Wilson Center | Digital Archive
International History Declassified
digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org

# November 29, 1976

# Cable from Ambassador Wickert to the Foreign Office, 'Benefits of Relationship with China for the Alliance'

## Citation:

"Cable from Ambassador Wickert to the Foreign Office, 'Benefits of Relationship with China for the Alliance'", November 29, 1976, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Institut für Zeitgeschichte, ed., Akten zur auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: 1975. 1. Juli bis 31. Dezember 1976 (München: Oldenbourg, 2007), 1553-1556. Translated by Bernd Schaefer. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119987

## Summary:

West German Ambassador Wickert reports to the Foreign Office about Chinese foreign policy following Mao Zedong's death.

## Credits:

This document was made possible with support from MacArthur Foundation

## Original Language:

German

## Contents:

Translation - English

Ambassador Wickert, Beijing, to Foreign Office

114-17096/76 strictly confidential
Telex Nr. 535

Sent: November 29, 1976, 07:25 hours[1]
Received: November 29, 1976, 07:34 hours

RE: Benefits of Relationship with China for the Alliance [NATO]

here: Telex report No. 5168 of November 11, 1976 -303-363.00-1892/76 strictly confidential[2]

For Your Information

I. The Chinese leadership has continued its anti-Soviet course after Mao's death.[3] It has not responded to conciliatory gestures and statements from Moscow and the Warsaw Pact states but instead rejected them poignantly.[4] Western reports that already wanted to see in Chinese statements -like for instance in congratulatory or thank you messages- a more accommodating attitude on Beijing's side were wrong in every regard and a result of imperfect analyses. Rather, the Chinese leadership left nothing undone to make clear that it will continue in its anti-Soviet course.

This course is indisputable in China. The Chinese leadership, which has to deal with a whole range of serious and controversial domestic issues, can have no interest in opening debate on another issue everybody is agreeing about. A Chinese leadership can only afford a modification of its relationship with the Soviet Union when it is firmly established in power and commands undisputed authority. Yet this has not been the case yet, and this situation can last for a long time. However, in the long run a more moderate propaganda and a more sober bilateral relationship is very well possible. Still, the Sino-Soviet conflict will continue to remain in its fundamentals for a foreseeable time, due to reasons outlined already earlier.

Although the Chinese military forces are far inferior to the Soviet forces in terms of equipment, according to Chinese estimates they tie down about one million Soviet forces in Siberia.[5] The currently relatively small, but quantitatively and qualitatively growing Chinese nuclear potential will cause increasing concerns for the Soviet Union. A military threat to Western Europe from the Chinese side will not exist for the foreseeable future.

It is in the interest of the [NATO] Alliance that this situation persists. An increase of Chinese military potential would even be desirable in order to tie down even more Soviet forces in Asia. China's military leadership is demanding a modernization of its forces. In the current domestic situation, this leadership can expect its requests to receive priority treatment. It appears logical that those NATO members capable of doing so could support this development financially or materially. However, there are major arguments to be made against a significant and visible arms supply to China:

- A modern and better armed China would indeed tie down more Soviet forces, but on the other hand it would be viewed as a threat by Japan and other states in East and Southeast Asia. Arms deliveries by NATO to China would lead to protests from these states. Especially the United States have to take this into consideration.

- The Soviet Union would view comprehensive arms supplies by NATO to China as an attempt towards encirclement and react accordingly sensitive.

II. The People's Republic of China is not just a benefit to NATO for its tying down of Soviet forces. Though foreign trade is small in proportion to the Chinese gross domestic product[6]; and politically China is mostly concerned with itself and, despite its seat in the U.N. Security Council, less active in terms of foreign policy than, say, Romania. Still, China's political weight is extraordinary in Asia and other countries of the Third World, much larger than China's quantifiable potential would actually be correspond to.

