

# China's Involvement in the Hungarian Revolution, October-November 1956

*Dandan Zhu*<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The 1956 crises in the Soviet Bloc states, and the Hungarian October events in particular, had a profound impact on China's international and domestic policies. The Chinese Communist Party leadership – party chairman Mao Zedong in particular – had by the end of mid-1950s begun to conceive of “a great Chinese revolution,” which would largely take the form of large-scale industrial modernization. At the same time, China's awareness that it could develop into a leading player in the international socialist camp led Mao and his colleagues to actively intervene on the East European scene, posing an implicit challenge to the Soviet dominance in the bloc. The apparent desire of the Hungarian and Polish people to break free from Stalinist socialism, and the real risk, as Mao saw it, of the bloc foundering, convinced the Chinese Party that only reforming institutional socialism and revising the Stalinist pattern of inter-state relations could keep the camp intact.

**Keywords:** Cold War, China, 1956 Hungarian Revolution, Hungary, Poland, Mao

In Mao Zedong's words, 1956 was a year of “big events”, both at home and abroad (Liu Congwen, 1996: 809). The “secret speech” delivered by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) Twentieth Congress had, according to Mao, “opened the lid” on the repressiveness of the immediately post-War Soviet regimes, thereby “making a mess” in ideologically inspiring a wave of de-Stalinization marked by massive demonstrations in Poland and Hungary. These mass movements demanded from their governments the improvement of their countries' living standards and the safeguarding of national independence and political rights in the teeth

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<sup>1</sup> Dandan ZHU, PhD (LSE) is Associate Professor at the Department of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs Management at China Foreign Affairs University. Address: China Foreign Affairs University, 24 Zhanlanlu, Beijing, 100037, China. E-mail:[2009015@cfau.edu.cn](mailto:2009015@cfau.edu.cn)

of the Soviet Union (Chen Jian, 2001: 64; Shen Zhihua, 2002: 267; Wu Lengxi, 1999: 6). The Hungarian events, in particular, were more complicated than either a populist anti-socialist protest or a form of proto-nationalist agitation, and the Chinese leaders exerted great effort in trying to apply the lessons of Hungary to their own situation (Bo Yibo, 1997: 597-599).

This paper takes advantage of the wealth of newly available archival material in studying the relations between China and the October Soviet bloc crises of 1956 (Shen Zhihua, 2002; Shen Zhihua & Li Danhui, 2004). Its particular focus lies with how the crisis prompted Mao to emphasize the necessity to keep hierarchical order within the Communist camp against the background of the Cold War. This attention, while centrally devoted to China, nevertheless captures an international dimension of the Hungarian crisis to which insufficient attention has as yet been paid (Chen Jian, 2001: 145-162; Hu Bo, 1999: 118-127; 2004: 231-244; Kuo, 2001: 95-111; Lüthi, 2008: 57-74; Radványi, 1970, 121-129; Shen Zhihua, 2005: 119-143; 2007a: 75-85; 2007b: 75-86; 2008: 369-608; Vámos, 2006: 38).

While duly examining China's involvement in the Soviet leadership's final decision to suppress the Hungarian Revolt, my analysis in this study is more concerned to offer a critical evaluation of Maoist China's inter-bloc policies in the period from the fall of 1956 to the end of 1957. My argument is that Beijing's advocacy of equality and internal autonomy against the Soviet "big power chauvinism" in the Communist camp, and call for a movement away from a pattern of Stalinist dependency in inter-state relations, represent strategic expedients on the part of Chairman Mao to weaken the USSR's prestige and ultimately accede to leadership of world communism himself. Chinese efforts to help the Soviets restore bloc unity after the Hungarian events clearly demonstrate Mao's perception that communist camp integrity had to be guaranteed by relations of dominance, with the strongest state framing definitions of communism and providing a general pattern of development. It is conceivable that Mao saw China in the place of this preeminent country. There is no evidence, meanwhile, that the Chinese Chairman ever seriously considered that equal interstate relationships were applicable to the Communist world. On the contrary, as Mao understood it, the splintering effect the Polish and Hungarian crises had on bloc unity reaffirmed the essential truth that some kind of new interstate order was a necessity inside the camp.

### **Beijing's restricted efforts to rescue bloc unity**

The immediate task in the aftermath of the Polish crisis for the Soviets was to win the support of the other socialist parties in order to prevent the national diversity of the camp from developing into international splits. Communist China's detached relationship with the Eastern bloc and the recent experience of coordination with Beijing in dealing with intra-bloc affairs for unity (Kim's North Korea for example) probably convinced Khrushchev that the Chinese could be more useful in mediating the Soviet-Polish relations than those East European satellites (Person, 18 May, 2007).<sup>2</sup> But the problem is: what if Chairman Mao desired more than the Kremlin leader wanted him to do in the politics of the Soviet Eastern bloc.

