



Robert A. Scalapino

China, Taiwan, and American Credibility

"Normalizing" relations with the PRC—which means abandoning Taiwan—promises no strategic, political, or economic advantage to the United States. Instead, normalization will disrupt the long-term political balance in Asia and further undermine American credibility throughout the world.

The era of bipolarism remains with us despite attempts to consign it to the past. The United States and the Soviet Union are the only two states with a military-strategic reach that can extend anywhere in the world. Moreover, the Soviet Union has achieved near military equality with the United States, and, in the view of some, is now striving for superiority. Under these conditions, it is understandable that the "Soviet issue" should be uppermost in the minds of those who make American foreign policy. The Soviet Union is the one country today that could wreak great physical damage upon the United States. And since its interests often clash with our own, the idea of a "united front" aligning us with China against the Soviet Union exerts a strong appeal.

Should we pursue a classic "balance of power" policy, joining with the lesser power against the greater one? The advantage supposedly would be to challenge the Soviet Union on two fronts, providing China (in combination with Japan) with the political-strategic capacity to oppose Soviet designs in the East while adding to the strength of NATO in the West. It is also argued that such a policy would insure against any future rapprochement between China and Russia, and thereby prevent the type of threat that loomed large for the Eurasian continent for a brief period after 1949.

What are the costs and risks of such a policy? First, it would inevitably cause American-Soviet relations to deteriorate, and make agreements relating to SALT, for instance, vastly more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. We might well reenter the so-called "cold war," a war, incidentally, which is not dead but is currently being waged most intensely between China and Russia. Secondly, such a policy would seriously disrupt the long-term political balance in Asia. To understand this fact, one must appreciate three things: the relative weakness of the Soviet Union in Asia; the growing influence of the People's Republic of China; and the precarious position of Japan.

Soviet Weakness in Asia

Unquestionably, the USSR intends to be a major Asian as well as European power, and in the coming decades it will develop Siberia

and Central Asia, both economically and militarily. It is now stepping up its military presence in the Pacific-Asian region, and that will certainly continue.

The central question is whether the USSR can translate military power into political influence. If one examines past developments and current trends, the answer is not promising from a Soviet point of view. China up to date has been a debacle for the Russians. Relations with Japan have not been worse since World War II, and no improvement is in sight. Even with North Korea, once a pure client state, relations in recent years have ranged from cool to hostile.

Turning to Southeast Asia, the Russians remain of critical importance to the Vietnamese Communists, and via them, to the Laotian Communists. The reasons are obvious. Soviet aid is the primary source of support for governments in the deepest economic difficulties. Further, a Soviet presence insures at least a temporary buffer against the Chinese—and the Chinese are nearby, not only on the northern border, but also in Cambodia where they serve as the main source of foreign aid. Indochina, in short, is now deeply involved in the Sino-Soviet cold war. Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Soviet influence is quite minimal.

Despite its growing military power, the Soviet Union remains very foreign to Asia—culturally, politically, and in terms of the economic system it presents. Its diplomacy may improve, but in the past it has been remarkably heavy-handed. The rigidity which has characterized its policies toward Japan, China, and others augurs poorly for expanded or sustained influence. What alliance or special tie consummated by the Soviet Union with a state not contiguous to its borders has long flourished or even survived?

China's Future Role

The leaders of the People's Republic of China have naturally disavowed hegemony in Asia and elsewhere, even as they have accused the Soviet Union and the United States of seeking to control the world. But China also has made it clear that it considers Asia its logical sphere of influence, and even in a period when China has suffered from economic backwardness, military weakness, and political strife, it has vigorously involved itself in Asian affairs.

