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Diane Monson

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The Strategy of Conflict: Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung

DIANE MONSON*

The complexities of various crises around the world have intensified public confusion concerning the causes of particular conflicts and the feasible alternatives of positive action in order to achieve a meaningful solution. The Sino-Soviet dispute has not soothed already troubled brows for, when confessions are finally made, no one really confidently knows all the whats, whys and wherefores of the chain of events in this dispute. Lack of information and beleaguered political stereotypes discourage understanding of the elements, let alone the complexities, of the problem. Yet with all the available analyses of the historical background and issues of the Sino-Soviet problem, the essential frustration of an incomplete definition of the problem is compounded by intellectual gaming in trying to discern the most appropriate term to be applied: tension, dispute, split, break, rift, cleavage, conflict, etc. Such splitting of hairs tends, however, to overlook some of the common ground which the Soviet and Chinese camps actually share both in their political theory, and military strategy and tactics. This insensitivity to the shared elements and nuances of difference tends to make the onlooker oblivious to the essential commitment which both sides have to an ongoing strategy of conflict. This paper will thus attempt not to delineate the causes or issues of the Sino-Soviet conflict in particular, but will rather focus on the broader aspects of Communist theory on conflict. In this way, it is believed that the reader will be able to view the specific dispute in greater perspective.

Since the exploitation of Communist theory occurred first in Russia, and since Stalin is a pivotal figure in the adaptation of Communist theory to both strategy and tactics, this discussion begins with him, moving then to Mao Tse-tung as the foremost Chinese theorist.

*Dr. Monson is assistant professor of political science at Brigham Young University.

Communists are totally absorbed in their theory.¹ The significance of this supreme dedication is evidenced not only in an almost mechanical acceptance of the theory *per se*, but mainly in a seemingly dehumanized fanaticism in provoking the realization of theory in practice. Communist theory provides this working dynamic in its comprehensive explanation for the sequence of events in time. Once the inevitable outcome of history is established and the factors that will cause the outcome determined, the human participator is effectively channeled in his task of "making the outcome an end and using the causes as means."²

This integration of Communist theory and practice is a result of the view that strategy and tactics are derivatives from theory by strictly logical deduction. "Without a revolutionary theory, there cannot be a revolutionary movement."³ "Only a party guided by an advanced theory can act as a vanguard in the fight."⁴ Whereas strategy is the application of theory to a broad context, tactics involves the direct, practical application of theoretical and strategic principles to the particular daily situation.⁵

Whereas strategy is concerned with such wide purposes as the winning of the war against tsarism or the bourgeoisie . . . tactic is concerned, not with the war as a whole, but with the fighting of this or that campaign.⁶

Although such categorization of action does not dictate a specific decision for a particular situation, it does orient the Communist to an awareness of his responsibility and contribution to a total historical commitment. The resultant zealousness is further sparked by a strategy of conflict whose characteristic of continued discord breeds a peculiar dynamism—which can be illuminated by an exposition, comparison and evaluation of the strategy of conflict as propounded by Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung.

The Western search for substantive guideposts to Communist ideology for present and future strategy has been some-

¹Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Strategy and Tactics of World Communism*, p. 5.

²*Ibid.*, p. 24.

³*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴*Loc. cit.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶*Loc. cit.*

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what obscured by an inattention to Communism as a method "of conflict in space over a sustained period of time, i.e., of protracted conflict."⁷ This method of conflict both serves the goal of the establishment of a Communist society and, due to the self-accelerating excesses of the method, appears, if not becomes, in reality, an end in itself. The Communist conception of the struggle for power in the detailed and comprehensive context of "its terms, its theater, its methods and its goals,"⁸ was first formulated by Marx and Engels as a limitless contest of socio-economic forces in a world area.⁹ Lenin also recognized conflict as integral to Communist development:

To discuss conflict outside of its historical and concrete setting is to misunderstand elementary dialectic materialism. At various junctures of the economic evolution, and depending upon changing political, national, cultural, social and other conditions, differing types of struggle may become important and even predominant.¹⁰

Indeed, all Communist theory is concerned with a strategy for annihilating the opponent over a period of time by diverse, although co-ordinated, tactics. The utilization of conflict as a means to keep the opponent off balance and to wear down his resistance is geared to the objective of total conquest. This extremely close attunement of procedure and objective not only highlights the method of conflict but almost makes the means and end appear identical.