The initial purpose of Khrushchev's inviting the Chinese delegation to Moscow was definitively to win Beijing's backing for the Kremlin's policy in the Eastern bloc and to ask the Chinese to induce the Poles to bow to Soviet domination. Although the Soviets had made advance preparations in military terms to respond to a crisis in Hungary, they do not seem to have anticipated the outbreak of the Hungarian riots immediately following the Polish events. The violence in Hungary, then, caught both Russians and Chinese on the hop. Beijing, further, had very limited information on Hungary, meaning that it was questionable whether the basic principles they had come with in their diplomatic mission to Moscow could apply or answer to the new situation.<sup>3</sup>

In brief, the outbreak of the Hungarian violence just after the Polish October led the Chinese leaders to take more seriously the possible effect of Polish diversity in sapping the unity of the socialist bloc. Before the Chinese side had obtained reports on the Hungarian domestic developments from its own channels on 26 October, Mao and his colleagues were not able to formulate judgment, let alone clear policy on Hungary. They chose not to make their specific views on Hungary clear and used the sequent crises in Soviet Eastern bloc to challenge the monolithic Stalinist formula of intra-bloc relations

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<sup>2</sup> "Record of Chairman Mao's Conversation with Mikoyan, September 1956", pp.138-143, China Central Archives (CCA), personal collection.

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese leadership mainly relied on routine reports from the Chinese embassy in Budapest to get first-hand information from the country. The situation only improved by November 1956, when two New China news agency journalists were sent to Budapest after the second Soviet intervention in Hungary. TASS reported on the Budapest riots on 24 October, together with the Hungarian government's request of Soviet military assistance to restore order. This report was reprinted in the 26 October version of *Neican*, suggesting that the earliest news reaching the Chinese leadership of the riots in Budapest could only have come from Liu Shaoqi in Moscow. See *Neibu cankao* (*Neican*), (26 October, 1956):1242-1243. *Neican*, whose publication was started in 1949 and ended in 1964, was an inner-circle journal on both domestic and foreign events edited by the Xinhua News Agency for reference purpose, distributed among the high-ranking CCP cadres only.

for a more flexible approach through the Chinese delegation in Moscow. But the telegrams from both Budapest and Prague revealed to the Chinese Chairman and other Politburo members that the Hungarian leadership was not clearly in control of the domestic situation, which, as the reports had described, had taken on a “counter-revolutionary” character.<sup>4</sup>

The Chinese support for limited local diversity either in Poland or Hungary was conditional: the local Communist regimes should be strong enough to control the domestic situation, preventing disturbances at home from translating into a challenge to internal Communist rule or the wider integrity of the Socialist bloc. Uncertain of the events in Hungary and the socialist character of Nagy’s regime, Mao and his men decided to place the emphasis on wresting concessions from the Poles, such as on Rokossovsky, to ease their strained relations with the Kremlin. Nevertheless, the Chinese attitude to the October crises in the bloc had already changed before the Polish Party’s reply reached Beijing. This change was prompted by the rapidly evolving situation on the ground, so far as the CCP leadership could understand it, between 28 and 31 October in Budapest.

### **The turning point: 29 October**

The reformulation of Nagy’s government and the seemingly stabilized domestic situation in Hungary from 27 to 29 October, 1956, to a large extent prompted Chairman Mao in Beijing to shift the CCP’s position from striving to repair the Soviet-centric bloc unity via its own resources to pressing the Soviets to set up a new pattern of inter-Communist state relationship on the basis of *Pancha Shila* on 29 October, 1956. At first glance, it seems that Mao and his Communist regime represented all the other Communist countries, especially the small and weak ones like Poland and Hungary to challenge the old intra-bloc pattern established by Stalin, which dictated unquestioned Soviet dominance in the Communist camp. The Chairman’s behavior in suggesting applying the five basic principles of international affairs, i.e. national independence, sovereignty, equality, non-interference in internal affairs, and self-determination to Soviet-satellite relations could further convince the audience that Communist China intended to introduce a more principled and truly equal state-to-state relationship pattern to the Soviet bloc.

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<sup>4</sup> From 23 October to 4 November, communication between Beijing and Budapest via telegrams was delayed on average by one and a half or two days, even though normally there was only a seven-hour time difference between Budapest and Beijing to be reckoned with in terms of the time gap between sending and receiving. For these telegrams, sent and received, see the China Foreign Ministry Archives (CFMA), 109-01041-01, pp.3-13.