The cultivation of Japan, including extensive people-to-people diplomacy, has steadily increased and often been effective. The wooing of North Korea has been high on the Chinese agenda, and here, too, the Chinese have scored impressive gains. In Southeast Asia, relations with most of the governments have been "normalized"—though not at the expense of continuing ties with the

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Communist movements there. It may have startled some to see a picture of Chairman Hua Kuo-feng smiling broadly and shaking hands with the Burmese White Flag Communist leader in the internationally circulated *Peking Review*, even as undying friendship was being pledged to Burmese Premier Ne Win—but China keeps two paths open in Southeast Asia, awaiting events. It has no intention of abandoning these pro-Chinese Communist movements, although it will raise or lower its assistance to them as an appraisal of its own national interests and developments in the region determine.

By now it should be clear that despite (or because of) its weaknesses, the People's Republic of China has considerably more influence in East Asia than does the Soviet Union. Among many Asian leaders, particularly those in Southeast Asia, one finds a combination of fear and respect for the Chinese. They firmly believe that in the long run China is destined to be the major power with the greatest influence in the region; for that reason they want countervailing outside influences to continue. The idea of a Sino-Japanese-American alliance is not in the least appealing.

Japan's Precarious Position

Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, U.S.-Japan relations have deteriorated recently, and serious problems lie ahead. For their part, the Japanese, like most other Asians with whom we have been associated, feel that the United States has not adequately consulted them in matters affecting their vital interests. Nevertheless, the Japanese government remains committed to special ties with the United States, while hoping to improve its relations with both China and the Soviet Union. Japanese leaders have disavowed the concept of "equidistance," even with China and Russia, but it is clear that Tokyo does not want to risk alienating either of the Communist giants by affiliating itself too closely or consistently with the other. The Soviet Union's current position in Japan is weak, due to the northern islands and fisheries issues and a host of other disputes. But despite its hostility to the Soviet Union, Japan has been reluctant to take any action that would suggest alignment with China; hence the difficulties over the anti-hegemony clause in the Sino-Japanese treaty of friendship.

Japan, then, is not interested in a Sino-Japanese-American alliance, which could greatly exacerbate its already troubled relations with the Soviet Union—without improving its security. Rather, in dealing with the PRC and the USSR, Japan hopes that it can separate economics and politics, and thereby participate in the modernization drives of both.

Taking all of these facts into account, I would submit that American interests are best served by a policy that avoids any sustained, predictable tilt toward the People's Republic of China. Even if our policies amounted to no more than a *de facto* alliance with China, the repercussions would generally be adverse not only for us but for most Asians. I hasten to add that this does not rule out certain positive exchanges with China, any more than it should preclude similar steps with Russia. Strategically, however, in our relations with the two Communist states we should decide each issue on its merits, taking into account our interests and those of nations associated with us. We have benefitted greatly from being able to communicate with both the PRC and the USSR during a period when they have not been able to communicate effectively with each other. Alignment, *de jure* or *de facto*, jeopardizes our advantages.

II

Normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China, however, is not alliance, and most of us would agree that if it could be achieved without excessive cost to our interests it should be consummated. Therein lie the issues.

The PRC's three conditions for normalization are straightforward: The United States must break diplomatic relations with the Republic of China on Taiwan; remove all of its military forces; and abrogate the Mutual Security Treaty. Among those who favor

meeting these demands, one often hears mention of the so-called Japanese formula—but it should be made clear at the outset that that formula could not possibly work for the United States, as the Japanese themselves are the first to assert. Japan could take the actions it did—namely, break relations with the Republic of China and establish full diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, while continuing to carry on a wide range of economic and cultural activities with the ROC—precisely because the American defense commitment remained intact. Japan, needless to say, had no security obligations to Taiwan whatsoever after relinquishing its control over the island at the close of World War II. Thus, the critical issue of a peaceful settlement of the Taiwan question was not an issue in Sino-Japanese negotiations.

On the other hand, the reasons why the Japanese government does not want the United States to abandon Taiwan are not too difficult to perceive. Not only is the stability of Taiwan of economic importance to Japan, but the independence of Taiwan is of strategic importance as well. If Taiwan were to be incorporated into the People's Republic of China, Peking would find control of the Taiwan Straits essential to its control of Taiwan; and beyond Taiwan its jurisdiction would stretch in various directions into the western Pacific. Already a dispute over control of islands between Okinawa and Taiwan involves Japan and the PRC. The prospect of an expanded China to the south, accompanying the near presence of the Soviet Union in the north—and with the possibility of a troubled Korean peninsula—represents a worrisome picture.

