



Jeffrey A. Engel, “Of Fat and Thin Communists: Diplomacy and Philosophy in Western Economic Warfare Strategies toward China (and Tyrants Broadly,)” *_Diplomatic History_*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (June 2005), pp. 445-474.

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Jeffrey A. Engel has written an account of American economic diplomacy toward the Sino-Soviet Bloc dating roughly from the outbreak of the Korean War¹ until the Kennedy Administration. His main goal is to explain the difference between such policies vis-à-vis the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Using a metaphor borrowed from a British diplomat, he argues that Washington wanted “fat” (i.e., contented) communists in the Soviet Union, but “thin” (i.e., discontented) communists in the PRC. The basic idea was that the domestic pressures caused by poor economic development in the latter country would lead to a revolution, whereas the former country was already industrialized and not dependent on potential American trade. He skillfully maps out the differences in policy recommendations between the British and Americans over this issue, with the British making the argument for aiming at “fat” communists in China too. “Fat” communists would be more likely to be contented and peaceful, argued the British; therefore they suggested open trading relations with the PRC. That this was due in large part to the economic power disparities between the two allies – the British desperately needed the trade and control over Hong Kong - is noted but downplayed as an explanation for the policy differences. Such instrumentalist explanations are generally covered, but de-emphasized. Other factors are also entertained and downplayed in explaining American policies, e.g., domestic politics and reputational concerns. David Allan Mayers’ “wedge theory” (a book that is never mentioned here), that argued that US policy was based on the idea that economic sanctions would produce a strain in PRC-Soviet relations and might lead to a break-up of their alliance through the emergence of Chinese nationalism and disappointment with Soviet aid, which is more or less accepted wisdom now, is given but perfunctory treatment.² Engel goes beyond such instrumental, power-based explanations, however, and argues that American planners wanted sanctions “not only to limit [China’s] capabilities and its relations with Moscow, but ultimately they wanted China so burdened that it might rot from the inside.” (p. 460) It is this last argument that represents the “philosophy” in the title of the article.

Indeed, Engel wants to move away from economic and political instrumentalist arguments and position these policy differences within the realm of philosophical differences between the British and Americans, with the latter being particularly rigid and inflexible. Instrumental factors were present, he admits, but philosophical issues have been largely overlooked. It is here that his thesis begins to run into problems.

The Americans, he argues, were “Lockean” in that they believed that communism – or any oppressive system - was an untenable way of organizing society and would ultimately collapse from within of its own contradictions, and – here is the “Lockean” part - that Americans in the 1950s believed “like a catechism” that “a government’s primary role was the sustenance

and protection of its populace.” (p. 462) If a government failed to do so, or even worse acted to oppress the populace, the people would and should turn against it and overthrow it. The “classic example” given is the French Revolution, but the American Revolution is an example also. (p. 462) It is from this revolutionary experience, it would seem, that the Americans adopted their “Lockean” viewpoint. No other explanation is given or implied. Hence the trade sanctions on China and other tyrannical governments were to bring those governments down.

The problems with this formulation and approach are several. First, it is not clear what exactly is uniquely “Lockean” about this idea of what constitutes good governance. Locke undoubtedly believed it to be true, but so did many other thinkers. In fact, it sounds quite a bit like the concept of the “Mandate of Heaven” in Chinese political theory, or a version of Rousseau’s General Will, or any number of the French *philosophes*, among other political traditions. Does not this formulation pretty much describe what happened to the Guomintang (Kuomintang) under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek)? The aspects of what uniquely constitutes “Lockean” political philosophy need to be articulated and demonstrated more clearly before this kind of epistemic claim can be made. Engel does not do this.

Second, the measurement of the causal influence of ideas in an entire culture is always difficult in intellectual history, and in some cases impossible. As Engel notes, Herbert Hoover believed in “fattening” the Soviets in the early 1920s, and even Eisenhower wasn’t too sure about his own “thinning” policies. (Hoover, p. 473; Eisenhower, p. 460, fn. 27) Were they not “Lockean”? Why are some Americans “Lockean” and not others? Or some Americans “Lockean” at certain times but not at other times? Engel makes much of the fact that even Winston Churchill – “no great lover of Bolshevism” – was in favor of a “fattening” strategy towards China in the 1950s. Yet this was the same man who decried the West’s not having gotten rid of the new Soviet Union by “strangling it in its crib.” Why was he “Lockean” in the 1950s, but not in the 1920s? What about the aid and trade with Tito’s Yugoslavia? These anomalies can be far better explained by instrumentalist theories that are context-dependent than by the broad claims of political philosophy, regardless of the political rhetoric used to justify them. This seems to be a case of claiming Americans are “Lockean” except when they are not, a claim that cannot be refuted.

Third, there really is very little said about the communist side in this article. The disastrous Great Leap Forward in China in the late 1950s, for example, which caused the deaths of thirty million people or more, is barely mentioned. To believe that a government responsible for that kind of misery is doomed to failure was not foolish or rash, although in the event it did not happen in this case. Jiang never was this bad a leader, and yet his government fell.