There are various reasons for this: The large population (about one third of mankind), the size of the country (matches the size of Europe), and the resulting opportunities inspire the imagination. The Chinese program of development is based on agriculture and successful in many regards. For many countries of the Third World it is more attractive than a Soviet or a Western model. Moreover, China is portraying itself as a developing country and a protagonist in the fight against the Soviet Union. As China is turning primarily against the Soviet Union, this aspect is also beneficial to us and the [NATO] Alliance.

III. Opposition against the Soviet Union is the determining factor of Chinese foreign and defense policy. However, it is not possible to nail the Chinese down here. Plans about an alliance or a “quasi alliance”, as sometimes dreamed up by prominent Western visitors to China, are impracticable; and just for the reason alone that China will not make itself dependent on such an alliance. The trauma after the failure of the pact with the Soviet Union will continue to have a long-lasting effect. Even to the smallest extent, the Chinese leadership wants to avoid any political, economic, and military dependency. It will make use of only selective and targeted foreign support for its agricultural, industrial, technological, and scientific development.

Thus the Chinese are rejecting credits and development programs. They also never made efforts to receive comprehensive arms support. As long as they follow their principle of “everything by our own means”, it is questionable whether they would accept anything from the West at all.

However, the transfer of technological know-how, and the delivery of products for dual military and civilian use, is something different; just look at the purchase of computers in the United States[7], aircraft engines in Great Britain, and large helicopters in France.[8]

We propose to review what further opportunities exist in those and related fields. Within NATO we might propose a relaxation of CoCom rules for China. Bilaterally we should intensify collaboration in various technological areas that are of interest to China. However, we cannot expect that those measures will reap political dividends just for us or the Alliance. Even bigger material incentives would not achieve that.

It is important to strengthen in first place the willingness of the Chinese to cooperate with us and to see through an actual exchange of political and military information. This will not be not easy and achievable from one day to the next; since in all times political interest of the Chinese had been directed towards their own country.

Thus it is necessary to win and deepen the trust of the Chinese and to convince them of the benefits coming from continuous cooperation with us. Even though it gets rarely expressed, the mistrust of the Chinese towards the West is clearly noticeable. Suspicions are especially harbored about SALT, MBFR, and the CSCE. They are afraid of the possibility of collusion or a general understanding between the NATO powers, in particular the United States, and the Soviet Union. In this regard they are not different from those kind of Western observers who are suffering from the nightmare of an anti-Western alliance between Moscow and Beijing.

The Chinese leadership is quite aware of NATO's weaknesses, the critical economic and domestic situation in some of the member states, and the delusional thoughts widespread within some countries and political parties concerning opportunities of detente [with the Soviet Union]. It will not only become necessary to convince the Chinese of the Alliance's willingness to stand up against Soviet pressure or expansion, but also to convince them that NATO is actually capable of doing so in political, economic, and military terms. Otherwise Beijing might be tempted to scale down avoidable tensions in its relations with Moscow without giving up fundamental positions. If such would occur with regard to the border question, it certainly would have an effect on the tying down of Soviet forces in Siberia.

It will be protracted and arduous to persuade the Chinese leadership to have confidence in Western policy and to cooperate. This will only succeed if we have frank conversations, do not raise expectations we cannot meet later on, and if we show understanding for Chinese sensitivities, peculiarities, and domestic pressures. Yet we have to make this arduous effort, especially in a moment when China is at the crossroads of its future development. And all this will certainly pay off. If domestic conditions would consolidate and the leadership's pragmatic economic ideas prevail, the country could experience, in the coming decade already, a boom that would exceed all our imaginations and increase China's political weight considerably.

[signed] Wickert

VS-Bd. 8652 (201)

[1] Submitted to Section Head Pfeffer on December 1, 1976 who noted in handwriting for section 201: “Please, as discussed, comments as soon as possible.”Was submitted to Ambassador Roth on December 2, 1976 who instructed to forward it to KLR I Ruth. Was submitted to Ruth on December 2, 1976. Was submitted to section head Meyer-Landrut. Was submitted to VLR Wentker and Kuhna on December 2 respectively 4, 1976. Was submitted to VLR Metternich.