Even if the United States were to relinquish all security obligations to Taiwan, one school of thought holds that Taiwan could survive as an independent entity, hence the security of Northeast Asia would not be threatened. The argument is that the People's Republic of China is neither prepared to take Taiwan by force, nor willing to accept the political costs of such an action, knowing how deeply it would alienate the United States, Japan, and many other states. Further, by doing away with all security commitments, the United States would create a climate whereby the two Chinese governments could negotiate a peaceful settlement and bring an end to the civil war.

The thesis that the PRC would not immediately attack Taiwan is probably correct. Once "the American obstacle" were removed, though, Peking would be forced to fashion a new and more militant policy. Its leaders could no longer rely on the excuse that U.S. presence made progress impossible. In short, our abandonment of Taiwan would put pressure on Peking to "do something."

Various possibilities exist short of full-scale military operations. China could seek to enforce a naval blockade, or to intercept ships flying ROC flags. But the first steps would probably be of an economic and political nature. The economy of Taiwan has been highly successful, but it has also been greatly dependent upon an atmosphere of confidence in Taiwan's political future. The flight of indigenous capital, together with the curtailment of foreign investment, could radically alter the scene, and Peking would have the opportunity to encourage these developments if it saw fit. Indeed, the removal of the American security guarantee might be sufficient.

Politically, Taiwan's situation is equally fragile, and recent American policies have been discouraging to the Taiwan independence movement. The PRC would almost certainly seek to plant its own political movement on the island, using the powerful argument that now that Taiwan has been abandoned by its sole protector, incorporation into the PRC is inescapable, and those who make an early accommodation to Peking will be properly rewarded. Indeed, that appeal has already begun. Note the following from a Fukien radio broadcast to Taiwan in March 1977:

After assuming office, the new U.S. President, Carter, declared that he would continue to adhere to the Shanghai Communiqué and normalize Sino-U.S. relations. This has created panic within the Chiang gang, which fears it may be abandoned by the U.S. and come to a miserable end like the puppet cliques of Lon Nol and Nguyen Van Thieu.

These words speak eloquently to the prospects for negotiations between Peking and Taiwan. Given the enormous disparity in size

and power, in the absence of any outside support, and with the position of the PRC permitting of no doubt, Taiwan authorities could negotiate only the terms of their surrender.

Such a situation would scarcely enhance our credibility in Asia or throughout the world, particularly if the denouement even remotely approached the painful events that occurred in Indochina. It is no secret that the disastrous end to the Vietnam war, particularly the collapse of American efforts at "peace with honor," had a profound effect upon all Asians—associates, "neutrals," as well as adversaries. American credibility—the willingness of the United States to maintain its commitments—continues to be questioned, and not merely by former and present allies. Indeed, one of Peking's primary concerns is that the U.S. no longer has the will and capacity to remain a major power in Asia and in the world. To be sure, Peking's litmus-paper test is not Taiwan, but American policies *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union. But if the United States unilaterally abandoned Taiwan, this would not only be widely interpreted as presaging a broader withdrawal from Asia—particularly in light of recent Korean policies—but it would confirm some of the Asians' worst suspicions about American reliability. Would this not ultimately affect the decisions made by Peking itself as to whether it should retain or abandon its "balance of power" foreign policy?

III

Chairman Hua Kuo-feng's political report to the 11th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist Party on August 12, 1977, provides a remarkably clear exposition of the Chinese attitude toward the United States, the Soviet Union, and the world in general.

