

Debate surfaces over China card

Peter Ennis's assessment of the GOP upsurge against Carter's Peking alliance.

A major debate over the Carter administration's China policy has broken out, spurred in part by the controversy surrounding Republican presidential candidate Ronald Reagan's statements concerning China and Taiwan. At the core of the debate is the increasingly obvious fact that the administration has concluded a military alliance with the Communist leaders in Peking—an alliance many Democrats and Republicans fear will lead to American involvement in a Chinese-backed conflict with the Soviet Union.

On the one side of this debate stands the Carter administration, shoulder to shoulder with its friends in Peking. Evidence clearly indicates that Peking now actively favors the reelection of President Carter for reasons that have mostly to do with the character of military technology arrangements and defense alliances now either consummated or under further negotiations between the two countries. The Chinese appear to prefer the kind of "American card" they now have with the Carter administration to an unknown relationship with a Reagan administration, despite the overall commitment of the Reagan-Bush campaign to maintaining the basic U.S.-Chinese relationship.

On the other side stands a broad array of American policy circles who are unified in their opposition to the Carter China policy and view the Reagan campaign as a vehicle for their views. In the recent period, a handful of cautious conservative Asian and Soviet specialists have succeeded in getting Ronald Reagan to make an issue of Taiwan, with their real underlying concern Washington-Peking relations. Opposition to the China card was also voiced this week at hearings on U.S.-China relations held in Washington by the House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific.

The danger at this time is that the debate will drag out too long, or prove ineffective, while the threat of a U.S.-Soviet conflict increases. Analysts are particularly concerned about the situation in Indochina, where China threatens to invade Vietnam at the close of the current rainy season. Should China invade Vietnam, the Soviet Union will almost certainly become involved, and the

Peking leaders will drag the United States into a conflict with Moscow sooner than most of Carter's opponents realize.

Carter spokesmen reveal alliance

This week, the lines of the debate were drawn in the public view.

Top Carter officials launched a new round of attacks on Reagan for his China policy statements, providing alarming new evidence of the Washington-Peking alliance. The latest attacks follow Reagan's Aug. 25 press conference, in which he criticized the administration for being "hypocritical" toward Taiwan, and for making concessions to the Communist Chinese "not in our national interest."

Vice-President Walter Mondale touched off the new attacks when he told reporters in New York that Reagan was disrupting American-Chinese ties, which could have "disastrous consequences" for the national security of the United States. "This will only benefit one country," Mondale said, "the Soviet Union."

U.S. Ambassador to China Leonard Woodcock emphasized this same theme Aug. 26 when he told reporters in Peking that Reagan was endangering the "delicate" Chinese-American relations, which in turn could "gravely weaken" the United States. He made the statement just before going to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, where he had been imperiously summoned for consultations.

The Mondale and Woodcock statements are the most far-reaching comments thus far by Carter officials on the strategic and military nature of current American ties with Peking. By saying China is crucial to American national security, the Carter administration has admitted that China has been integrated into U.S. global defense plans, and is a cornerstone of U.S. deployments in Asia. Implicit in this alliance is a commitment to back up China in the event Peking becomes embroiled in a military conflict—which is where the threat of a U.S.-Soviet nuclear conflict arises. Militarily, China is so weak and backward that the United States gains

nothing from this alliance. But Carter has given Peking a free hand to pursue its goal of dominating all of Southeast Asia, including Soviet-allied Vietnam.

Election issue

In his Aug. 25 California press conference, called to “clarify” his China policy, Reagan kept the issue on the front pages by denouncing “the petty practices” of the Carter administration in its handling of Taiwan. He said that he does not “see eye to eye” with the Peking leaders on Taiwan, and that he fundamentally disagreed with the decision of the Carter administration to sever all governmental ties between Washington and the island. This was a concession that both the Nixon and Ford administrations refused to make to Peking, Reagan said, yet Carter agreed to this Chinese demand. Nevertheless, Reagan said, this is a decision of the past, which he as President could not change.

However, he said, American ties to Taiwan are now governed by the Taiwan Relations Act, passed by the Congress in 1977. This provides for the stationing of American officials temporarily on “leave” from the State Department on Taiwan, based at an institute financed by the Congress. As President, Reagan said he would adhere to the provisions of this bill. “I would not pretend, as Carter does, that the relationship we now have with Taiwan, enacted by our Congress, is not official,” Reagan said. The bottom line, he said, is to end the “inappropriate and demeaning” fashion in which “our Chinese friends on Taiwan” are now treated by Carter.

Coming on the heels of Republican vice-presidential candidate George Bush’s trip to China last week, during which the Chinese continually blasted Reagan, the Monday press conference is sure to have further angered the Peking leaders. For Peking, the Taiwan issue is racial—they want to dominate Taiwan along with the rest of Southeast Asia, and claim the island as part of Chinese territory. The issue is also symbolic for Peking: Will the Reagan campaign kowtow to the demands of the Communist leaders, ensuring them that the “American card” is there to be played to manipulate Washington against the Soviet Union?

An unreliable ally

Discussions over the last few days with Reagan’s Asia specialists have underlined the concern that exists over the Carter alliance with Peking. To be sure, most advisers in the Reagan camp would like to “play the China card.” In fact, at the Monday press conference Reagan himself said that China and the United States and Japan have “common interests” against the Soviet Union’s “military buildup” in Asia. However, these advisers say, this “common interest” should not extend into an alliance with Peking.

An example cited by one adviser was Indochina. Should a war break out there, and the Soviet Union intervene on the side of Vietnam, the United States should “absolutely not” back up the Chinese, according to this adviser. “And if we haven’t told them this yet,” he said, “we should tell them now.” The Carter decision to sell arms to China, and the upcoming trips to Peking by some of the Pentagon’s top officials, including Undersecretary of Defense Robert Komer and Undersecretary William Perry in the next few weeks, are cited by the Reagan team as “very questionable decisions.”

Importantly, however, the Reagan advisers uniformly deny the Carter administration has formed an alliance with Peking, choosing to ignore all the evidence. It is the danger that an alliance will be formed in the future that worries them, they say. China is not a reliable ally, they say, and therefore no alliance should be formed.

The danger at this time is that the debate will drag out too long.... China threatens to invade Vietnam at the close of the current rainy season. Should China invade Vietnam, the Soviet Union will almost certainly become involved, and the Peking leaders will drag the United States into a conflict with Moscow sooner than most of Carter’s opponents realize.

This same theme was emphasized in testimony Aug. 26 before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia, which is sponsoring hearings on U.S.-China relations. Four witnesses testified against the China card, including two former ambassadors to the Soviet Union. Ambassadors Malcolm Toon, who retired last year, and Raymond Garthoff, joined in attacking Carter for moving away from the “even-handed” dealings with China and the Soviet Union, and strongly questioned the supply of military goods by the U.S. to Peking.

Another witness, Banning Garrett of the University of California’s Institute of International Studies urged the subcommittee to investigate the plan, begun under Henry Kissinger, to establish “a far-reaching military relationship with China in an incremental, step-by-step manner.” ■