Stalin adds to Lenin's analysis by implying that inevitable conflict is the result of internal and external contradictions within society as represented respectively between the proletariat and the peasantry, and between socialism and capitalism.¹¹ A certain inadequateness of a single nation is implied in the need for the efforts of the proletariat of several countries to resolve the external conflict; moreover, this technique promotes an implied internal involvement in external conflict even with the elimination of any contradiction between the proletariat and the peasantry. Apparently oblivious to these theoretical inconsistencies, Stalin dauntlessly envisions the establishment

⁷Robert Strausz-Hupé, *Protracted Conflict*, p. 7.

⁸Strausz-Hupé, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁹*Loc. cit.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

¹¹Joseph Stalin, *Problems of Leninism*, p. 63.

of the dictatorship of the proletariat as not only achieved by "class struggle"¹² but maintained as a

persistent struggle, sanguinary and bloodless, violent and peaceful, military and economic, educational and administrative—against the forces and traditions of the old society.¹³

In a continued contradictory vein, Stalin assures that the dictatorship of the proletariat will preclude "not merely," indeed "not even mainly,"¹⁴ the use of violence, and that such dictatorship is justified as a "higher type of social organization of labor compared with capitalism."¹⁵ Such reasoning for the inevitable complete victory of Communism is indeed presumptuous, primarily due to the ambiguity on the nature of violence and of the features of the proletarian organization. The logical outcomes of this vagueness would appear to be procedural and organizational chaos or the irrelevance of theory for reality. This latter possibility would admit a practical "freedom" which could intensify the danger from an unconstrained commitment to conflict.

Stalin's preoccupation with the extension of Socialism presents an interesting case study of inherent theoretical conflict. Not only does the term Socialism appear to be a facade for the realization of Communism but the theoretical indecision for this development provokes discordant interpretation. In Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* (1924), he advocates "Socialism in one country" as a result of capitalist Imperialism which would make any country vulnerable to Socialism regardless of the degree to which it had become industrialized. Yet he also admits it is impossible to "organize socialist production" and so achieve "the final victory of Socialism" without revolutions "in several advanced countries." Realizing the extremity of the latter formulation, Stalin substituted in his *October Revolution and Tactics of Russian Communists* (December 1924) the proposition that "the proletariat can and must build up a socialist society," but that this does not mean that it can achieve "the complete and final victory of Socialism"¹⁶ in the sense that it would be guaranteed against the danger of counter-revolution. In his

¹²Stalin, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵*Loc. cit.*

¹⁶R. N. Carew Hunt, *The Theory and Practice of Communism*, p. 197.

Problems of Leninism, Stalin explained the rationale for the previous rejection of extended revolution; he felt that the important distinction should be kept intact between "the possibility of building up Socialism by the efforts of one country" and the impossibility of any country considering itself "fully guaranteed against counter-revolution without a victorious revolution in a number of other countries."¹⁷ Not only did Stalin later emphatically affirm that the building of Socialism in one country had actually been achieved, but he also indicated that the victory of Socialism was not complete even in that particular country—so long as Russia was encircled by hostile capitalistic states.¹⁸ Thus, the hazy and seemingly contradictory reformulations of Stalin's position indicate in a measure the lack of a clear, positive program. Such a lack would seem to be compensated only by the mask of conflict: the ambivalences in Stalin's theorizing could thus be camouflaged through the implementation of his aggressive and uncompromising policies.

