

Nation-Building and Political Struggle (1): Kuomintang's China

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First, this paper analyzes the interactions between the KMT (Kuomintang) and the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) by focusing on the political strategies of these two actors between the First United Front and the start of the Sino-Japanese war. Second, this paper seeks to define the political conditions necessary for precipitating a communist revolution in a certain type of countries.

I. Introduction

A question in the political development of the Third World is how a new, non-communist government is able to overcome traditional powers, foreign interference, and a revolutionary communist movement simultaneously. The communist revolutions in China, South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, share a certain set of conditions: weak control by the state, disunity among government leaders, tenuous financial support, intense urban nationalism, social grievances, civil wars, foreign intervention, the decay of the government, and an abrupt cut in foreign assistance.

One has to ask why some nations that achieved independence after World War II were eventually taken over by a communist party. Sometimes a non-communist government becomes increasingly vulnerable to communist movements. There may be a causal link between the possibility of a communist revolution and nation-building.

Nation-building is a process in which (i) nationalism grows, and (ii) a government expands its control over people and regions, defeating traditional powers. In this process, individuals who used to obey different powers are integrated into a single political unit. Many Third World governments face the following complex set of conditions.

First, most of them have feudal or semi-feudal legacies. By "feudal"

or "semi-feudal" I mean a high degree of decentralization. Third World countries must achieve both the bourgeois revolution and the centralization of political and economic power at the same time. They have to replace traditional social authorities, such as clans, cliques, or warlords, by a central government. And at the same time they have to replace local identity by national identity. The government must reorganize a society so that no regional actors are outside the control of its decision.

Second, non-communist Third World governments have to fight in two different dimensions. One is defined by the ideals of liberal democracy, such as political participation, rule of law, and freedom of expression. The other is the policies of communism, such as united front, propaganda, indoctrination, and democratic centralism.

If a Third World country is lenient to a communist party in order to achieve democratic ideals, then the communist party may organize all social forces to overthrow that government. If it suppresses a communist party and its sympathizers, then students and intellectuals begin to doubt the legitimacy of the government, because in their minds legitimacy is the question of what a government should be. People do not necessarily calculate in advance that the government can afford. Third World governments must strike a balance between tolerance and oppression.

The third is the expansion of the government's obligation to citizens. What used to belong to a village or a traditional power, such as social insurance against poor harvest, or protection from local bandits, become the responsibility of the government. The failure to fulfill such obligations is likely to discredit the legitimacy of the government. This weakened legitimacy of the existing government in turn produces opportunities that communist movements may take advantage of. Because when people destroy the old, they usually assume that what will follow will be better. Third World governments must therefore try to narrow the gap between what people expect and what the government can do.

The fourth is the influence of industrially advanced foreign countries. Even when the government is able to cope with the above problems, foreign countries with advanced economic and military capacities may intervene to disrupt, distort, or precipitate the nation-building process

for their own interests. Third World governments must utilize advanced foreign countries for their own domestic political benefit without being used by the foreign countries.

The fifth is coalition-building. Since no political actor in a Third World country is predominantly strong, each actor must form an alliance with some other actors to fight against the rest. The key question is whom to ally with first, whom to ally with second, whom to betray first, and whom to betray second. Today's friends may be tomorrow's enemies. Today's enemies may be tomorrow's friends.

No Western country ever faced the above combination of nation-building, communist challenge, having to live up to the ideals of liberal democracy, the obligation of the state, foreign influence, and coalition building at the same time. Bismarck could suppress dissidents without being accused of being non-democratic. He could defeat his political enemies without worrying about how much foreign countries assisted him or his enemies. He could tackle social problems one by one, without worrying about a communist party.

In the Third World, governments face too many demands and too many enemies. How is it possible for a new non-communist government to manage the above set of problems, without a communist revolution? This is the question I am about to explore, drawing on the experiences of the KMT's China.

II. Concept of Revolution

1.

Revolution is a notion that is yet to have a rigorous definition. According to Huntington, "a revolution is a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of a society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership, and government activities and policies."¹ According to Skocpol, "social revolution is a rapid, basic transformation of a society's state and class structures, accompanied by class-based revolts from below."²

1. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* p. 264.

2. Theda Skocpol, *State and Social Revolution* Chapter I.

I find both definitions defective because of the vagueness of the terms "fundamental" or "basic". These are both subjective terms. It is often debatable what has actually changed after a revolution. Besides, when there seems to be a "fundamental" change, the change may not be durable. A revolution may be upset soon by a counterrevolution. Even when the same group rules after the takeover of state power, the old system may quietly replace the new under a different name. A revolution must be defined not in terms of actual change in a social system but in terms of the termination of power struggle, and the initial intention of its winner.

