

January 17, 1977
Erich Honecker to the Politburo Members of the SED,
'Information about the Situation in China and the Policy of
the New Leadership of the PRC'

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Summary:

This document discusses the shift in political leadership and the instability of the government in the wake of Mao Zedong's death. It also reports on China's economic situation and the beginnings of efforts to modernize the country, as well as foreign relations, especially with the Soviet Union.

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I n f o r m a t i o n

About the Situation in China and the Policy of the New Leadership of the PRC

The development of events in China after the death of Mao Zedong (9 September 1976) confirmed the existence of a deep domestic crisis in the country and led to a drastic escalation of the fighting within the ruling group. The latter reflected the increasing contradictions between the Maoist concepts and the objective requirements of the country. Already a month later, in early October, the extremist "Gang of Four" was eliminated - Jiang Qing^[3], Wang Hongwen^[4], Zhang Chunqiao^[5], and Yao Wenyuan^[6] -, i.e. people from Mao's closest circle who had been the main implementers of his political line over the last ten years. Actually, a military-political coup has occurred in the PRC. As a consequence, people came to power who are orienting the country towards a more stable development of the economy and a growth of military potential. "The time of phrases and slogans is over, now it is about moving towards concrete actions" - this is, according to statements made, the objective of domestic policy for the new Chinese leadership. The latter is pursuing the goal to turn China into a powerful and modern world power.

With the death of Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De^[7], Kang Sheng^[8], and Dong Biwu^[9], and with the purge of Deng Xiaoping and the expulsion of the "Gang of Four", a new situation has emerged at the top leadership of the PRC. Of the 22 members of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CCP 10 have been dismissed, especially old functionaries and upstarts of the "Cultural Revolution". As a result, the influence of the military (Ye Jianying^[10], Chen Xilieng^[11], Yui Shijiu^[12], Li Desheng^[13], Su Zhenhua^[14], and others) has noticeably grown. All the top posts are concentrated in the hands of Hua Guofeng: Chairman of the Central Committee of the CCP and of the Military Council of the Central Committee of the CCP, Chairman of the State Council of the PRC, Minister for Public Security. For different reasons, Hua is currently acceptable to all the heterogeneous forces within the Chinese leadership. There also remain some people in the Politburo who had been close to the group around Jiang Qing (Ji Dengkui^[15], Ni Zhifu^[16], Wu Xiuquan^[17] and others). There is no complete unanimity and mutual trust between the new leaders of the PRC. This is complicating the situation within the ruling upper class and it is hampering the resolution of the political, cadre and other problems facing the country.

The political situation in China remains unstable. Currently the struggle has spread all over China. It is sucking in party, administrative and military cadres. According to numbers, the supporters of the "Gang of Four" are representing about one third of the Central Committee of the CCP which had been formed at the last X Party Congress in 1973. About the same proportions do exist in the party and state organs of the provinces, districts, and counties. In fact, in every institution, in every educational facility, and in every factory the tensions are still existing, which had been caused by the conflicts between the upstarts from the period of the "Cultural Revolution" and the old cadres. Indications for a more far-reaching political upheaval are noticeable - what can go as far as armed clashes - in some parts of the country (in the Provinces of Fujian, Hubei, Henan, Shanxi and others).

Until today, the new leaders are unable to convene a Plenum of the CCP Central Committee and to solve the most important organizational questions and cadres issues. Apparently they have been so far incapable to make public their political and social-economic program for the future. In some documents published recently, and here also in speeches by Hua Guofeng, there are only vague contours apparent how the new leadership wants to proceed in the near future. The leadership is reaffirming its loyalty to the banner of Mao Zedong. It is defending its "specifically Chinese" and its "special" path of development which it is contrasting directly with the experiences of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries. The main interests of Hua Guofeng, and those who are behind him, are the solidification of their positions as leaders of the country and the stabilization of the political and economic situation.

Recently there are contributions appearing in the Chinese press that lay open the difficult situation of the economy in the country. As it is known, this situation has happened as a result of Mao Zedong's policy, but now it is blamed on the subversive activities of the "Gang of Four". One has noted a significant decrease of production in all sectors. The country has problems to provide financial and material resources for the production of goods, in particular food, for the supply of the population and for the guarantee of exports. The foreign trade deficit is exceeding one billion Dollars.