[2] VLR I Hellbeck reported: “On November 10 there was extensive discussion in the NATO council about developments in China and consequences for the Alliance. Largely a consensus was reached that the Sino-Soviet conflict, notwithstanding tactically motivated reconciliation efforts, will continue in its substance and further determine global policy. Probably the [NATO] Ministers' Council will have to deal with the issue what benefits the Alliance can reap in the future from relations with China.” See VS-Bd. 10045 (303); B 150, File Copies 1976.

[3] On the death of Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Central Committee and Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party, on September 9, 1976 see document 281.

[4] Counselor Berendonck, Beijing, reported in October 29, 1976: “The Warsaw Pact countries have congratulated Hua Guofeng to the party chairmanship with congratulatory telegrams. From what we hear, senders were the Eastern European party leaders themselves, among them Brezhnev. Beijing has rejected those telegrams for the reason they are unacceptable because no party-to-party relations exist. So China repeated the same reaction it had in case of the letters of condolence sent by the communist parties from Moscow's camp at the occasion of Mao's death. The Chinese gestures are supposed to demonstrate that the new leadership will continue to pursue policy vis-a-vis Moscow as determined by Mao Zedong. The same purpose is served through polemical attacks Beijing is continuing in order to criticize Moscow at international meetings and in the Chinese media.” See telex report No. 481; Section 213, Vol. 112769.

[5] Ambassador Wickert, Bejing, reported on September 29, 1976 from a conversation with the Chinese Deputy Chief of the General Staff Wu Hsiu-chuan concerning th situation at the Soviet-Chinese border: “Since the border incidents in 1969 on Zhenbao Island no special events would have occurred in the North. Though there exists permanent tension in the border regions, since 1969 there occurred only small,

overall insignificant incidents. In 1969 the Soviet Union had attempted an attack with heavy weaponry, but it could not make territorial gains despite the Chinese forces being equipped weaker. To the contrary, back then the Soviet forces were said to have been repelled with heavy casualties. Now the Soviets would know they cannot play with the Chinese army and the Chinese people. The Soviet Union has deployed one million men along the Chinese border. Those number of forces, however, would be insufficient for a war of aggression against China." See telex No. 416, Section 303, Vol. 103177.

[6] On September 21, 1976 Ambassador Wickert, Beijing, informed: "The foreign trade volume of the People's Republic of China amounted in 1975 to around 15 billion U.S. dollars. The share of the Federal Republic of Germany in Chinese foreign trade was about 760 million dollars, the one of the GDR about 220 million dollars. Overall, the share of the Eastern bloc is estimated at somewhat more than 2 billion dollars." See appendix to written report No. 1181; Section 303, Vol. 103170.

[7] Ambassador von Staden, Washington, reported on November 2, 1976: "Press reports, according to which President Ford approved the sale of two computers of Type Cyber 172 to the People's Republic of China, did first produce some speculation here the United States had abandoned the principle of balanced export of potentially strategic material to the Soviet Union and China. [..] Meanwhile the New York Times felt compelled to correct its report that the administration had abandoned balance in favor of China: A similar system was approved for export to the Soviet Union as well." See telex report No. 3512; Section 303, Vol. 103176.

[8] On April 27. 1976 Counselor Hansen. Washington, referred to an article in the New York Times claiming "the American government silently tolerates supplies of strategic material to the People's Republic of China by France and Great Britain without involving CoCom [Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls]." The newspaper report stated: "The only significant case thus far has been the multi-million dollar British sale of the powerful Rolls-Royce Spey engine to China in December. Officials said that after the British had informed the Ford administration that they would not seek allied approval for the sale, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger let them know that he would not make an issue of it. The official also cited the 1974 sale of Super Frelon Helicopters to China by Aerospatiale of France as an instance where CoCom approval could have been sought by France though Paris was not pressed to do so by the administration." See telex report No. 1368; Section 303, Vol. 103165.