BOOK REVIEW
Tao Wang, *Isolating the Enemy: Diplomatic Strategy in China and the United States, 1953-1956* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021)

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Upon its establishment, the People's Republic of China (PRC) faced a tremendously hostile international environment. Despite securing the support of the Soviet Union and the recognition of a few neighboring states, the PRC was denied membership in the United Nations and the emergent postwar international order. The outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula and the ensuing direct conflict between 'volunteers' from the PRC and American-led UN forces only made this worse. Not only did it enflame domestic anxieties in the PRC about an imminent conflict with the United States on several fronts, but it also led to a crippling embargo on the PRC.[1] Thus, despite emerging from economic and societal calamity in the wake of decades of internal conflict and foreign imperialism, mainland China – home to nearly a quarter of the world's population - began the 1950s faced with a hostile world order outside of the Soviet Union and its allies, themselves recovering from the horrors of the Second World War.

By the middle of the 1950s, however, the situation was entirely different. In the aftermath of the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung in 1955 and Premier Zhou Enlai's ensuing spur of diplomatic visits and communiques, the PRC's international profile dramatically improved amongst its neighboring countries, the majority of which now recognized it as the representative of the Chinese people and supported its ascension to the United Nations, as well as countries further afield. In contrast, the United States' reputation amongst its allies and ostensibly neutral nations in Asia fell to a precipitous low. In thus a few short years, the PRC had broken out of an isolation forcibly imposed upon it with shrewd diplomacy, if not necessarily to the full extent to which its leaders had hoped, while also damaging the regional prestige of its biggest opponent.

Few works have tackled the diplomatic exigencies that led to this result with as much precision and care as Tao Wang's *Isolating the Enemy: Diplomatic Strategy in China and the United States, 1953-1956.* Wang provides an exceptional and detailed account of the stunning diplomatic progress that the PRC made in the crucial years between the end of active warfare on the Korean Peninsula and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis, as well as American attempts to respond to it. As Wang notes, this was a period of great uncertainty in terms of the two countries' relationship. Functionally at war on various fronts, the PRC leadership viewed the American government as its primary global opponent and American leaders likewise regarded the PRC as the central threat to its aims in the Asia-Pacific. Despite this hostility, the period between 1953 and 1956 saw both governments attempt to engage with one another at various diplomatic levels and fora, while also pursuing a strategy of isolating their opponent. In highlighting Chinese attempts to outmaneuver the Eisenhower administration by preventing a direct conflict and courting supporters, *Isolating the Enemy* is part of a growing field of work that has sought to reinterpret the PRC's engagement with the world during the early Cold War.[2]

To explore the contradictions between engagement and containment, Wang tackles three key events over the course of six chapters by exploring each from the

perspective of both governments: the Geneva Conference; the First Taiwan Strait Crisis; and the Bandung Conference. Along the way, Wang shares fascinating perspectives from statesmen and diplomats from Taiwan, Vietnam, India, and the United Kingdom, with his use of declassified records from the Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives in Beijing, since-then largely closed off to foreign scholars, to instill his account with tremendous granularity and texture. As he suggests, the tactic of isolating the enemy helped both the United States and China "eliminate the other's threat through uniting allies and mobilizing supporters to push the other to make concessions" to mixed success. (7)

Chapters one and two focus on the mid-1954 Geneva Conference, which aimed to solve outstanding issues from the Korean War and settle the question of French Indochina, where war between the Viet Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and France – among others – had been raging since 1946. Despite the overwhelming importance with which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership treated the Geneva Conference during and after its proceedings, very little work has explored Chinese attitudes at the event. As Wang details, leaders from the United States and the PRC both regarded the conference as important to their immediate interests in the region. The United States did not want to intervene militarily without guarantees from its allies, but also sought to ensure that Indochina did not 'fall' to Communism. Conversely, the PRC leadership wanted to ensure that the Americans didnot involve themselves directly and sought to neutralize the emergent Indochinese states to prevent them from becoming potential participants in a wider, American-led security pact. Both sides, in conjunction with their allied participants at the conference, pursued these objects in various ways. The PRC strategy at the conference largely revolved around attempting to use the British and French to prod representatives from the United States into accepting a settlement. The French government, at the brink of collapse after disastrous defeats on the battlefield, sought an end to the conflict without wanting to entirely cede their interests in the region entirely to the United States, and were likewise aggrieved that the latter was not willing to provide them with more military support.