Quoting Lenin, Hua spoke to Sino-American-Soviet relations in the following passage:

The more powerful enemy [read: the USSR] can be vanquished only by exerting the utmost effort, and most thoroughly, carefully, attentively and skillfully making use without fail of every, even the smallest, "rift" among the enemies [read: the USSR and the U.S.], of every antagonism of interest among the bourgeoisie of the various countries and among the various groups or types of bourgeoisie within the various countries [read: U.S., Japan, and Western Europe], and also by taking advantage of every, even the smallest, opportunity of gaining a mass ally, even though this ally be temporary, vacillating, unstable, unreliable and conditional [read: the United States].



It would be difficult to find a more straightforward and succinct statement of the tactics and strategy of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. But Hua was even more explicit regarding the United States and the Soviet Union in certain other passages of his report:

Soviet-U.S. contention extends to every corner of the world, but its focus is still Europe.

The Soviet Union and the United States are the source of a new world war, and Soviet social-imperialism in particular presents the greater danger.

The two hegemonic powers, the Soviet Union and the United States, are the biggest international exploiters and oppressors of today and the common enemies of the people of the world. The third world countries suffer the worst oppression and hence put up the strongest resistance; they are the main force combating imperialism, colonialism and hegemonism. The second world countries have a dual character; on the one hand, they oppress, exploit and control the third world countries, and on the other, they are controlled, threatened and bullied by both hegemonic powers in varying degrees. Chairman Mao's thesis differentiating the three worlds gives a correct orientation to the present international struggle and clearly defines the main revolutionary forces, the chief enemies, and the middle forces that can be won over and united, enabling the international proletariat to unite with all the forces that can be united

to form the broadest united front in class struggles against the chief enemies on the world arena.

Making due allowances for its ideological cast, this represents a comprehensive presentation of the Chinese view. It should not be regarded as mere rhetoric, since it demonstrably provides the rationale for actual Chinese policies and attitudes—a mix of political culture and national interest as conceived by the leadership. Chinese leaders should be given credit for a degree of honesty and forthrightness that is often denied them. It is frequently said, "They don't really mean it," or "Pay attention not to what they say but what they do." In fact, they do mean it, and in general terms the above words do mesh with current policies. Moreover, PRC foreign policies have not varied with the major political changes on the domestic front in recent years, contrary to the expectations of many Americans and Russians.

To summarize: The PRC holds that the world is divided into three parts: the two superpowers; the second world comprising essentially the national bourgeois states of Western Europe and Japan; and the third world, built around the developing states. It fully identifies with the third world, the former "socialist camp" having been scuttled when the Soviet Union became a "fascist, social-imperialist state," and aspires to play the role of spokesman for the "peasant and proletarian" positions equated with this world.

The superpowers are both primary enemies of "the peoples of the world," but the Soviet Union is the principal threat because it is a rising power, whereas the United States is a declining power. To combat the Soviet Union, it is necessary to build the broadest possible front, one encompassing not only the second and third worlds but also the United States—though we are intended to be only a temporary ally, in the manner of the alliance with Chiang Kai-shek during the Sino-Japanese war.

War is inevitable, and its major locus will be Europe, its principal contestants the United States and the Soviet Union. Adequate preparation, however, may make it possible for the opponents of the Soviet Union to postpone the date of the war, or to win the conflict when it breaks out. Appeasement of Russia can only lead to disaster.

Under this strategic vision, the PRC encourages NATO and applauds an American presence in Europe. It is now also encouraging the rearmament of Japan, and the maintenance of close American-Japanese security ties. Indeed, it favors a strengthening of the American position at points where confrontation with the Soviet Union appears most likely, and where the Chinese strategic reach cannot extend. Thus, there is no objection to our continued presence in the Philippines, or in Diego Garcia.

However, parallel interests stop considerably short of desiring an American presence everywhere, or of being willing to help the United States resolve crucial issues. A tragic error was made in assuming that the PRC would assist the United States in obtaining "peace with honor" in Indochina. As the prospects for Communist victory brightened, Chinese aid to Hanoi increased during the final period of the war. Similarly, it is a mistake to assume that the PRC will compromise on Korea. To the contrary, Peking has signalled in every possible way its determination to stand by Kim Il-sŏng, and its statements on Korea have been unrelentingly hostile to the U.S. position and that of South Korea.