In this paper, I define revolution as a violent takeover of the state by a group which believes in the reorganization of society. What distinguishes a revolution from other political process is that the power is violently taken away from an existing government by another group which demands—but not necessarily successfully—the reorganization of society. This definition is strict enough to distinguish revolutions from coups.

Here, the new group in power is not necessarily based on a class. It may well be a group of elites who simply want to utilize social classes for their own advantage. Moreover, according to my definition, a revolution does not necessarily mean that there was an actual social change after the takeover of power. It simply means that the power was violently replaced by a group calling for a transformation. Whether the proclamation is put into practice does not matter.

A communist revolution is a revolution by a communist party. Here a communist party is simply the name of a group with a set of attributes such as Marxist-Leninist belief. What "true" communism is not an issue here.

An important question is the relation between power struggle and social policies. My definition of a communist revolution is neutral to whether (i) a communist party takes power in order to put into existence the ideal society, or (ii) a communist party uses the image of the ideal society for the sake of getting and maintaining political power. According to the first view, a communist party is a group of altruists who devote their lives to the creation of an ideal society. According to the second view, a communist party is a group of hypocrites who hide

their thirst for power with beautiful slogans.

III. Political Actors

It is possible to classify political actors in a non-communist Third World country in the following way.

- A: government [the KMT]
- B: communist party [the CCP]
- C: non-communist opposition groups [e.g. the National Salvation Association]
- D: traditional powers [warlords, landlords, bandits]
- E: foreign countries [the US, the USSR, the UK, Germany, France, Japan]
- F: the "people". [countryside (gentry, peasants), urban (proletariat, students, intellectuals)] or [active, apathetic]

Since the start of the Northern Expedition, the KMT tried to expand its territorial control over entire China. The CCP cooperated with the KMT in the form of the First United Front for a while. But neither the KMT nor the CCP thought that their cooperation was lasting. The clearest evidence is Chiang Kai-shek's suppression of communists in Shanghai on April 12, 1927.

Non-communist opposition groups were rather weak during the Northern Expedition. But after the Mukden incident of September 1931, students and intellectuals in urban areas began to create anti-Japanese movements in the form of the National Salvation Associations. The movements were not necessarily sympathetic to communism, but opposes Chiang's lenient attitude toward the Kwantung Army.

Moreover, there were warlords with semi-feudal characteristics. What they are most interested in is their personal wealth which they accumulate through the exploitation of peasants or through opportunistic wars. In close connection with these warlords were foreign powers, such as the UK, the US, Japan, France, Germany, and the USSR. In addition to the above, there was "the people" classified in several ways. In terms of political consciousness, some are politically active, but most were apathetic.

IV. Dimensions

1. Organizational Strength

“Organizational strength” may be a useful concept. This is essentially a degree to which the highest decision-maker of a political organization can make his subordinates do something which otherwise they would not. Every political actor described above is actually a group of people. What matters is a degree to which sub-leaders of a political organization follow the final decision of the top leader. The top leader may not be able to implement his decision. One may be able to divide political actors into “organizationally strong” actors, such as the CCP, and “organizationally weak” actors, such as the KMT.

In most non-communist Third World countries, the government is usually organizationally weak and a communist party is organizationally strong. The government often faced coup-attempts. Corruption was rampant. In the case of China before 1949, the adjectives most often used to describe the KMT were “factional” and “corrupt”. Chiang Kai-shek, who himself established his position in the KMT through a coup, faced a number of rebellions.

In contrast, a communist party usually has the iron rule of democratic centralism. Namely, problems are rediscussed until a decision is reached, but once the final decision is reached it must be obeyed at any cost. Of course there are exceptions, such as Mao’s disobedience to Li Li-san’s strategy. But in comparison with a government, a communist party is much more cohesive and its cohesion is durable.

2. Financial Base

The other organizational character is the diversification of financial bases. Every actor must have some financial base. The more you come to be dependent on the base that supports financially your activities, the more you become vulnerable to its loss. The diversification of financial bases is a degree to which a political actor can spread its financial bases so that the loss of a single financial base does not critically hurt the actor.

A communist party has at least one rather relatively reliable financial

base: the USSR. Furthermore, a communist party in China or South-east Asia bases its financial source on many villages in a large territory. In contrast, a non-communist government does not necessarily have reliable foreign resources. Europe and the US do help non-communist governments, but they are not reliable because once they perceive that their assistance is not producing favorable results, they abruptly withdraw their assistance. The government has cities as financial bases. But a single battle can destroy a city.

