialist aggressors as a so called 'inferior race' and our people suffered the same bitterness of slaughter, plundering and enslavement at the hands of foreign colonialists." ¹⁵

Similarly the element of Common experience was repeatedly invoked. Subsequent to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between China and the Republic of Guinea on October 4, 1959, the Communist Party daily hailing this even inter alia related it to the common experiences of the African and Chinese people and declared that the latter "fully understand and sympathize with the plight of the African people still under colonial rule and firmly support their heroic struggle for independence and freedom." ¹⁶

In considering China's attitude towards and its conception concerning the liberation struggle in Africa, the African response

15. HSINHUA (New China News Agency), April 14, 1960.

16. Dutt, op. cit. p. 286, quoting the 5 October, 1959 Editorial of Jen-min Jih-pao.

to some of China's conceptualization on the matter must also be borne in mind. In many cases, China's radical views on the issue of liberation and its international dimension has found echo among the more 'radical' of the African States as well as among the active liberation movements in Africa today. Two examples would serve to illustrate this point.

The joint communique issued by President Sekou Toure of Guinea and Chairman Liu Shao-chih at the conclusion of the Guinean leader's State Visit to China from 10-15 September 1960, inter alia stipulated that, in order that a genuine and just peace may be realized, imperialist aggression and the rule of colonialism must be terminated and the oppressed nations in the colonies and semi-colonies must be masters of their own fate.¹⁷ This declaration would seem to place President Sekou Toure in full agreement with the Chinese thesis that liquidation of imperialism is a sin a qua non for peace in the world.

The resolutions and decisions of the Second Congress of the Mozambican Liberation Front (FRELIMO) held in Niassa Province (liberated areas) of Mozambique in July 1968 make interesting

17. PEKING REVIEW No. 37, September 14, 1960, pp. 9-10.