Nor should it be assumed that the PRC is prepared to make significant concessions pertaining to Taiwan. In the months since the advent of the Carter administration, PRC leaders have repeatedly stated that they will *not* renounce the possible use of

force. On the contrary, they have asserted that force may be necessary if the present attitudes of "the Chiang clique" persist. Nor is there any indication up to now that they would accept the continuance of American military assistance to Taiwan, even if we agreed to abrogate the Mutual Security Treaty. Almost certainly, such aid would be attacked as interference in the internal affairs of another country, particularly if Taiwan had been legally accepted as a province of China. If the aid came indirectly, via a third source, the same charge would be made.

The PRC's position towards Taiwan does not jibe well with its insistence that the people of Timor should be supported in their quest for independence, despite the fact that the Timorese are both ethnically Indonesian and geographically encased in the Indonesian region. Nor is Peking's ardent espousal of independence for Puerto Rico wholly consistent. But consistency is not the hallmark of many foreign policies, and we must assume that in their recent pronouncements on the issue of Taiwan the Chinese mean what they say.

IV

In the face of these problems, and admitting that the United States enjoys greater contact with the PRC than many nations having full diplomatic relations, why has normalization been declared so urgent? In its briefest form, the argument is that if there is no progress, then there will be deterioration.

In this connection, it has been suggested that trade and other forms of economic intercourse can only be advanced in a sustained fashion after normalization. The old lure of 400, now 900, million customers is a powerful one, and unquestionably some increases in trade would follow normalization and the establishment of "most favored nation" treatment. But economic relations between the U.S. and the PRC will not be a major factor in the economy of either nation for the foreseeable future, if ever. We may assume that the PRC will modify but not abandon its doctrine of self-reliance. Investment will be impossible and the problem of China's foreign reserves will remain serious, with her exports relatively limited. Its most logical trading partner will continue to be Japan for a great variety of reasons, starting with proximity and costs. China will diversify its trade in some degree, anxious to avoid the dependence upon a single source that proved so costly in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split. From the United States, however, it will seek primarily the very high technology products it cannot get elsewhere, which in some cases will raise the same security problems posed by certain products covered by the Soviet Union. But once the political-security question has been settled, these products can be sold under present conditions, as indeed, in some cases, is happening.

Far more important is the question of how decisions concerning normalization may affect Sino-Soviet relations. A few years ago, it was argued that if the United States did not normalize relations with the PRC prior to Mao's death, the chances were high that a post-Mao leadership would turn toward rapprochement, or at least a tactical détente, with the Soviet Union. This thesis rested upon three premises: that Mao himself was the chief architect of Sino-American détente; that significant opposition to this policy existed in China, particularly among the military; and that the logic behind a limited tactical détente between China and Russia was sufficiently powerful to carry the day, should normalization falter.

In its timing, at least, that thesis has proven to be incorrect. The post-Mao leadership has been as fiercely anti-Soviet as Mao himself. But the issue persists, partly because, from a Chinese standpoint, there is a logical case to be made for a shift in Sino-Soviet relations. Putting ourselves in the role of a Chinese spokesman for change, the argument could run as follows:

We do not have to love the Russians, nor to trust them. However, the present level of tension is too high to serve our national interests. We must keep a huge force along a 4,800-mile border, much of it inactive in

productive terms during a period when we desperately need semi-skilled and skilled manpower. We are forced to consider rapid military modernization when our first need is to build a solid infrastructure in heavy industry, and approach military modernization more gradually.

Further, the present level of tension has created a torrent of public polemics damaging to both the Soviets and ourselves, and badly disruptive of the international revolutionary movement. Everywhere, we must fight the Russians first in seeking access to that movement. Each of us, moreover, has problems with minority peoples living on our borders, problems exacerbated by this feud.

Finally, current policies make us heavily dependent upon the United States whose will—its capacity to serve as the countervailing force to the Soviet Union—is in grave doubt.