Despite the lack of any reasoned analysis of the sources of contradictions and the causes of conflict, Stalin staunchly advocates the inevitability of war. This prediction not only illustrates the "weasel" use of words but also the assigned absolutism from any outside insinuation of the Communist role in instigating conflict. On the eve of the Nineteenth Congress of the CPSU in October 1952, Stalin attributed the inevitability of war to the capitalist states but affirmed the "peaceful" policy of the Soviet Union which would be immune from active engagement. Stalin also emphasized that war between the capitalist camp and the "camp of peace" was unlikely since the capitalists would seek to avoid a war where the "very existence of capitalism" would be reviewed. Moreover, capitalist states were aware that Russia's "peaceful policy" precluded an attack on them by the Soviet Union.¹⁹ Yet the Soviet involvement with conflict does find theoretical exposition in Stalin's writings.

A conflict is inevitable. This is the greatest difficulty of the Russian Revolution, its greatest historical problem: the necessity to solve international problems, the necessity to call forth the world revolution.²⁰

¹⁷Carew Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 200.

¹⁹Legislative Reference Service, *Khrushchev on the Shifting Balance of World Forces*, p. 2.

²⁰Stalin, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

This aggressive clarion call is, nevertheless, balanced by Stalin's intimation of the defensive Soviet position: "We are surrounded by people, classes and governments, which openly express their intense hatred for us."²¹ It is interesting to note how Stalin attaches connotative value to words so that the reader could be impressed by allegations of badness and by declarations which claim the occurrence of a certain process as *ipso facto*. Such theoretical aggressiveness without the necessary foundations would seem to be effective only with an uneducated public or a society controlled by powerful instruments of curtailment and enforcement.

Although Stalin's technique of affirming that mere declaration makes truth has questionable validity, there is a significant section in his *Foundations of Leninism* which illuminates the present reality of Soviet tactics. Stalin's theory in this section has been zealously inculcated into the fibre of Soviet foreign policy. Stalin accused capitalist countries as having three main frictions:

- 1) capital versus labor; i.e., "increase [in] the indignation of the working class against the foundations of capitalism."²²
- 2) capital versus colonies; i.e., the capitalist extension of "spheres of influence" versus the colonial powers' desire to liberate themselves.
- 3) capital versus capital; i.e., "the uneven development of the different capitalist countries, which leads to a bitter struggle between the countries."²³

This analysis furthers the Communist tactic of aggravating these frictions to the extent that almost every Soviet move today is motivated by the exploitation of at least one of these frictions. The apparent rationale is that the best way to weaken the outside world is to play upon frictions, which is easier to do than to quiet frictions. Thus, the lack of theoretical implementations of practical specifics is compensated by the truism that a destructive policy is easier than a constructive one.

This utilization of the contradictions, conflicts and wars between non-proletarian classes or states for the advantage of weakening the adversary or strengthening the Communist re-

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 66.

²²Joseph Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*, p. 31.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

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serves is carefully considered from the view of relating all human actions to both ideological impact and earthly gains:

Tactics must not be guided by the transitory interests of the movement, they must not be guided by motives of immediate political effect, still less must they leave firm soil and build castles on the air. Tactics must be adapted to the aims and possibilities of strategy.²⁴

The utilization of resources for maximum strategic advance consists principally of:

- 1) the concentration of the main forces of the revolution at the decisive moment, at the most vulnerable point of the enemy.²⁵
- 2) the selection of the moment for striking the decisive blow. . . . as to coincide with the moment when the crisis has attained the highest pitch.²⁶
- 3) [the recognition that] a course having been mapped out, it must be pursued no matter what difficulties and complications may be encountered on the road.²⁷
- 4) maneuvering with the reserves calculated to effect a correct retreat when the enemy is strong, when retreat is inevitable.²⁸

Of similar thematic implications is the tactical advice:

to locate at any given moment that single link in the chain of events which if seized upon will enable us to control the whole chain and prepare the ground for the achievement of strategic success.²⁹

Thus, the exploitation of weakness and of timing is of paramount and steadfast importance. The Communist method of conflict thrives only on the opponent's disabilities and is lessened only by the existence of a strong enemy.