In light of the urgent economic tasks ahead, some questions are already raised in Beijing which are testament to the intention to revise some concepts of Mao. Recently there is getting addressed again the problem of modernization of the economy of the PRC. Furthermore, some voices are to be heard, albeit still rather very weak ones, calling for proceeding on the economy, especially with regard to agriculture, on the basis of decisions by the VIII Party Congress of the CCP (it took place in 1956 and, as it is well known, it had emphasized a course that in essence corresponded to the objective requirements of the country).

Efforts are underway to correct the Five-Year-Plan (1975-1980), and measures are introduced to organize the guidance of the economy. Meetings have been held in Beijing about the operation of the coal and oil industry, as well as of railway transportation. There has also occurred a conference on questions of agriculture, which is considered to be of major importance. Outlined in statements by leading officials, and in press articles on economic subjects, are the importance of creating a strong material foundation for the solidification of the power, for the increase in defense readiness, and for the gradual improvement of the material situation of the population.

Some measures are being introduced aiming at reviving social-political and cultural life. It looks like a process has begun of a return by some representatives of the artistic intelligence to become active again. However, all these steps are of inconclusive character. They are just half measures.

By following the concepts of Mao Zedong on the main issues of political, economic, and ideological development, the new leadership is attempting at the same time to get rid of especially fateful decisions for the country. But here again, it is advocating under the banner of defending Mao's line to act against "deviations" and of blaming the group of "Four" for all the excesses of recent years. Apparently the current Beijing leaders are eager to preserve name and authority of Mao Zedong and to use both for their interests. One has begun with building a memorial for Mao; also a decision has been made to publish an edition of his collected works.

The foreign policy course of the new Chinese leadership has remained essentially unchanged. Beijing does increasingly reaffirm its loyalty to the line pursued in international affairs during the lifetime of Mao Zedong. This can be mostly explained by the fact that the new leaders are forced to deal with urgent problems of domestic development. Another reason is that they are overall insisting on nationalist positions.

Up to a certain limit, China's line of political collaboration with imperialist countries remains unchanged. The efforts towards rapprochement with the United States are remaining in place, namely on the foundation of "joint" interests and "parallel positions" in the world by both the PR

China and the U.S. The new Chinese leaders are demonstrating a positive attitude towards expanding relations with Japan. They are indicating that recently occurring problems, especially with regards to trade, were just temporarily and a result of a "wrong course" generated under the influence of the "Gang of Four". Beijing's economic and cultural exchanges with Tokyo, as well as visits by parliamentarians and other representatives of the United States and Japan in China, became somewhat more active recently. At the same time Beijing is showing no willingness to abandon its demands vis-a-vis the United States (on the Taiwan question) and Japan (regarding issues of signing an agreement on peace and friendship aimed against the Soviet Union); both making the possibility of substantial change in relations between them problematic in the near future. The overall essence of the policy of the Chinese leadership towards the United States and Japan remains the desire to deepen relations with both countries and to simultaneously aggravate by any possible means their relations vis-a-vis the Soviet Union.

In Western Europe, the policy of the PR China is consisting in support for a concept of the need for an arms race related to the so-called "Soviet threat", in support for processes of integration, and for the development of economic and trade relations with the aim to obtain new technical material and technology.

As far as the "Third World" is concerned, Beijing has not abandoned its plans to turn the former into a sphere of Chinese influence. For that purpose, high-ranking personalities from developing states are actively invited to Beijing. These countries are granted economic and other aid, as well as also Maoist concepts are aggressively forced upon them - including those hostile towards the Soviet Union.

Clearly recognizable are Beijing's previous tactics of dividing the socialist community according to the old formula of Mao Zedong - hitting the Soviet Union with hard strikes and at the same time pursuing a "soft" course towards the majority of the socialist states. The Beijing leaders are for now holding back with criticism of the other states of the socialist community. At the same time they announce China's intentions to normalize state-to-state relations with them; however, under the condition that they [the socialist states] are taking the initiative. In Beijing they want to accomplish "selective normalization" with individual socialist countries in order to disrupt their coordinated policy towards China and to split them from the USSR. Evident is also the continuation of Beijing's attempts to play off the socialist countries against each other.

The new Chinese leadership has begun to mention the international communist movement as a factor in international developments by applying explicit Maoist interpretations. Therefore one has enormously activated the links with each and every possible pro-Chinese group abroad. Recently about 10 meetings by Beijing's leaders, among them also Hua Guofeng, with representatives from such groups have been held. Party exchanges with the Romanian Communist Party and the Korean Workers Party are continuing unabatedly.