With enough knowledge of Mao's Communist China's long-range perception of world politics and intra-bloc relations, however, all of the above interpretations were merely misreadings of Chinese intentions. As it would soon be proved by Beijing's reaction to the Nagy government's nationalist demand for independence in the following days, Mao's suggestion of applying the five principles to intra-bloc state relationships should only be seen as a political means to alter the old Stalinist formula, rather than an end in itself. In the Chinese Chairman's understanding of relations among Communist-ruled states, he had never really doubted the legitimacy of an ultimately power-centralized Communist order, with the strongest "fraternal socialist country" naturally playing the leading role, setting up the principles and guiding other members' behaviors. The root of Mao's abrupt shift in policy should be understood from the perspective that the Chairman by this point saw China's future potential as the most powerful Communist regime and recognized the improvement of the Hungarian domestic situation on 29 October as a rare good chance to manipulate the weakening Soviets to abdicate the leading position and give room to better men. With all due respect to Mao's sagacity and political skills, however, there is no evidence that he anticipated the nationalist emotion among the people and Nagy's eventual independent appeal to the Communist camp in the following days, which eventually would force him to re-adjust his own policies.

### **China and the second Soviet intervention in Hungary**

The situation in Hungary, however, was already spinning out of control as Khrushchev and his colleagues were discussing a declaration with the Chinese. Moscow received new telegrams from Mikoyan and Suslov from Budapest on 29 and 30 October, communicating their concern over the situation. The optimism of the diplomats vis-à-vis the Hungarian riots had evaporated by the time of their telegrams to Moscow on 30 October, at which point the situation was more clouded than ever and all prospects of a simple solution had closed down (Shen Zhihua, 2002: 308, 312). Not long after Khrushchev, Molotov, and Bulganin left the Chinese delegates, another CPSU CC (Communist Party of the Soviet Union Central Committee) Presidium convened on 30 October to discuss Hungary. The session kicked off with a reading of the Budapest wires of the 29th and the 30th, with Khrushchev following this up with an account of discussions with the Chinese. Khrushchev suggested that

“we should adopt a declaration today on the withdrawal of troops from the people's democracies (considering these matters further at a session of the Warsaw Pact),

taking account of the views of the countries in which our troops are based. The entire CCP CC Politburo supports this position.”

Even if the Presidium regarded Mao’s internationalist proposal as a “good suggestion”, they were more immediately preoccupied with Hungary and seemed to see Mao’s idea of a statement of principles as a means of settling a specific issue. The Soviet leadership thus approved and issued the document on the same day.<sup>5</sup>

At this stage, the Chinese delegation in Moscow obtained access to Mikoyan’s and Suslov’s cables from Budapest via the Soviets on 30 October (Shi Zhe, 1997: 16). The delegation was shocked by the envoys’ reports of a heated anti-communist atmosphere in Budapest, and by the suggestion that the Hungarian government, after the retreat of the Soviet forces, had succumbed to sclerosis. The Chinese thus spent the whole day of 30 October discussing Mikoyan and Suslov’s communications, being unable to reach a unanimous decision between two options: either rowing in behind the retreat or urging the return of Soviet forces to Budapest. Liu Shaoqi thus made an evening-time phone call to Chairman Mao and Mao told the delegation to put forward both alternatives to the Soviets for discussion. In general, although the Chinese leadership was leaning towards Soviet intervention at this point, Mao still thought it better to defer the final decision a little longer. But one thing was clear: whether in Budapest or not, there was a need for Soviet troops to stay in Hungary. Under Mao’s direction, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping immediately contacted Khrushchev to ask for a meeting conveying the revised Chinese position.

The evidence suggests that Khrushchev was discomfited by this apparent volte-face on the part of the Chinese, especially since he had just ordered the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary partly at the instigation of the Chinese. All the Presidium members had already agreed that a new round of Soviet military intervention would inevitably lead to a national occupation of Hungary, to the very consequence they were trying to avoid. China’s turn-about thus put Khrushchev in a quandary, leading to his bringing in Liu Shaoqi to the Presidium session to consult with the other Presidium members.

Liu repeated the CCP CC’s opinion to the Presidium that Soviet forces should stay in Budapest and Hungary (Jin Chongji & Zheng Huang, 1998: 806; Shi Zhe, 1997: 17;

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<sup>5</sup> For the records of the CPSU Presidium see: Mark Kramer (ed.): The “Malin Notes” on the Crises in Hungary and Poland, 1956. *Bulletin*, Cold War International History Project, Washington D.C., Issue 8-9. Winter 1996–1997, pp. 385–410, 392, 393.