Although Mao Tse-tung deplores the ambiguity of the terms "war" and "peace" used in Stalin's writings to explain complex social realities,³⁰ Mao himself draws upon the internal

²⁴*Strategy and Tactics of the Proletarian Revolution*, p. 28.

²⁵Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism*, p. 92.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 94.

²⁸*Loc. cit.*

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁰Strausz-Hupé, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

contradictions in society to explain the necessity for conflict—almost paradoxically in a greater development of theoretical abstraction than Stalin's analysis.

Social changes are chiefly due to the internal contradictions in society, namely, the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production, the contradiction between the classes, and the contradiction between the old and the new.³¹

Mao, like Stalin, sees the inevitable juxtaposition of contradictions resulting in an apparently positive re-alignment, although there is no questioning of the means involved or the ends sought.

It is the development of the contradictions that impels society forward and starts the process of the superseding of the old society by the new one.³²

Moreover, like Stalin, Mao Tse-tung also stresses the importance of strength in international relationships, but adds the implication that the quantity of power itself is a source of conflict. "The enemy is strong and we are weak, so we are facing the danger of subjugation."³³ However, this analysis is fortified by a strong measure of theoretical relativity which allows for the dynamism of practical strategy:

The strength or superiority on either side is not absolute in nature. . . . Conditions are continually changing. In the course of the war, as long as we employ correct military and political strategy . . . a decisive change will take place in the relative strength as well as in the relative position of superiority and inferiority, a change that will bring about the enemy's defeat and our victory.³⁴

Mao conceives the strategy of protracted conflict in effecting this change in the relative strength of the revolutionary and the *status quo* as multi-dimensional. Not only is war regarded as "one of the highest forms of struggle for the settlement of contradictions,"³⁵ and as a necessity when politics cannot proceed by the usual means,³⁶ but political, economic, and psycho-

³¹Mao Tse-tung, *On Contradiction*, p. 13.

³²*Loc. cit.*

³³Mao Tse-tung, *Selected Works*, II, 181.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 182.

³⁵H. Arthur Steiner, ed., *Maoism: a Sourcebook*, p. 13.

³⁶Mao, *Selected Works*, p. 202.

logical forces³⁷ are nourished in the arsenal of conflict. However, in Mao's theorization, there looms the fundamental contradiction of how war can solve contradiction, when war actually thrives on contradiction and especially when war is viewed as protracted. The logical impasse is that, for the Communists, conflict is the solution and victory is the only settlement. Thus, Mao's theoretical frame of reference is on a wholly different level than the traditional Western approach. For Mao, a just war is synonymous with progress, although he sets no criteria for the determination of "justness" or "progress." "We Communists are opposed to all unjust wars that impede progress, but we are not opposed to progressive, just wars."³⁸ The length of the war entirely depends on the amount of change in the "relative strength"³⁹ of the Communists and their opponents. Thus, the term "war" acquired the qualitative haziness which Mao himself criticizes, but one could easily assume that conflict in whatever form continues until victory. Even then, the dilemma might arise as to how to deal theoretically and practically with the alleged internal dynamics of society. Mao only poses this problem but does not attempt a solution: "The struggle within the contradiction is ceaseless."⁴⁰

Antagonism and contradiction are utterly different. Under socialism, antagonism disappears, but contradiction exists.⁴¹

Utilizing various fronts, Mao views the winning of the war as the paramount objective—regardless of methods or consequences. Military success is prepared by theoretical assumptions whereby

each of the two aspects of every contradiction finds the presupposition of its existence in its opposite aspect. . . . Each of the two contradictory aspects, according to given conditions, tends to transform itself into its opposite aspect.⁴²

In other words, these statements could be interpreted to mean that Communism is not only fortified by opposition but also, even though it might have only secondary power and influence

³⁷Strausz-Hupé, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³⁸Mao, *Selected Works*, p. 199.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁴⁰Mao, *On Contradiction*, p. 53.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 42.

