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Sino-US Relations: Better Vibrations from Peking

Peking's view of the US has become more relaxed since the beginning of the year. The Chinese appear heartened by what they believe is a new sense of firmness in US policy toward the Soviets. Peking also seems to have a clearer understanding of some of the domestic political factors that influence the Carter administration's policy toward "normalization."

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The shift in Peking's assessment of Washington's approach to relations with Moscow has been reflected both in [redacted] comments by Chinese leaders and in Chinese propaganda.

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- During recent discussions with French Premier Raymond Barre, Vice Premier Teng Hsiao-ping commented favorably on President Carter's visit to Poland and on the current US role in the Middle East, describing the former as "an excellent step" toward promoting greater East European independence from Moscow and the latter as "an example" of how the United States could cooperate with the "Second and Third Worlds" in thwarting the Soviets.
- Foreign Minister Huang Hua expressed satisfaction with US policy in the Middle East in his discussions with Canadian External Affairs Minister Donald Jamieson.
- The Chinese media highlighted in a manner that implied approval President Carter's statements of US commitment to a strong defense policy in his State of the Union and budget messages. Recent Presidential statements of concern over Soviet activities in Africa and of opposition to the establishment of Soviet military bases in the Western Hemisphere were given similar treatment.

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-- Chinese propagandists have also taken approving note of statements by Defense Secretary Brown and other US military leaders articulating a strong US global defense posture and of reports on US development of the neutron bomb, cruise missiles, and other weapons systems.

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[redacted] commentary of this sort has been balanced by criticism of Washington over such issues as US trade policy toward the USSR, and Peking remains acutely sensitive to any evidence of US "softness" in the SALT negotiations. Such criticism has, however, lost much of the bite and sharp personal slant that was apparent last fall when the Chinese were clearly apprehensive that the Carter administration was ready to cede advantages to the Soviets in the interest of an early agreement on disarmament issues.

Chinese assessments of US resolve to oppose Soviet "expansionism" operate on what Chinese leaders themselves describe as the "strategic" level of their thinking about Washington, as distinguished from the "tactical" level occupied by the Taiwan question and other bilateral issues. There have been a number of signs in recent months of a better Chinese appreciation of domestic US political realities as they relate to "tactical" matters, and this too appears to have contributed to the more relaxed outlook on Washington.

In early January, for example, a Chinese diplomat abroad said that on the basis of the report Huang Chen-- the former head of the Chinese Liaison Office in Washington--made after his return to China in mid-November, Peking believed the United States would "have difficulty in accepting" Chinese conditions for normalization.

[redacted] comments made by other officials of the Liaison Office prior to Huang's departure may reflect the line he took. One of these officials said that the Carter administration "has too many major problems on its hands already and cannot afford to take on the controversial issue of normalization." This official further implied that considerations relating to the 1978

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congressional elections and the 1980 presidential election might prevent Washington from taking up normalization for "the foreseeable future."

Such analysis can be read into the characterization of the Taiwan issue as a "political" and not a "diplomatic" problem for the United States, a line Chinese leaders took in expressing renewed "patience" on the Taiwan issue to recent US Congressional delegations. It seems clearly to underlie recent statements by Chinese officials abroad that "normalization" has slipped as a subject on President Carter's policy agenda. In early February, a senior Chinese official abroad listed what he viewed as the President's policy priorities in the following order: the Panama Canal treaties, SALT, "energy and domestic programs," and US relations with its allies.

Whatever the specific causes, there is little doubt that China's leaders want to demonstrate their positive approach to bilateral relations with the United States. Aside from facilitating more visits by prominent US political figures, Peking is also moving ahead with plans for increased US tourism to China and continues to show keen interest in US technology. On the symbolic level, the Peking media gave unusual treatment to the sixth anniversary of Edgar Snow's death on 15 February--the fifth anniversary passed unnoticed last year--praising Snow for his belief that "the springtime of friendly contact between the peoples of China and America would certainly arrive." (SECRET [REDACTED])

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