

China and the Yugoslav Crisis, 1990-94: Beijing's Exercise in Dialectics

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This article examines the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) relations with the (former) Yugoslav region in the post-Cold War period. It scrutinizes Chinese policies toward Belgrade, the development of political interaction between the PRC, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia, and Beijing's stand on the Bosnian conflict. It also analyzes Beijing's voting behavior vis-à-vis the Yugoslav question in the United Nations. Finally, a short review of the Chinese press coverage of the Yugoslav conflict is provided.

The central thesis of this paper argues that the goal of Beijing's Yugoslav politics is promoting an anti-hegemonistic, peace-loving image, rather than a genuine concern for the peoples of the former Yugoslavia.

Keywords: Chinese foreign policy; Yugoslavia; Yugoslav civil war; China and the UN; Chinese propaganda

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Relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) have probably been the most torturous among Beijing's relationships with the states of East Central Europe (ECE).¹ In 1949, Beijing refused to accept diplomatic recognition when it was extended by Belgrade. The Sino-Yugoslav "honeymoon," initiated in 1955 when both states finally established diplomatic relations, lasted only three years. From 1958

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¹East Central Europe is defined here as the region comprising Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany (until 1990), Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia (which since 1991-92 has split into Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia).

until the early 1970s, China conducted a wide-scale international “hate campaign” against Yugoslavia’s supposed revisionism. Only in 1968, when Beijing and Belgrade found themselves both criticizing the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, did a slow political and economic rapprochement between the two sides begin.² A full normalization of state and party relations, symbolized by Yugoslav President Tito’s visit to China in 1977, came in the late 1970s.

During the period of intense hostility between the PRC and the Soviet Union in the 1970s, Yugoslavia’s friendship represented a definite political and strategic value to Beijing. Until the mid-1980s, when the PRC thoroughly normalized political and party relations with the rest of ECE, Yugoslavia was one of the few maverick states in the Soviet backyard which was openly friendly with Beijing. This friendship enabled China to extend its influence in the Balkans, and Beijing also perceived Belgrade’s independent foreign policy as a valuable source of potential trouble for the Soviet leadership.³ Moreover, friendly ties with Yugoslavia, an undisputed leader of the nonalignment movement, provided China with sympathy among developing nations.

The gradual normalization of China’s relations with Moscow (which culminated in Mikhail S. Gorbachev’s visit to Beijing in May 1989) transformed the strategic considerations of the PRC’s diplomacy. The Soviet Union ceased to be China’s “official enemy,” and subsequently Yugoslavia’s importance as a potentially destabilizing influence on the Kremlin substantially declined. The systemic changes in ECE in 1989 and the consequent end of the Cold War further lessened Beijing’s interest in Belgrade as the focus of its foreign policy. Entering the 1990s, Yugoslavia no longer had strategic or political value for the Chinese policymakers, and when the Yugoslav internal ethnic crisis erupted in 1990, the post-Cold War political ties between Belgrade and Beijing seemed destined to be of secondary importance.

The Yugoslav political crisis and the subsequent civil war in the early 1990s⁴ did not change Belgrade’s insignificance in terms of China’s

²For a study of Sino-Yugoslav relations from the perspective of Sino-Soviet hostility, see A. Ross Johnson, “Yugoslavia and the Sino-Soviet Conflict: The Shifting Triangle, 1948-1974,” *Studies in Comparative Communism* 7, nos. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 1974): 184-203.

³For a discussion of the PRC’s Balkan strategy, see David A. Andelman, “China’s Balkan Strategy,” *International Security* 4, no. 3 (Winter 1979/1980): 60-79.

⁴A vast number of studies on the Yugoslav civil war have been published. For a splendid example, see Bogdan Denitch, *Ethnic Nationalism: The Tragic Death of Yugoslavia* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

strategic interests. They did, however, involve a number of issues Chinese diplomacy has traditionally been concerned with. Moreover, the internationalization of the conflict and the PRC's membership in the United Nations' Security Council (UNSC) rendered Beijing an "involuntary" participant in multinational efforts to bring an early peace to the warring sides in the former Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav crisis and civil war invoked the following issues: secessionism, systemic changes from communism to capitalism/democracy, the Western "peaceful evolution" strategy, and alleged international violations of state sovereignty.