Such an argument would not be submitted on behalf of a restoration of the alliance. Rather, it would be advanced in favor of a reduction of tension—some degree of normalization. It should also be noted that it does not mention, let alone center upon, the issue of Taiwan. To the extent that it involves the United States, it hinges upon the issue of American credibility. Yet despite the element of logic here, the tides are not running in the direction of even a tactical limited détente. Why?

First, it is easy to underestimate the deep emotional and racial antagonisms that affect both societies. In Russia, the specter of "the yellow peril" has a lengthy history, and it is by no means dead. Chinese xenophobia also runs deep, and given the profound cultural differences and recent experiences, it can easily be directed against the Russians.

This alone would not suffice, of course, but there are powerful impersonal forces also at work. Close relations between two major societies living cheek-by-jowl are always difficult to establish and maintain—they usually depend upon a shared perception of threat. While the United States served that purpose in the late 1940s and early 1950s, today it does not. Hence, the *raison d'être* for close ties is gone. The fact that Russia and China claim to share a common ideology further intensifies the struggle, since the issue of heresy, and interference in each other's internal affairs, follows.

Finally, and most important, the Soviet Union and China are two empires moving toward each other at an accelerating rate, with no buffer state system—so critical to European détente—to separate them. Both the USSR and the PRC are seeking to strengthen their frontiers with their own dominant race, and to develop these regions economically and militarily. Yet they are at different stages of development, with radically different cultural heritages, timings of revolution, and, hence, different senses of national interest. As a trading partner, moreover, the Soviet Union has very little to offer the People's Republic of China—both because of historic experience and innate capacity.

Thus, the chances against any meaningful Sino-Soviet détente currently outweigh the chances of its achievement. Among the available options, continued hostility short of war appears the most likely. A Sino-Soviet war has a very low level of probability since both sides are aware of the costs and risks, as well as the impossibility of winning such a war. And a restoration of the old Sino-Soviet alliance can be considered virtually impossible.

It is vitally important to realize, however, that one of the key variables in this picture is American foreign policy, and, specifically, American credibility. When Teng Hsiao-p'ing recently asserted that Secretary Vance had told the Chinese that America's military power was greater than the Soviet Union's, he added, "but we don't believe him." This is but one piece of evidence among many that the Chinese are acutely aware of the fact that their "balance of power" policy depends upon the United States. In appreciating this, I would emphasize that it is neither necessary nor desirable for the United States to reenter the cold war, nor to accept the Chinese contention that an American-Soviet war is inevitable. An important distinction must be made between playing Peking's game of allowing ourselves to be drawn into confrontations with Russia, so that China can sit on the mountaintop and watch the two tigers fight, and maintaining an economic, political, and military posture that assures all states of our will and ability to honor those commitments and policies we believe to be in our interests.

The final issue concerning the complex question of normalization is whether the problem of Taiwan, if not "settled" now, will breed the circumstances of a future Sino-American war. The argument is that ten to 15 years hence, a militarily sufficient PRC will be prepared to risk confrontation with the United States to "liberate" Taiwan.

In my view, this is a misreading of both the past and the future. If China's developmental problems remain as formidable, and its relations with the Soviet Union as complex, as they are today, it will not be prone to risk war with a nation that for the conceivable future will be vastly superior to it in military and economic terms. Since such a conflict would also antagonize the Japanese, who by that time may be playing a much larger role in China's economic development, it would be the height of folly. Only a miscalculation of U.S. commitments and intentions could lead to conflict. Unfortunately, this risk could arise.

Consider, for a moment, the Shanghai Communiqué, that joint declaration signed at the end of the Nixon visit in August 1972. Two positions were set forth there: the Chinese view that there is but one China, and that this one China includes Taiwan; and the American view that the China-Taiwan question should be settled peacefully. The United States agreed not to challenge the Chinese position—with the meaning of this commitment unclear. The Chinese were silent on the question of peaceful settlement.

