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Abstract

By the end of the Second World War, a new international system had come into being, based on global bipolarity, with two superpowers defining the nature and process of international relations. This new period became known as the Cold War. During the period in question, several other players sought to break the monopoly that the USSR and the USA exercised on each side of the divide. The most important of these players was China, because of its huge size and population. It was a true dragon, albeit a red one.

In this study we discuss the transformation in Sino-American relations, from hostility to engagement, during the years from 1949 to 1972, in the attempt to understand the shift in the two parties' relations to one another and to other members of the international community. Our objective is to understand why China and United States began to mend their relations during the latter part of the nineteen sixties. It emerges from our research that three fundamental elements played the key roles in bringing about these changes: China's possession of nuclear weapons after 1964; the Sino-Soviet confrontation that split the communist world into two camps; and the Vietnam War, the biggest strategic disaster faced by the USA since its Civil War.

Even before the advent of the People's Republic in 1949, China saw itself as destined to play a significant role in the postwar international system, alongside the US and the USSR. It never really accepted the concept of bipolarity. Because of the US's containment policy, based on the so-called 'domino theory', seen to apply to China as well as the Soviet Union after 1949, it found itself forced to accept a tactical alliance with the Soviets to break its encirclement. In the last years of the sixties, however, things began to change, on both the Chinese and the American side, with a progressive thaw in relations.

The principal finding of this study is that a change in the structure of the system itself, and in particular, in the balance of power in Southeast Asia, in turn brought about the change in the quality of relations between China and the United States, producing a new type of interaction between them.

In researching and analyzing the case at hand, a historical approach was taken, as it appeared to be the most appropriate methodology. It also made it possible to create logical and empirical links between the past, the present, and, by way of projection, the future. As for the theoretical framework, realism, coupled with a dose of constructivism, was adopted, and this made it possible to account for variations over time and space and reach plausible conclusions.

China, it will be shown, increasingly came to view the Soviet Union, and no longer the United States, as the prime enemy. This trend, which began even before the death of Stalin, continued thereafter and reached a peak at the time of the proclamation of the so-called Brezhnev doctrine, which entailed the right to interfere in the internal affairs of block members, and the application of the doctrine in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Meantime, the US encountered such problems in the greater Asian region with its looming defeat in Vietnam, that it became open to improving relations with the Chinese, after the end of the Johnson presidency.

More generally, it can be seen that US policy towards China was based on an incorrect appraisal of international power relations, predicated on structural/ideological enmity in the context of the Cold War, rather than the reality of international power politics. The shift came only very slowly, but its results were all the more spectacular, and a vindication of the role of history as well as the applicability of theoretical realism to international processes.

The study consists of an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion: the four chapters deal successively with theoretical

considerations, the early history of modern US-Chinese relations, factors of change, and resulting structural transformations. Following the conclusion, there is a bibliography and an index.