This article argues that the PRC has utilized the Yugoslav crisis to demonstrate to the international audience (especially the Third World) its principled stand on the questions involved. This exercise in "public relations" has revealed China's caution and sensitivity to playing anything more than a verbally supportive role for Belgrade. At the same time, Beijing's recognition of the Yugoslav breakaway republics in mid-1992 and its energetic advancement of political and economic relations with them has illustrated China's "diplomatic flexibility" and its commitment to developing friendly ties with other states, regardless of their size and political/ideological orientations. To sum up, from 1990 to 1994, Beijing attempted to please all sides of the Yugoslav conflict and simultaneously score points with other states closely observing the major powers' involvement in the Yugoslav crisis. Domestically, the Chinese leadership, through the domestic mass media, has attempted to present the post-1990 situation in Yugoslavia in such a way as to convince the Chinese public that the breakup of the SFRY was mainly caused by anticommunist, foreign forces (which also seek to destroy socialism in China) and the weakness of Yugoslavia's ruling communist party. Therefore, in order to avoid the Yugoslav fate, the Chinese media has implicitly urged its readership to support the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which strengthen the unity of the party and the state, and fight against the Western "peaceful evolution" strategy.

The following article examines relations between Beijing and the republics of former Yugoslavia from 1990 to 1994. It begins with an analysis of Chinese policies toward Belgrade, followed by an examination of developing political interactions between the PRC, Croatia, Macedonia, and Slovenia, and the Chinese stand on the Bosnian conflict. Finally, Chinese press coverage of the Yugoslav events will be examined.

The Ambiguity of Beijing's Attitude Toward Belgrade

The PRC's earliest official reaction to the deepening ethnic dispute in Yugoslavia came after Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence in June 1991, when the Chinese Foreign Ministry's spokesman implicitly condemned both secessionist republics and called for the maintenance of stability and a unified Yugoslavia.⁵ When open ethnic hostilities erupted in Yugoslavia, China officially remained neutral and urged all sides involved to seek an end to the military conflict through peaceful means. At the same time, it strongly opposed sending any international force to Yugoslavia, in agreement with its longstanding opposition to interference in any state's internal politics.⁶ Insistence on the peoples of former Yugoslavia solving their problems themselves and opposition to foreign military involvement in the Yugoslav civil war became repeated themes in Beijing's official position on the conflict.

In compliance with its principled opposition to secessionism, until December 1991 the PRC leadership was apparently not engaged in any direct consultations with Croats or Slovenes. At the same time, Beijing's political relations with Belgrade expanded. This was exemplified by Yugoslav acting federal secretary of foreign economic relations Bozidar Jovanovic's and Yugoslav president Borisav Jovic's separate visits to Beijing in November 1991. Those visits offered Belgrade an opportunity to update the Chinese leadership on the Yugoslav situation from its own perspective. When the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, composed of Serbia and Montenegro) was proclaimed in late April 1992, Beijing promptly recognized the new state.⁷ The FRY thus became the only post-SFRY republic recognized by the PRC without delay.

Beijing's explicit friendliness toward Belgrade, however, did not go beyond verbal manifestations of political support. When the UNSC voted on resolution 757 imposing sanctions on the FRY, Beijing ab-

⁵*People's Daily* (Overseas edition), July 1, 1991, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Daily Report: China* [hereafter cited as *FBIS-CHI*]-91-126 (July 1, 1991): 18.

⁶Xinhua News Agency, September 25, 1991, in *FBIS-CHI*-91-187 (September 26, 1991): 7-8; Yugoslav Press Agency (YPA), Tanjug, October 9, 1991, in *FBIS-CHI*-91-200 (October 16, 1991): 17.

⁷Xinhua, April 30, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI*-92-084 (April 30, 1992): 1.

stained, declaring that sanctions would not solve the Yugoslav crisis, but rather would probably lead to further deterioration of the situation.⁸ Despite abstaining, it nevertheless acted in accordance with the resolution by cutting off direct air links with Belgrade, suspending trade and scientific/technological/cultural cooperation, and freezing Yugoslav assets and official bank accounts held in the Bank of China.⁹ China's implementation of sanctions severely hurt the Yugoslav economy, as 22 percent of Serbia's oil in 1991 came from the PRC.