Before 1949, the CCP's financial resources were small but diversified. In contrast, the KMT's financial resources were large but concentrated. The KMT tended to rely on a limited number of friends such as the compradores in Shanghai and US aid. Without this diversification, a political actor tends to be constrained by its financial supporters. For example, if China fights a war, Chinese coastal cities are very vulnerable. The KMT cannot launch a war against Japan, so long as the KMT depends on the support of the Shanghai business community.

3. Questions for Political Actors

Political actors must always consider two points. First, because no political actor is overwhelmingly stronger than all the rest combined, actors must ask themselves. Who fights whom? Whom should I form an alliance with first. How long will the alliance last?

Second, because the process of nation-building involves both the elimination and the assimilation of various actors, or the politicization of the previously apathetic, a political actor must be aware that its own organizational structure may change in the process of power struggle. For example, a large membership is likely to weaken the cohesion of a group. If an organization expands, its leader must begin to think of the timing of indoctrination and purge. In addition, during a civil war or an international war, a political actor's financial base could change rather quickly. It was fatal, for example, that the KMT relied on Shanghai business, as Shanghai was attacked by Japan after the Mukden Incident and the China Incident.

V. Problem

1.

It is important to study the causal relations between the strategies of political actors in a process of nation-building and the probability of a communist revolution. On a theoretical level, what are the relations between a strategy and a revolution ?

There are at least two distinct schools in revolution theories: structural-determinist school and actor-oriented school. Scholars in the former tend to see revolution as a result of socio-economic conditions. For example, Barrington Moore³ explains a communist revolution as a result of the absence of the commercialization of agriculture. In contrast, actor-oriented school stresses that leadership makes a big difference.

Structural-determinism is misleading. Simply both strategies and conditions matter, and the key question is the relations between the two. There are three mutually compatible relations.

First, conditions constrain choices. For example, the CCP could not expect the poor and illiterate peasants to launch voluntarily a coordinated civil war against the KMT. Second, political actors change conditions. Some conditions are easy to change; others are not. For example, it was difficult for any political actor to conduct an effective land reform in China. But it was easy for some actors to provoke the Kwantung Army into a full-scale Sino-Japanese war. Third, objective conditions affect the perception of political actors. As a result, a political actor perceives that one strategy is possible when it in fact is not. Or a political actor cannot think of an option when it is actually open to the political actor. For example, because of the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the atmosphere of the Comintern during the 1920s, Li Li-san and his followers may have misperceived that an urban uprising would be feasible in China.

This problem of perception is theoretically very complex because an objective condition may be sometimes related to the way the leaders of a political organization are selected. Namely, under a certain objective

3. Barrington Moore, *Social Origin of Dictatorship and Democracy*

condition, only a type of people with a specific cognitive characteristics are chosen as leaders.

Moreover, a political actor sometimes realizes the most feasible option simply through trying many options. An example may be China. Barrington Moore connects communism with agrarian grievances. But actually the CCP did not choose at first the strategy of peasant-mobilization. It was only after surviving the failures of Li Li-san line that the CCP began to focus primarily on agrarian power bases. For influencing peasants, the Red Army was essential. But the Red Army was created only after the April 12 coup of 1927.

A political organization is more likely to succeed when it can choose innovative strategies. But what attributes of a political organization make innovation possible remains a question. On some occasions, simply the failure of past strategies leads to the innovation of strategy. However, democratic centralism will be more favorable to innovation than an organization led by an autocrat.

2.

It will be ideal if one can theorize the point of no return, i.e., an event that indicates that a revolution will occur in the near future. One may be able to say, relying on the experiences of the emergence of the CCP's China, Communist Vietnam, and Khmer Rouge's Cambodia, that in a nation-building non-communist Third World, a communist revolution is very likely to occur after a civil war in which foreign countries are militarily involved. There were communist movements and even civil wars in other Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia. But it seems that the success of a communist revolution is related to foreign intervention. It is when the process of contention between a non-communist government and a communist party is interrupted by intervention that an Asian Third World country has communist revolutions.

When a foreign country fights in a Third World country, it is relatively easy for a communist party to camouflage its ideology by nationalistic appeal to the masses. Communists succeed in power struggle by not appearing to be true communists. It is also relatively easy for a communist party to use the propaganda of "guilt by associa-

tion". By relating a non-communist government with the negative image of an intervening foreign country, a communist party gains much broader support. In this sense, I see as correct Chalmers Johnson's thesis that a communist revolution in China is a result of peasant nationalism aroused by Japan.⁴

If the above hypothesis is correct, a non-communist government competing with a communist party has two strategies available: (i) If a foreign military operation inside your country is likely, do not compete with communists. (ii) If you are already at war with a communist party, do your best to avoid fighting with a foreign country. Because, in both (i) and (ii), if you fight with a communist party and a foreign invader at the same time, the communist party is likely to be the ultimate victor. The strategy of a communist party is the opposite.