Wu Lengxi, 1999: 53). Perversely, the new Chinese suggestion went down worse than their earlier, apparently more anti-Soviet line. The Presidium still looked to the declaration to effect some sort of outcome, especially if it meant an accommodation with the West over Hungary. According to Liu's records of the meeting on his return to Beijing, the members of the Soviet Presidium set their face firmly against the Chinese delegation's suggestion, being convinced of the necessity of retreat (Chen Jian, 2001: 157; Wu Lengxi, 1999: 53). As the Soviet leaders had already reached a consensus, Liu did not insist on the Chinese position (Shi Zhe, 2005: 233). It is plausible that, had Beijing received telegrams from Budapest outlining Nagy's suspicious policies more promptly, Mao would have been much more decisive in pushing the Soviets toward military involvement.

### **Conclusion**

Mao attached a great importance to the Polish and Hungarian events on account of their indicative or symptomatic significance for the future destinies of all socialist states as they sought to navigate a course to some degree independent of the U.S.S.R. Should the Eastern bloc gain more autonomy, the existing Stalinist inter-bloc relationships would come under pressure, a development towards which the Chinese Communists entertained rather complicated feelings. First and foremost, the Chinese Chairman evidently viewed the Soviet difficulty in dealing with the "foul-ups" in its Eastern bloc as a chance to redefine China's position in the camp, which Mao repeatedly complained of having been downgraded or diminished by the Kremlin. There is no doubt that the Chinese leaders judged the Soviet management of the Polish and Hungarian crises, including that of Khrushchev personally, as heavy-handed in managing socialist international relationships. In these respects, the CCP's leadership perceived themselves as far more capable and far-sighted than the CPSU's leaders, which further strengthened the Chinese Chairman's consciousness of Beijing's potential to inherit Moscow's central position inside the camp.

This is not to suggest, however, that Mao felt his country was ready to displace Moscow as the strategic centre of the world proletarian revolution by October 1956. While opposing the presumption of Soviet dominance, and of the dependence of all other socialist nations, in theory, and of Stalinist "big state chauvinism" in practice, Mao was necessarily constrained by the Soviet lead in technology and economics, deferring to the success of the Soviet model in "building socialism" in quick order. (That is why Mao had

been so anxious to plan for faster and better socialist development at home from late 1955 onwards). Furthermore, Soviet political and military leverage in the Eastern European bloc was something the Chinese Communists knew they could not ignore. Ultimately, the Chinese leaders perceived the Hungarian crisis through a prism of Cold War defensiveness. Hungary's ideological and political uncertainties warned Mao against the possible disintegrative impact that the demise of Stalinism as the principle of bloc relations would have on the general unity of the camp. The Chairman and his colleagues therefore oscillated in their political objectives from the very start of the Budapest upheavals between an adjustment of Stalinist general principles regulating "Soviet-centered" relations between fraternal parties on the one hand, and a restoration of Communist camp unity on the other, blown about as they were by their uncertainty over the nature of the Hungarian uprising.

Within this context, the Chinese leaders decided which factors in the Polish-Hungarian case were ideologically salient and which they could safely ignore. This made certain questions permissible in China, while consideration of others – concerning the more fundamental tendency of state socialism in small and weak bloc countries and the essential problem of inter-bloc relations based on hierarchical principles – remained outlawed. In the Chinese Chairman's eyes, the permanence of "Soviet autocratic rule" was improper, while at the same time it was only reasonable that the strongest socialist state should head up an armed socialist camp. Their interpretation of the Hungarian developments thus became a key criterion for the Chinese side to shift their policy preferences in the period from 26 October to 29 October. Mao's dramatic change of attitude on 29 October, when he suggested that the Soviets deal with satellite states on the basis of the five Bandung principles indeed amounted to a bold bid on Mao's part to sap Soviet political and military dominance in Eastern Europe. This line was only facilitated by his judgment that the Hungarian events would pose no fundamental threat to communist regime security and the overall unity of the Communist camp after a new leadership in Budapest had been installed. Chairman Mao's explicit support for the Polish and Hungarian aspirations for autonomy was no more than a pragmatic tactic pushing at the Soviet-centered bloc pattern, paving the way for the Chinese junior partner to displace its senior in the foreseeable future.

In the field of inter-bloc diplomacy, after the Chinese had been so helpful in rallying bloc unity and stressing Moscow's leading role inside the camp post-Budapest, the Soviet leaders found no difficulty in accepting China's highly theoretical prescriptions



for party and bloc unity once the fires had died down. The Soviet leadership itself also became aware of the danger of abandoning Stalin in symbolic terms, taking Mao up on his suggestion of maintaining a Stalinist ideological orthodoxy as the ‘glue’ of an international communist movement. This reaffirmation of Stalinism brought the partners together in a fraternal union in late 1956. But the Chinese Chairman’s desire to surpass the Soviets and enhance China’s status in the revolutionary camp did not diminish with Hungary, posing future problems for the Sino-Soviet relationship and the general structure of the Communist commonwealth once the two had later broken over a mutually acceptable formula for domestic construction and the conduct of international relations.

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