For its part, the United States only pledged to intervene with a coalition of other countries, most importantly including the United Kingdom, which,preoccupied by its own concerns in Malaya, had little interest in Indochina. Both European powers thus wanted the United States to take the talks seriously. On the other hand, the PRC had to convince the Viet Minh, despite its extraordinary victories on the battlefield, to relinquish its goal of a unitary Indochina to quell Western suspicions of Communist expansion in the region. In return, the PRC"s diplomatic team sought guarantees from the conference's participants that the new states of Cambodia and Laos would not join American plans for a Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). While straining its relationship with the DRV, the PRC's diplomatic team successfully played on divisions between the Americans, British, and French to end the conflict, partition the region, guarantee Laotian and Cambodian neutrality, and leave the door open to possible unification between the two Vietnamese states in the future. The American government, having largely remained belligerent throughout the talks, was unable to sow similar discord amongst the Communist participants. Despite its position that the Soviet Union was a moderating force, the Soviet, Vietnamese, and Chinese parties presented a united front during the discussions. In the end, as a British diplomat put it, this "left the United States with few friends, many enemies and almost universal critics amongst Asian Governments and peoples." (87)

In the immediate wake of their successes at Geneva, PRC leaders pushed efforts to "reduce tensions in its neighborhood" (93) by marshalling the United Kingdom and Asian neutral states against the United States out of fear that it was seeking a Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the Guomindang government in Taiwan. As Wang argues in Chapters 3 and 4, this precipitated the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. These chapters highlight how instead of regarding the Crisis as an error borne out of the Chinese leadership's erratic behavior, it was the product of a comprehensive strategy to "convince the United States not to ally with GMD," with the bombardment of Kinmen and the PRC's simultaneous diplomatic maneuvering with countries like India and the United Kingdom serving as two sides of the same coin. (93) Wang masterfully

showcases how Chinese anxieties about Taiwan and misinterpretation of regional affairs led to this strategy completely backfiring. The Eisenhower administration had serious doubts about the need or value of an MDT with the Guomindang and scarcely contemplated it before the shelling of Kinmen began. Likewise, PRC attempts to woo the British government away from the American camp fell flat on their face. Despite a visit to the country by the Labour Party, then in opposition, and attempts to stress the potential boons of a full-fledged commercial relationship between the two countries, the British government remained ever committed to its alliance with the United States. At the same time, the American government, taken aback by the bombing of Kinmen, interpreted consequent military moves as a prelude to an invasion of Taiwan. The British and Indian governments, behind the scenes, attempted to convince the United States to neutralize Taiwan entirely to settle the issue once and for all, to little avail. Sensing anxieties from its neighbors about a looming showdown, the PRC pushed to participate at the Bandung Conference in the hopes of broadcasting its desire for a lasting peace in contradistinction to the United States.

As Wang concludes in Chapters 5 and 6, the Chinese government's conciliatory rhetoric at Bandung, which culminated in Zhou Enlai's declaration that he was willing to directly meet and negotiate with US representatives, was a way to make-up for its strategic errors in the aftermath of Geneva, and to continue its general strategy of isolating the enemy. PRC officials' goals at Bandung were to establish a neutral zone of peace in Southeast Asia by promoting the recently established Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which they hoped would thwart American efforts to isolate the PRC once and for all. In service of that goal, the Chinese delegation's performance at the conference, particularly Zhou's personal diplomacy, was crucial. By dividing up the participants of Bandung into categories of neutralist, neutral leaning, anti-neutralist leaning, and anti-neutralist, Chinese strategy aimed to "unite the neutralist states, win over countries in group two, influence group three, and isolate group four" (164). Zhou and his team were largely successful. His speeches highlighted the importance of trade, his respect for the neutralist states, particularly India, the PRC government's insistence that overseas Chinese people ought to renounce any claim to Chinese citizenship – a great worry to the countries of Southeast Asia – and the PRC's desire to abide by peaceful coexistence and not export revolutionary politics.

The Americans, by contrast, viewed Chinese participation at the conference with great suspicion. They regarded the Chinese diplomatic team's presence as another ploy to distract from its looming takeover of Taiwan. Relying on friendly governments in Ceylon, Thailand, the Philippines, and Pakistan, Dulles and Eisenhower sought to push their allies to underscore Communist aggression as essentially another form of colonialism and hijack Bandung's anti-colonial sentiments. This was not much of a success. While Bandung failed to result in a "zone of peace," it nonetheless marked the height of the PRC's prestige in the 1950s. The Eisenhower administration's initial rejection of Zhou's call for talks also led to a backlash even amongst its partners. In the end, the US government had to reverse course by announcing that it would discuss the Taiwan situation with the PRC's delegates. Zhou even declared that the PRC would seek a peaceful reunification with Taiwan if possible. Though ambassadorial talks eventually began after a great delay, they ultimately led to nothing but deadlock. By 1958, as Wang soberly concludes, the PRC's growing break with the Soviet Union and the "blind adventurism of revolutionary diplomacy" spelled the end of the pragmatism that had characterized PRC approaches to foreign relations in the 1950s. In the end, conciliatory rhetoric and actions were "simply a different way to fight the enemy" and thus meant that "the ambassadorial talks were doomed before they started." (204)