Now, the credibility of this document is marred by a patent falsehood, namely, that "all Chinese on both sides of the straits" accept the one-China thesis. If the communiqué had stated that the two governments on both sides of the straits so viewed the matter, that would merely have been a statement of fact. But both the Chinese and American negotiators knew that the statement put

into the communiqué was false, since it ignores the large number of Taiwanese and the growing number of mainland Chinese on Taiwan who do not accept this thesis. Thus, our new relation with the PRC was launched on the basis of a deliberately ambiguous and partly false set of statements, presumably because it could not be launched on any other basis.

Ambiguity is not invariably a mistake, but neither is it necessarily helpful in producing and maintaining an understanding. Today, the PRC leaders insist that via the Shanghai Communiqué, the United States has committed itself to the eventual recognition of the People's Republic of China and the abandonment of Taiwan. Peking also insists that it has made no commitments to a peaceful settlement, and intends to make none, viewing Taiwan as strictly an internal affair. The United States meets this clarity with continued ambiguity, exploring privately the possibility of some compromise.

The United States thus appears today to be on the defensive, uncertain of its basic principles, and hence, unpredictable. In some circles it is now being asserted that our commitments to Taiwan are not meaningful because the American people would not support involvement in any war to defend Taiwan. If we are to judge the validity of our commitments on the basis of presumed public opinion in a completely abstract situation—in the absence of any incident or clearly perceived threat—no American commitments will seem credible. Yet in the event of crisis, public and official reaction may be quite different. And the danger of miscalculation provides a powerful argument against an ambiguous policy towards Taiwan—since our involvement in both the Korean and Vietnam wars was to a large extent the product of Communist miscalculation, for which we bore considerable responsibility. □

Roger Kaplan

Will the Kremlin Win the French Elections?

On March 12 and 19 the French will choose a new National Assembly. Polls show that as many as 55 percent of the voters still prefer the left. But with the recent breakdown of the Communist-Socialist alliance, this election could prove most interesting for the emergence of a strong center.

February 3, 1978

“Twenty years, enough!” With this slogan, the divided left is sending its candidates into the battle to see who controls the next French National Assembly. The reference is to twenty years of Gaullism, and since the Gaullists are not in power, one could say that what the French have really had twenty years too much of is leftist buffoonery instead of responsible opposition. With the French political fever rising, the Prime Minister, Raymond Barre, is at last taking full cognizance of his duties as political leader—as well as leader of the government—and is sallying forth with a lengthy reforming program (offered at Blois in mid-January), a document so radical that it proposes to give the French people the right of *habeus corpus*. Meanwhile the Communist leader, Georges Marchais, calls the president of the French equivalent of the National Association of Manufacturers (*le Patronat*) a murderer because there are some families which cannot afford meat every night. And François Mitterrand intones about the just society.

The major event since March 1977, when the *Union de la*

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Gauche swept the municipal elections, has been its virtual collapse over the issue of nationalization (at least that is the ostensible issue). The Socialist Party of François Mitterrand and the Movement of Left Radicals of Robert Fabre walked out of a meeting in late September claiming the Communists were asking for too much. Indeed, the PCF had demanded that the “Common Program of Government” be updated. MM. Mitterrand and Fabre claimed it would be inflationary and communistic. It certainly would be, as would the original agreement of 1972 which the Communists signed enthusiastically.

The pity is that M. Mitterrand staked his career on the Common Program and the politics it implied: alliance with the Marxist-Leninist left and its 20 percent of the vote, and, concurrently, assistance in its search for respectability as a democratic party. Now that the PCF, for its own cryptic (or not so cryptic) reasons, is coming out of the Stalinist closet, which really surprises no one other than the outraged leader of the Socialist Party, M. Mitterrand is finding that his whole strategy is worth as much as an old *pissoir*, even though the polls show that as many as 55 percent of the voters still prefer the left. What could dash its lead is this: Because of France's two-round electoral process, a plurality for the left on March 12 could fail to translate into a