

China-Watcher Notes No. 4

Premier Zhou Enlai: Role and Relevance

China's Economic and Technology Achievements and Permanent CPC Rule

A China-Canada Story

Kishan S. Rana

Former Indian Ambassador/ High Commissioner to Algeria, Czechoslovakia, Kenya, Mauritius and Germany; Professor Emeritus, DiploFoundation, Malta and Geneva; Emeritus Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi

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In August, Amb. Ashok Kantha shared with the Institute of Chinese Studies' Group a fine review published in *Foreign Affairs*, of a new book titled, *Zhou Enlai: A Life.*, by Chen Jian, (Harvard, 2024).¹ That produced a rich discussion – of the kind that serves our discussion group well.

May I add some comments? Premier Zhou was concurrently in charge of the Foreign Ministry, from 1949 to 1958, when Marshal Chen Yi was appointed Foreign Minister. As many have noted, Zhou served Mao loyally, even during the harshest of times. That included major upheavals in the Communist Party of China (CPC), notably the ill-conceived Great Leap Forward (1958-60), and the famine that followed, as well as the tumultuous Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Zhou died in January 1976, nine months before Mao's demise.

Some characteristics of this 'great survivor' are striking, when other leading personalities were brought down. First, Zhou displayed complete subservience to Mao. Chen Jian describes a 1943 event (when the CPC was partly allied with the Kuomintang (KMT) against Japanese occupation, but these allies were also in mutual confrontation). Zhou underwent five days of 'self-criticism' in front of the CPC Politburo, ending with a humiliating acceptance that he had gone against '...“correct policy lines,” embodying “rightist capitulationism” toward Moscow, and committing numerous other “mistakes and crimes”'.² Zhou consistently occupied the third position in the hierarchy, below Mao and Liu Shaoqi, up to the mid-1960s, and thereafter, below Lin Biao. Zhou was a rationalist by education, having studied for over a year in France. That direct experience of a Western country was unique in the high echelons of the CPC.

Second, even after Chen Yi became Foreign Minister, the foreign policy management remained Zhou's personal remit. In mid-1960, prior to India's withdrawal of its Ambassador from Beijing, P.K. Banerjee was shifted from Tokyo to Beijing; in the diplomatic rank of 'Minister', and he headed the Embassy, as Charge d'Affaires, from September 1960 to December 1963.³ Premier Zhou held 10 substantive meetings with Banerjee between September 1961 and April 1963. Beijing treated him as the principal channel of communications (Banerjee was usually told that he should come unaccompanied). New Delhi appeared ambivalent in trusting its envoy; that was Banerjee's personal impression, narrated in his book, and to us, on his diplomatic staff. At one meeting, Zhou told Banerjee that he saw each and every official communication from India, including all the frequent protest notes and responses.⁴ Zhou's style of negotiation can be judged from a wide range of diplomatic records of discussion and documents, which are accessible at the website of the Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington D.C.⁵

Third, a glimpse of the human side of Zhou. In the late 1950s, when Southeast Asia was in turmoil, the Thai Premier engaged in secret diplomatic contact with Beijing (the Chinese envoy in Rangoon made clandestine visits to Bangkok). As a token of sincerity, this Thai dignitary sent to China two children of his closest political associate, a 12-year old boy and his 8-year sister. They went to study in China, becoming the wards of Premier Zhou, who entrusted them to an associate for close supervision. That echoed history, when lesser powers offered personal tokens of sincerity to higher entities. That strange story is narrated in *The Dragon's Pearl* by Sirin Phathanothai.⁶ She grew up in China with her brother, leaving only around 1967, at the height of the Cultural Revolution (the brother had left earlier). Her final meeting with Zhou took place in a car; she was picked up at a pre-arranged street location. As they drove around, Zhou urged her to leave, because he could no longer protect her. That gives a remarkable glimpse into the turmoil of that time, even at high echelons.

Fourth, as foreign minister, Premier Zhou Enlai established the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' work style, and personally guided it, even after he handed over charge to Chen Yi in 1956. Even in those years, when the Soviet Union was China's role model, Zhou urged that they should develop a Chinese diplomatic style, summed up in a four-character phrase 不卑不亢 *bu bei bu kang* – 'neither servile, nor overbearing'. Zhou became the exemplar of the diplomatic service. Since 2012, President Xi's directives to the MFA, and his own actions

show that he has set new norms in his efforts to carve out for China a greater role in global governance.