By analyzing the two governments and their diplomatic maneuvering together and consulting an impressive corpus of archival documents in and beyond both countries, Wang showcases the fragile contingencies that often dictate foreign policy. Neither country's governments completely understood the other, their view of their opponent often mired by geopolitical anxieties and the intercession of various allies and interlocutors. Rather than settle on dismissing the PRC's diplomacy as erratic or subject to the whims of a few leaders, Wang highlights the complexity of the

Foreign Ministry's interactions with its American counterparts. Most noteworthy here is a picture of two governments that often failed to understand each other. Despite conciliatory rhetoric, those misunderstandings often sparked further conflict and mistrust; in the context of rapidly deteriorating relations between the United States and the PRC today, Wang's insights are sadly as relevant as ever.

At the same time, it is clear that Beijing's more flexible approach meant that it was able to outflank Washington at several junctures. Although never truly able to isolate its enemy, the PRC exerted enough pressure for the US to suffer a loss of prestige amongst its allies and the various Asian states, while greatly improving its own reputation in the process. That it did so under great duress and while denied recognition from, and participation in, various international fora makes that even more impressive. This is thus a valuable addition to the work of PRC scholars interested in highlighting that, contrary to popular belief, the PRC was far from isolationist prior to the Reform and Opening-Up period.

Wang's work also raises a few questions about how to analyze diplomatic maneuvering in relation to other political concerns. Wang suggests that thePRC's leaders were eager to use narratives about Taiwan and coming war to "'raise the political consciousness and political alertness of the people of the whole country'" (96), while in the US, Congress and public opinion forced the Eisenhower administration to accept Zhou's offer for direct negotiations (191). Aside from these few mentions, however, domestic politics did not figure into *Isolating the Enemy*'s narrative. Were there any other examples of public pressure or sentiments that affected either country's diplomatic posture, or of the ways in which domestic political priorities set the tempo of foreign policy? How did the PRC government attempt to frame its diplomatic overtures towards Britain, for instance, to the public? What were reactions to visits from leaders of neighboring Asian countries?

Similarly, Wang notes that Bandung did not lead to much concrete success with *actualizing* the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence or neutrality, as many of the participating states had already pledged themselves to various American-led security pacts. But as new scholarship has stressed, the 'Bandung Moment' was of significance not just because of state rhetoric, but also because of people-to-people interactions and participation.[3] Chinese diplomatic overtures towards India, Burma, and Indonesia, for instance, were often accompanied by significant activity conducted by 'unofficial' delegations and United Front organizations. What role, if any, did such 'unofficial' activity play in the PRC's pushes to isolate the enemy and win friends abroad? Should we treat such delegations as distinct from their 'official' counterparts, or as part of a larger diplomatic strategy?

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[1] Hajimu Masuda, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015)

[2] Cf. Jason M. Kelly, *Market Maoists: The Communist Origins of China's Capitalist Ascent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Arunabh Ghosh, *Making It Count: Statistics and Statecraft in the Early People's Republic of China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Julia Lovell, *Maoism: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019); Matthew Galway, *The Emergence of Global Maoism: China's Red Evangelism and the Cambodian Communist Movement, 1949-1979* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Pete Millwood, *Improbable Diplomats: How Ping-Pong Players, Musicians, and Scientists Remade US-China Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2022); Gordon Barrett, *China's Cold War Science Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Taomo Zhou, *Migration in the Time of Revolution: China, Indonesia, and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019); Emily Wilcox, "Sino-Japanese Cultural Diplomacy in the 1950s: The Making and Reception of the Matsuyama Ballet's *The White-Haired Girl*", *Twentieth Century China* 48, no 2 (2023), 130-158.

[3] Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, 'Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War', *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1 (2019): 1-

19; Carolien Stolte, "'The People's Bandung': Local Anti-imperialists on an Afro-Asian Stage," *Journal of World History* 30.1 (2019): 125-156. See also the edited volume, *The Lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

Response

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I am grateful to Yasser Nasser for the attentive and generous review of my book, *Isolating the Enemy: Diplomatic Strategy in China and the United States, 1953-1956*. Thanks to Yidi Wu for organizing the review and to *PRC History Review* for the opportunity to respond to the review. It is really my honor to see my own work introduced to the community, as I have read *PRC History Review* book reviews to update my bibliography on contemporary China.