Moreover, Engel appears to assume that the Chinese were completely free to trade with the United States. The Soviets also placed limits on what their ally could do in exchange for aid and support. In his meeting with Stalin in Moscow in 1949-1950, Mao was forced to accept restrictions on his freedom of action. As Vlad Zubok describes it:

During the talks on the ministerial level [in 1950], the Soviet side succeeded in imposing on the PRC several secret agreements. The Additional Agreement to

the treaty stipulated that "on the territory of the Far Eastern region and the Central Asian republics, as well as on the territory of Manchuria and Xinjiang," both the USSR and the PRC "would not provide to foreigners the rights for concessions, and would not tolerate activities of industrial, financial, trade and other enterprises, communities and organizations, with the participation, directly or indirectly, of the [financial] capital of the third countries or the citizens of those countries."³

It is true that this policy was eased following Stalin's death, but it did not exactly get things off on the right foot.

Fourth, in fact the United States did approach the Chinese Communists in the summer of 1949 and offered to normalize relations with them, including normal trade relations, if they would not pull too close to the USSR "in a confrontation with the United States" and not establish a totalitarian dictatorship. Foreign aid was even offered, with the United States also offering to "cooperate with the Soviet Union in the construction of world peace." The Americans were rebuffed.⁴ Where was the "Lockean" element of U.S. policy in this instance? When does it appear and why? Engel never seems to entertain the idea that the hostile behavior of the communist side was an important causal factor in the shift toward hostility in American policy. The attack in June, 1950 occurred in the wake of a good deal of Chinese Communist hostility to the United States already.⁵

In other words, as China historian Warren Cohen has noted, citing John Garver, "the Truman Administration did precisely what lost chance [for better relations, including trade relations, in 1949] critics wanted it to do, to no avail."⁶ Cohen notes the turning point in China scholarship on this subject:

In 1986 Chinese and American scholars met at a conference in Beijing to discuss relations between their countries from 1949-1955. American participants were surprised to hear many (but not all) of the Chinese present, diplomats as well as scholars, dismiss the lost chance idea as fanciful. They had not been interested in friendship with the United States in 1949. Interviews that I conducted with men and women who had worked closely with Zhou Enlai in the 1940s sounded the same theme. The United States was seen as an implacable enemy by 1946, if not earlier, and friendly [Chinese Communist] overtures towards Ambassador J. Leighton Stuart and others had been tactical, designed to avert a major military intervention by the Americans.⁷

Writing from the perspective of 1996, Cohen notes that the archival materials that have emerged since 1986 support such a thesis. Clearly all of the blame for the lack of normal trade relations does not rest with the United States alone, especially in the early period. It may just be that US economic strategy did not matter that much, at least in the early days. The Chinese weren't interested anyway, for ideological and other reasons. It has been twenty years now since this information about the communist side became available. It is time that it is represented in the general history of the period rather than tired, outdated claims of the Cold War being solely, or

even primarily, the responsibility of the United States and its allegedly rigid ideology (or philosophy.)

In sum, this article synthesizes various explanations of US policy well. But there are remaining methodological and evidentiary shortcomings that are problematical and detract from its overall quality. Its main thesis remains unproven, and perhaps unprovable. And the interactive nature of Cold War policies is slighted, if not ignored, in service to a one-sided criticism of U.S. policies that overvalues the domestic and ideational sources of those policies.

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¹ Engel gets the date of the outbreak of the Korean War wrong. He writes, in his very first sentence, “In late June of 1950, three weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States government cancelled all pending American exports to the People’s Republic of China.” The war broke out on June 25, 1950 which would put three weeks later sometime around July 16, 1950. This is not a trivial point; as if it was done in late June it demonstrates that it was a part of the larger set of policies in immediate reaction to the attack. We are also told that the U.S. subsequently “seized all Chinese and North Korean financial assets in the United States.” (p. 445) A reader may wonder what “financial assets” North Korea had in the United States in 1950, but no further information is provided.

² David Allan Mayers, *Cracking the Monolith: U.S. Policy Against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949-1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986).

³ Vladislav Zubok, “‘To Hell With Yalta!’ Stalin Opts for a New Status Quo,” *Cold War International History Project Online, Virtual Archive*, from Bulletin 6-7, “Cold War in Asia Pact,” n.p., at: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org>.

⁴ See Shuguang Zhang and Jian Chen (sic), Eds., *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy and the Cold War in Asia: New Documentary Evidence, 1944-1950* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1996), p. 110, fn. 40. The evidence is from a report from the Chinese Communist archives, so we know the message was delivered and understood by the Chinese in this fashion.

⁵ U.S. Ambassador Stuart specifically mentioned the ending of the Chinese Communists’ “anti-American campaign” in the summer of 1949. *Ibid.*

⁶ Warren I. Cohen, “Introduction: Was There a Lost Chance in China?,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 21, Nr. 1 (Winter, 1997), p. 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.