Fifth, what was Zhou's role in China's actions against India in the period 1954-62 and later? Mao was the principal decision-maker and Zhou was his agile deputy, handling key diplomatic actions. There is little doubt that Zhou played his part in misleading India in the events leading to the 1962 War, at a time when India was ill-prepared. China's conduct was deceitful on several counts. We too were gullible and did not pursue our own interests with the necessary tenacity and clarity. As A.S. Bhasin's study *Nehru, Tibet and China* (2021), based on tight documentary analysis, indicates, it appears that we mishandled negotiations, including Zhou's April 1960 visit to New Delhi.⁷

China's Economic and Technology Achievements & Permanent CPC Rule

Is China's economy as strong as some macro numbers indicate, or is it heavily beset with potential problems as recounted in varied reports? This issue widely debated.⁸ Major economic stimulus measures, recently announced by China's Central Bank and other entities, have added edge to the discussion. And yet, a crisis in housing construction, deep indebtedness of local authorities, and consumer and investor confidence (domestic and foreign) are among the major challenges that persist. Some observers suggest incertitude on the part of policymakers as to the steps that are needed to restore growth at a high level.⁹

Another discussion strand focuses on China's technological advances. That issue also seems polarised, but the broad consensus is, that thanks to massive investments over several years, it is well placed to continue its wide-front advances.¹⁰ President Xi coined the term 'new productive forces' in 2023 to address especially, China's focus on multiple cutting edge manufacturing technologies. (Prof. Barry Naughton addressed this issue in depth at the Gargi & V.P. Dutt Memorial Lecture organised by the ICS in April 2024).¹¹

During a recent lecture tour to Hong Kong, Singapore international affairs commentator Kishore Mahbubani, known for his pro-Beijing orientation, warned Hong Kong to prepare for a coming 'typhoon of geopolitical turbulence'. His core message: 'We are now witnessing the largest geopolitical contest ever seen in human history.'¹² And he remains optimistic over the anticipated outcome for Beijing.

China insists that it is doing well in both managing the economy and in its industrial policy. A potential spoiler qualifies the anticipated successes: China's political future. A major concern for President Xi, of which he has spoken repeatedly, is how can the permanence of its political system be safeguarded?

A recent commentary in *The Economist* of 30 September 2024 argued a different case.¹³

Even after a dozen years in power, during which he has carried out purges of potential rivals from the party's senior ranks and waged relentless ideological campaigns to ensure the absolute loyalty of its nearly 100 million members, Mr. Xi appears far from satisfied... The phrase "special challenges of a large Party" has since become a leitmotif of Party propaganda, much of it referring to the experience of the Soviet Party... Deng's supporters used the Soviet Union's fate as a way of pushing back against ideologues in the party who saw his economic reforms as a betrayal of Marxism... In a Jan 2023 speech, published in March 2024, Xi said: "A fortress is most easily breached from within. The only ones who can defeat us are ourselves".

Another nugget of Chinese thinking: The *1843 Magazine* wrote in July 2024¹⁴:

Xi Jinping drew a very different conclusion from the end of the Cold War. The intensity of his feelings didn't become clear until a speech he gave much later, in 2012, in which he attributed the fall of the Soviet Union to ordinary people losing faith in a corrupt party with a hollow ideology. 'Why must we stand firm on the Party's leadership over the military?' Xi asked. 'Because that's the lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union.'

Over time, strong leaders everywhere have agonised over the permanence of their achievements. Mao came up with the notion of a 'continuous revolution',¹⁵ which produced country-wide turmoil, led by the youth, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Xi puts his faith in the tight, all-pervasive leadership of the CPC. That now covers the economy as well as intellectual activity, be it in relation to innovation or in analysis of economic outcomes.¹⁶

A China-Canada Story

In 2018, Canada detained Meng Wanzhou, chief financial officer of the Chinese telecom and electronics major, Huawei, at US request, in a case involving alleged illegal financial actions by this company on American soil. She is the daughter of the principal owner of Huawei. That produced a firestorm of Chinese protests against Canada and the US, followed by arrest and imprisonment of two Canadians in China, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor.¹⁷ Kovrig

was a former Canadian diplomat who had spent 3 years at the Canadian Embassy in Beijing while Spavor was an academic working in China. Kovrig broke his silence three years after his release. He detailed his harsh prison treatment in an hour-long ‘Drum Tower’ broadcast by *The Economist* in September 2024.¹⁸ He has spoken of near-continual blindfolding, other forms of sensory deprivation, and several rounds of daily, aggressive interrogation, even late at night. The other released detainee, Spavor, has not spoken yet.