As Nasser points out, *Isolating the Enemy* examines PRC diplomacy during the Bandung Moment and its interactions with the United States. Specifically, it tries to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the PRC's quest for peaceful coexistence in this period and its militant actions in the Taiwan Strait. In terms of historiography, *Isolating the Enemy* responds to the narratives of the Eisenhower revisionists and post revisionists, particularly the "wedge strategy" and the "Two Chinas" policy, which the Eisenhower administration purportedly pursued to split the Sino-Soviet alliance and contain the People's Republic.

The research for this book benefited enormously from then-available Chinese Foreign Ministry archives. When I began my research browsing through issues of *People's Daily* [人民日报], I was surprised by the numerous articles that stated that the PRC could exploit conflicts between the United States and its allies to isolate U.S. imperialist at a time when U.S. policymakers sought to isolate the PRC. I wondered how that could be possible in light of the disparity of power and influence between the two states. To what extent, I asked, was this simply propaganda that reflected a Leninist perspective of imperialism? Upon deeper investigation, I found that isolating the United States was not propaganda or mere rhetoric. The declassified documents from the Foreign Ministry archives, supplemented by reports in *Internal Reference* [内部参考] collection, demonstrate that PRC officials truly held that U.S. relations with allies and neutral states were rife with conflicts. So there were opportunities to play Europe and the U.S. against each other and formulate a united front with neutral states to eliminate American threats from the PRC's neighborhood. These documents contain invaluable information of certain actions to be taken by Chinese diplomats to drive a wedge between the United States and those powers. In this context, the Taiwan Strait Crisis was consistent with the peace overtures: PRC leaders adopted the same tactic of isolating the United States to pursue the same goal of removing the U.S. threat—in this case, to prevent the United States from signing a security treaty with Taiwan.

These sources also show that PRC officials were unequivocal about U.S. attempts to split the Sino-Soviet alliance and to neutralize Taiwan Strait to establish "Two Chinas." These same officials also knew the British interest in such policies and tried to mobilize the British to pressure the United States, although they misunderstood British intentions and overestimated their influence during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis. In combination with recently available Russian and Vietnamese documents, the PRC Foreign Ministry documents also display how Communist leaders coordinated their positions to speak in the same voice to defeat U.S. efforts to split the Sino-Soviet alliance or establish Two Chinas.

I appreciate that Nasser provides additional insight about the significance of the PRC's diplomacy in the mid-1950s. Now let me answer his questions. *Isolating the Enemy* focuses on interactions between PRC and American officials, and, hence, does not delve into the domestic politics of either countries, as Nasser points out rightly. Nevertheless, as PRC officials often say, fundamentally, diplomacy serves a domestic agenda. The CCP's peace diplomacy of the mid-1950s sought to reduce tensions that PRC leaders witnessed in Asia with strong U.S.-backing. Their aim was to produce a peaceful environment for the PRC's ambitious domestic programs, which

included the First Five Year Plan, the Party's nationalization of industry and commerce, and agricultural collectivization. PRC leaders repeatedly declared the priority of their domestic agenda. [1] Scholars have also demonstrated convincingly that the PRC's diplomacy served domestic needs in the 1950s.[2]

On the Chinese public opinion, my reading of the sources is that it had limited influence on PRC policymaking in the period that I cover. During the First Taiwan Strait Crisis, PRC leaders paid close attention to public responses to their diplomacy. *Internal Reference* included reports to PRC leaders about the effects of the confrontation in the Taiwan Strait on the Chinese public, which ranged from a general fear of United States, to worries about war and anxieties about nuclear weapons, to a general lack of confidence in PRC policy. I argue that public opinion was an influence on Beijing's decision to attack Yijiangshan Island in early 1955. Because PRC leaders also wanted to use the crisis to galvanize the Chinese people, they must demonstrate strength after U.S. leaders concluded the Mutual Defense Treaty with the GMD government. Other than that, however, public opinion did not matter much in Beijing's foreign policymaking, and CCP leaders paid little attention to public responses to their diplomacy, as was evident in the reports in *Internal Reference*.