Chiang Kai-shek's strategy before the Sian incident is in accordance with the above. He avoided fighting with Japan, because he was waging a war against the CCP. As his order of non-resistance after the Mukden incident of 1931 and the appeal to the League of Nations shows, Chiang may have believed that he could avoid fighting with Japan. For Chiang, to fight against the CCP without confronting Japan was a much more rational strategy than to terminate fighting with the CCP and fight against Japan. This is not only due to the gap of military power between Japan and China but because Chiang can control over the KMT-CCP struggle. If the KMT fights Japan, supposing that the CCP will cooperate with the KMT, then the CCP is able to totally change the situation to its favor by waging a war against the KMT.

Then, if the KMT continues to avoid fighting with Japan, what will be the strategy of the CCP? It is to create a situation in which the KMT and the Chinese people are compelled to fight with Japan. That the CCP realized this option and successfully put into practice this option demonstrates the genius of the CCP leadership.

VI. China

The CCP was created under the guidance of the USSR. The KMT also relied on assistance from the USSR. In return for Soviet aid, the

4. Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Revolution in China*

KMT agreed that the members of the CCP join the KMT. But as it was evident to the KMT that the USSR's aid to the KMT was simply to "squeeze" the party eventually, Chiang began to suppress Soviet advisers and communists. After the coup of April 12, 1927, Chiang comes to have virtual control over KMT leadership.

The KMT's Northern Expedition was quick. It was too quick, because it was soon followed by the KMT's internal conflict. After defeating the rebels, Chiang begins annihilation campaigns. The CCP's Li LI-san line of urban uprising did not bring much result to the CCP. As a result of the fifth annihilation campaign, the KMT considerably weakened the CCP, but could not defeat it. During the Long March that followed, Mao's line of peasant mobilization was chosen as a new CCP line.

Meanwhile, the Kwantung Army invaded China in 1931 to create a puppet state in Manchuria and was trying to establish other similar puppet governments in North China. Chiang carefully avoided direct confrontation with Japan after the Mukden incident, by giving secret order of nonresistance to Chang Hsueh-liang in Manchuria. But this strategically wise policy alienated nationalistic urban dwellers.

During the sixth annihilation campaign, the Sian incident occurred. After this incident, the civil war stopped. Then came the China incident of July 7, 1937, which led to a full-scale war between China

5. Mao's secret directives to the Eighth Route Army during this period are quoted in Brian Crozier, *The Man Who Lost China* (p. 237)

"The Sino-Japanese War affords our party an excellent opportunity for expansion. Our fixed policy should be 70 percent expansion, 20 percent dealing with the Kuomintang, and 10 percent resisting Japan. There are three stages in carrying out this fixed policy.

The first is a compromising stage, in which self-sacrifice should be made to show our outward obedience to the Central Government and adherence to the Three People's principles; but in reality this will serve as camouflage for the existence and development of our party.

The second is a contending stage, in which two or three years should be spent in laying the foundations of our party's political and military powers, and developing these until we can match and break the Kuomintang, and eliminate the influence of the latter North of Yellow River.

The third is an offensive stage, in which our forces should penetrate deeply into Central China, sever the communications of the Central Government troops in various sectors, isolate and disperse them until we are ready for the counter-offensive, and wrest the leadership from the hands of Kuomintang."

and Japan. The KMT and the CCP formed the Second United front. The KMT's military power was quickly diminished by Japan. Trading space for time, the KMT sought cease-fire, without success. Meanwhile, the CCP launched a war of attrition against Japan. Japan was involved in a hopeless war. The brutality of the Japanese gave birth to Chinese peasant nationalism. Organizing these peasants, practicing land reform but compromising with wealthy farmers, the CCP expanded its influence.⁵

Losing its most important financial base in Shanghai as a result of bombing, the KMT became increasingly dependent on US aid. After Pearl Harbor, the US was able to aid the KMT publicly. The CCP meanwhile was creating an image of "moderate agrarian reformers" in the US.

Contemporary theoretical literature on revolution is not very helpful in explaining the revolutions of China or Southeast Asia. In Europe, there is only a short intermission between the destruction of the old regime and the creation of a new regime. However, in Chinese and Southeast Asian cases, it is more reasonable to separate the causes of destruction of old regimes and the causes of the creation of new regimes. When the old regime collapses, it is not necessarily clear what kind of regime will eventually emerge. But theoretical literature on revolutions, especially structural determinism and economic determinism, tends to explain the creation of the new in terms of the causes of the collapse of the old regimes, such as peasant grievances. Between the old and the new there is uncertainty.