The podcast adds:

...18 months into Kovrig’s detention, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson broke with the usual line that there was no connection between Meng’s case and the two Michaels. Instead, the spokesperson said if Meng Wanzhou is released, it could open up space for a resolution of the two Canadians detention. Both the Canadians were held for three years, and after complex 3-way negotiations that also involved the US, the case against Meng was dropped and she was released. In parallel, the two Canadians were set free, boarding their chartered plane to return home precisely at the time Ms. Meng left the US for China.

The podcast includes a revealing comment by a foreign journalist, a friend of Kovrig’s, who disclosed that he raised this issue (before the swap deal) in an informal setting in Beijing:

Over dinner, I had a chance to ask a Chinese official what his government gained from frightening other countries. His tone turned icy. Canada made a political choice to please America and anger China, the official told me. Now, he said Canada must feel pain. So, the next time America asks for such help, every ally will think twice.

The clear objective is that foreign states should not act against China, or its’ citizens, without being aware of retribution, in which norms of fairness and respect for human standards will not apply. That is China exceptionalism.

It is also a form of coercive diplomacy. Australia experienced something similar during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when its official statements about the origin of the pandemic and demand for thorough investigations displeased Beijing. At that time, other issues including actions of Chinese students studying in Australia were roiled into the dispute, leading to Chinese sanctions against the import of Australian wine and other trade

items. It took about two years of quiet diplomacy from Canberra to get diplomatic ties restored to an even keel.

Clearly, this violates the standards, norms and the rationale of inter-state diplomacy, accepted diplomatic practices, and international law, including international conventions such as the two Vienna Conventions, on Diplomatic Relations, 1961 (VCDR), and on Consular Relations, 1963 (VCCR). Is this likely to invite similar actions from others? China targeted Canada, but not the US that first arrested Ms. Meng Wanzhou. Thus, retaliation is conditioned by realism. Rational thinking is also in evidence, in the solutions worked out. These are new trends in international relations.

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- ⁴ In the lead-up to the 1962 Border War and immediately after, both sides were prolific in exchanging protest notes and responses. For an assessment of PK Banerjee’s tenure in Beijing, including his discussions with Premier Zhou.

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In December 1963, on the eve of Banerjee’s departure from China Premier Zhou received him for a farewell visit; I attended, the junior-most of the four that accompanied him.
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- ¹⁰ *The Economist*: ‘Xi Jinping’s misguided plan to escape economic stagnation’, 4 April 2024, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/04/04/xi-jinpings-misguided-plan-to-escape-economic-stagnation>.
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- 16 Consider the installation of Party units in business enterprises, including subsidiaries of foreign investors. The notion of a small-scale enterprises that would lead in innovation and entrepreneurship is also a product of such thinking.
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About the Author

Kishan S. Rana has an MA in Economics from St. Stephens College, Delhi. Joining the Indian Foreign Service in 1960, he learnt Chinese at Hong Kong; served at the Indian Embassy in China (1963-65, 1970-72). After 1975, Ambassador/ High Commissioner to Algeria, Czechoslovakia, Kenya, Mauritius and Germany; served on PM Indira Gandhi's staff (1981-82). Professor Emeritus, Diplo Academy, Malta and Geneva; Emeritus Fellow, ICS, Delhi; Archives By-Fellow, Churchill College, Cambridge; Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Centre, Washington DC. Guest faculty, Diplomatic Academy, Vienna (2011-18); Commonwealth Adviser, Namibia Foreign Ministry (2000-01). Authored and edited 14 books (two translated into Chinese); *Inside Diplomacy* (2000); *Asian Diplomacy* (2007); *Diplomacy of the 21st Century* (2011); *Churchill and India: Manipulation or Betrayal?* (2023); *Diplomacy at the Cutting Edge* (2016) (on the internet, free download).

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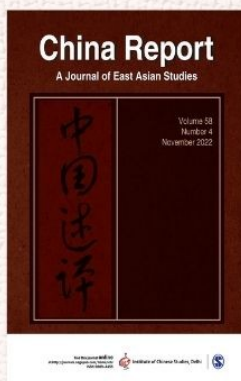


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INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES
B-371 (3rd Floor), Chittaranjan Park,
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