Nevertheless, the PRC government constantly drew upon diplomacy to promote the public's revolutionary zeal although it did not need their support for specific diplomatic decisions. In light of the PRC's relative isolation in the world, PRC newspapers easily portrayed visits of foreign leaders as failures of American containment and thus a success of PRC diplomacy. CCP propaganda also drew upon diplomatic issues to alienate the United States, although CCP leaders overestimated the influence of their straightforward propaganda. Zhou Enlai told *People's Daily* to highlight the British Labour Party visit to play on differences between the United States and the United Kingdom. Visiting leaders from neutral states in Asia provided opportunities to stress friendship among Asian countries and U.S. aggression as a common threat to Asia.

Another approach to the domestic influence on PRC diplomacy is to study the differences between PRC leaders. Historian Chen Jian argues that Mao Zedong criticized Zhou Enlai in July 1954 for neglecting the Taiwan issue when the latter concentrated on peace initiatives and the Geneva Conference.[3] But existing sources do not allow for further exploration into this matter. My interpretation of this period corroborates Yafeng Xia's study of the relationship between Mao and Zhou during the US-PRC rapprochement. The two leaders cooperated closely and had a good division of labor: Mao set the agenda and made decisions whereas Zhou conducted diplomacy and reported his experiences for Mao's decision.[4]

I completely agree that unofficial diplomacy and/or People's Diplomacy was an important component in the PRC's strategy of developing an international united front against the United States, although my book focuses on official diplomacy and interactions between leaders and diplomats. PRC officials (especially Zhou Enlai) attached great importance to People's Diplomacy, and established the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs [中国人民外交学会] immediately after the CCP came to power in 1949 to conduct People's Diplomacy. This institute indeed invited the British Labour Party to the PRC in 1954, and later sponsored many Japanese, French, American visits before formal diplomacy was established with these countries. In 1954, the CCP established another institution, Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries [中国人民对外友好协会] to pursue People's Diplomacy. After the Bandung Conference, the Foreign Ministry planned to expand trade and cultural exchange via People's Diplomacy with many Asian and African states, and urged institutions such as trade unions and youth and women's federations to participate. [5] According to Zhou Enlai, People's Diplomacy ought to play a particularly important role in relations with Europe and the United States, and he even proposed using it to pit the American public against the hostile U.S. government.[6]

Indeed, recently there has been a growing scholarly interest in the previously underexplored People's Diplomacy. Apart from Emily Wilcox's pioneer study of dance diplomacy in the 1950s that Nasser

cites,[7] Gregg Brazinsky examines China's cultural diplomacy and competition with the United States in the Third World after Bandung.[8] Pete Millword and Kazushi Minami have monographs on China's People's Diplomacy in U.S.-China relations in the 1970s.[9]

Thanks again to Nasser for the thoughtful review and to *PRC History Review* for publishing my response.

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[1] *People's Daily*, editorial, January 1, 1953; *A Biography of Mao Zedong, 1949-1976* [《毛泽东传，1949-1976》], eds. Pang Xianzhi and Jin Chongji (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2003), 546; *A Chronological Record of Zhou Enlai, 1949-1976* [《周恩来年谱，1949-1976》], eds. Li Ping and Ma Zhisun (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1997), 446, 508.

[2] Jia Qingguo, "Searching for Peaceful Coexistence and Territorial Integrity" in *Sino-American Relations, 1945-1955: A Joint Reassessment of a Critical Decade*, eds. Harry Harding and Yuan Ming (Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 1989, 267-70; Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Qiang Zhai, *China & The Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[3] Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 168.

[4] Yafeng Xia, "China's Elite Politics and Sino-American Rapprochement, January 1969-February 1972," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Fall 2006), 3-28.

[5] "Draft opinion about pursuing and promoting friendship relations with Asian and African countries after Asia-African Conference," [亚非会议后加强和开展对亚非国家友好关系的意见草案]，July 12, 1955, Chinese Foreign Ministry Archives, 207-00086-01.

[6] *A Chronological Record of Zhou Enlai*, 419-21.

[7] Emily Wilcox, "Sino-Japanese Cultural Diplomacy in the 1950s: The Making and Perception of the Matsuyama Ballet's The White-Haired Girl," in *Twentieth-Century China* 48, no. 2 (May 2023): 130-58; and "Performing Bandung: China's dance diplomacy with India, Indonesia, and Burma, 1953-1962," in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2017): 518-39.

[8] Gregg A. Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 132-65.

[9] Pete Millword, *Improbable Diplomats: How Ping-Pong Players, Musicians, and Scientists Remade U.S.-China Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Kazushi Minami, *People's Diplomacy: How Americans and Chinese Transformed U.S.-China Relations during the Cold War* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, forthcoming in 2024). See also Mao Lin, "'To See Is to Believe', Modernization and U.S.-China Exchanges in the 1970s," *Chinese Historical Review 23*, I (May 2016): 23-46.