in the world at a given moment, it will inevitably succeed. Moreover, military victory is readied by strategic crystallization:

Enemy advances, we retreat;
 enemy halts, we harass;
 enemy tires, we attack;
 enemy retreats, we pursue.⁴³

Finally, for Mao, the winning of the war is ascertained by the highly organized implementations by the "strong mass base"⁴⁴ of the peasants, a strong party, a strong Red Army, and by strategically located territorial bases.⁴⁵ Although Mao is concerned with organization mainly if not only in terms of its membership—the peasants,⁴⁶ he has explosively blended the ingredients of theory and strategy to maximize the fervor for revolutionary ferment.

Both Mao and Stalin ruthlessly gear their theoretical discourse to the utilization of conflict for eventual Communist victory. "Conflict to the bitter end is the stuff from which Communism draws its very sustenance."⁴⁷ Although there is a vagueness in both expositions on the deep-rooted, definitive causes of conflict, their zealous consciousness of the historical process and timing is inexorably illuminated. In their unquestioning justification of the *raison d'être* of conflict, they assume that conflict serves their advantage. The very explicitness of their stages of political and military advance is, nevertheless, counterbalanced by a certain indefiniteness of the present, their blindness to the possible "boomerang" repercussions of their own distrust and their imperviousness to potential tactical immobility or to political setbacks. Any theoretical shortcomings have however been compensated by a fearful and dynamic aggressiveness, by a people theoretically wooed mainly as a result of illiteracy or a party-disciplined education, and by awesomely powerful political mechanisms for doctrinal adherence.

⁴³Mao, *Selected Works*, p. 164.

⁴⁴Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao*, p. 189.

⁴⁵Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

⁴⁶"Chinese Communism in its Maoist development demonstrates in fact that a communist party organized along Leninist lines and imbued with a sincere faith in certain basic Marxist-Leninist tenets can exist quite apart from any organic connection with the proletariat." *Ibid.*, p. 191. Indeed, a basic concern of the Chinese Communist party is to minimize if not conceal this severance of the Chinese party from its proletarian base. *Ibid.*, p. 192. This development indicates the conflict within Communism in contrast to the international conflict it tries to promote.

⁴⁷Strausz-Hupé, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

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Communism's theoretical pretensions of a mastery of and stimulation by conflict are largely supported by a devastating technique of co-ordinating all phases of political warfare and graduated violence, and all possible relationships between states and groups—political, economic and cultural.⁴⁸

Any effective strategy for waging the ubiquitous protracted conflict must be, by necessity, a revolutionary strategy; to wit, a strategy that puts the revolutionary forces-on-the-loose in politics, economics, culture, science and technology to its own use.⁴⁹

The co-ordinated and comprehensive qualities of this Communist strategy are abetted by an enlarged vision of conflict whereby military action is only one of the many forms of warfare. This view has enormous impact for the Western strategist who traditionally views quick, decisive military victory as conclusive and who considers political objectives to be the responsibility of politicians or diplomats. In contrast, the Communists view policy and war as being the two sides of the coin of strategy.⁵⁰

The strategy of conflict expounded by Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung presents a challenge of survival to democratic, peace-loving nations. The dire crucialness of this contest is real and immediate, not imaginary or merely future-oriented. The conflict is not the hypothesis of a theoretical ivory tower. The approach to counteraction is complex in its strategic, policy and structural details and implementations, but the crux of our positive response will be the result of a deep awareness of the strategy of conflict for all it intends, of a sustained clarity of decision-making despite the pressures to deceive, of continued improvement and emphasis of the best features of our system and beliefs as well as correction of our weaknesses, and a greater leadership and insight in the means of strengthening our influence abroad. The formulations of Stalin and Mao Tse-tung are presented in the forms of theory and strategy whose effectiveness is determined in the testing grounds of reality. In similar fashion, democratic theory is determined by the reality of details, specifics and particulars. Not only will the realities

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

determine the winner, but the strength and identity of both conflict and peace are at stake.

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Note: See map on page 158 of this issue.

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