Concerning Soviet-Chinese relations, the new leaders of the PR China are not eager to aggravate state-to-state relations. No actions are permitted to complicate the situation along the border with the USSR. Trade and transportation of goods are processed normally. In their contacts with Soviet people, the official Chinese representatives have become somewhat more sociable. They are not such aggressive any more when it comes to discussions of questions regarding Soviet-Chinese relations.

At the same time the Chinese leaders have undertaken no actions whatsoever, which would indicate their intention to react positively to the constructive steps taken by the Soviet Union. To the contrary, they thought it necessary to make public statements reaffirming continuity of the anti-Soviet course in their policy. In order to justify such actions, they attempt in Beijing to portray our steps as "hidden" and "aggressive" intentions towards China. Like before, one does still claim that the USSR is "threatening" China. In official documents they are again outlining the "determination to conduct the struggle against modern revisionism until the end".

On all levels of propaganda the intensive anti-Soviet campaign is continuing. Subjects of attacks are basically all aspects of CPSU domestic and foreign policy. The activity directed against the Soviet Union in the international arena is not diminishing. Beijing's anti-Soviet activities within the United Nations, in different international forums, in third countries, as well as when working with foreign representatives, are not getting weaker.

The meetings on border demarcations held in December 1976 in the context of Soviet-Chinese negotiations have not shown any changes compared to previous positions of the Chinese delegations which had led to stagnation in negotiations.

The Chinese side is stating that the possibility of a turn towards normalization in Soviet-Chinese relations depends on the Soviet Union to first undertake basically unilateral "practical actions which would actually correspond to the interests of improving the relations between two countries". They are emphasizing here that the main element of such actions "still pertains to the issue of the Soviet-Chinese border", which they define as recognition of the "disputed territories" (this is of the Chinese territorial claims) from our side.

To major extent, the anti-Soviet policy of the Beijing leaders is correlated to issues of the domestic and international situation of the PR China. A change of this course would require the Chinese leadership to automatically revise its negative attitude towards questions of detente, disarmament, and the ban of nuclear tests. It would require a basic change of positions towards the international communist movement and the socialist community; it would require a serious correction of policy towards the countries of the "Third World" and the developed capitalist states. The policy of anti-Sovietism is nourishing the great power ambitions and nationalist aspirations of Beijing. Both of those are representing the foundations of Maoist doctrines. The transition to an actual normalization of relations with the USSR will deprive the new leaders of one of their arguments, namely the one of the allegedly existing "threat from abroad"- which is destined to divert the attention of the people from the serious domestic problems.

Thus the new leaders of the PR China, who are still declaring their loyalty to the "ideas of Mao Zedong", are gradually preparing the ground in the area of domestic policy for a more realistic approach (though coming from nationalist positions) towards the resolution of long matured problems of the country's social-economic development. At the same time, many questions regarding the situation in China are remaining unclear. The outcome of the struggle over the path of the country's further course of development is still not yet determined.

^[1] German translation of a Russian-language information from the CPSU Central Committee sent to GDR leader Erich Honecker, who then shares it with his fellow SED politburo members.

^[2] Erich Honecker.

^[3] 1914-1991. Wife of Chairman Mao and Member of the CCP Politburo until 1976.

^[4] 1935-1992. Vice Chairman of the CCP 1973-1976.

^[5] 1917-2005. Chairman of Shanghai Revolutionary Committee and Member of the CCP Politburo until 1976.

^[6] 1931-2005. Member of Cultural Revolution Group, Member of the CCP Politburo until 1976.

^[7] 1886-1976. Head of State of the PRC 1975/1976.

[\[8\]](#) 1898-1975. Member of CCP Politburo Standing Committee.

[\[9\]](#) 1886-1975. 2nd Vice Chairman of the PRC.

[\[10\]](#) 1897-1986. Minister of Defense of the PRC and Vice Chairman of the CCP.

[\[11\]](#) Spelling dubious.

[\[12\]](#) Spelling dubious.

[\[13\]](#) 1916-2011. Director of PLA General Department and Member of the CCP Politburo.

[\[14\]](#) 1912-1979. First CCP Secretary in Shanghai 1976/1977. Member of the CCP Politburo 1977-1979.

[\[15\]](#) 1923-1988. Vice Premier of the PRC 1975-1978.

[\[16\]](#) 1933-2013. In 1976 2nd CCP Secretary in Shanghai.

[\[17\]](#) 1908-1997. Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, Wu was appointed vice president of the special court for the trials of the Gang of Four and the “Lin Biao Clique”.