It is worth noting, however, that Beijing made an effort to remain on friendly terms with the FRY, the imposed sanctions notwithstanding. Diplomatic relations between Beijing and Belgrade were sustained at the ambassadorial level. The old agreement on no visa requirements for travelers with diplomatic/service passports continued. The personnel of the Yugoslav embassy in Beijing were informed in advance of the exact day that the Yugoslav accounts in the Bank of China would be frozen.¹⁰ Similarly, Beijing's imposition of sanctions on the FRY did not stop both sides from continuing high-level governmental, party, and army contacts.¹¹ New Yugoslavia's premier Milan Panic was the first leader from the former Yugoslav region to pay an official visit to China in September 1992, and was received by the entire elite of the PRC's state leadership.

Despite friendly interstate relations, when the question of the FRY's membership in the UN emerged in mid-September 1992, Beijing again abstained from voting, arguing that the suspension of the FRY's seat in the UN was only a "transitory arrangement," and as such did not amount to expulsion from the organization.¹² China also abstained during March 1993 UNSC voting on tightening sanctions against Belgrade.

⁸*People's Daily*, June 1, 1992.

⁹*China Daily*, June 12, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI-92-114* (June 12, 1992): 13; YPA, Tanjug, June 2, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI-92-106* (June 2, 1992): 14.

¹⁰An interview with an FRY's diplomat, Beijing, September 1994.

¹¹In July 1993, PRC Defense Minister Chi Haotian met in North Korea with Zivota Panic, chief of the General Staff of the Yugoslav Army. In September 1993, Yugoslav Foreign Minister Vladislav Jovanovic visited Beijing. In October 1994, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo paid a visit to Belgrade. A month later, a delegation of the Socialist Party of Serbia visited China.

¹²*People's Daily*, September 24, 1992; *Beijing ribao* (Beijing Daily), September 25, 1992; and *Zhongguo waijiao gailan*, 1993 (A survey of China's diplomacy, 1993) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1993), 284-89.

Until late 1994, Beijing consistently refrained from taking any independent action to support Yugoslav efforts to end its international isolation, repeatedly stating its willingness to strive for the restoration of peace and abolishing sanctions exclusively in cooperation “with other members of the international community.”¹³ Only after Belgrade distanced itself from the Bosnian Serbs in August 1994 did Beijing openly urge the UNSC to lift its economic sanctions on former Yugoslavia “to promote an early end to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina.”¹⁴ At the same time, Beijing volunteered to promulgate a “correct picture” of Yugoslavia among nonaligned countries, primarily Arab and Islamic states.¹⁵

Beijing’s behavior vis-à-vis Belgrade is not puzzling if it is assumed that the former Yugoslav region has lost its strategic importance to the PRC. As the Yugoslav issue has not been of vital national interest to China, the Chinese have expressed their attitudes mostly through declarations, avoiding any active involvement in the former Yugoslavia’s affairs. In terms of internal and external propaganda, China has attempted to utilize the Yugoslav conflict to restate its well-known opposition to economic sanctions, hegemonism, and any interference in the internal affairs of other states. The PRC has also appeared to be self-righteous in its militant public stance, but failed to live up to its rhetoric, as it has displayed no desire or willingness to assume a leadership role in solving the Yugoslav question. It has implicitly acknowledged that the European Union, Russia, and the United States have expertise in European affairs, and hence has refrained from taking any active posture in solving the problems of a region with which it is not familiar.

China’s schizophrenic demeanor in the UN, especially the contradictions between its political statements and its voting patterns, does not constitute a novelty for students of the PRC’s conduct in the international forum. Beijing is well known for being extremely cautious and sparing in its use of the negative vote both in the General Assembly and the Security Council.¹⁶ In the case of the Yugoslav crisis,

¹³See, for example, YPA, Tanjug, September 3, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-171* (September 7, 1993): 26.

¹⁴*China Daily*, September 9, 1994.

¹⁵YPA, Tanjug, November 22, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-226* (November 22, 1994): 30.

¹⁶For an extensive study of China’s behavior in the UN, see Samuel S. Kim, *China, the United Nations, and World Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

China's unwillingness to cast a veto in the Security Council was further reinforced by the realization that Yugoslav problems have not fallen into the zone of its perceived strategic national interests. According to Samuel S. Kim, nonparticipation (i.e., frequent abstention from voting) as practiced by China in the UN is a "dialectic exercise" to "maximize the flexibility of the Chinese position in the Security Council with little 'financial cost' or political responsibility."¹⁷ The PRC's reluctance to take practical steps congruent with its statements can also be rationalized as China's fear that a more involved veto posture might further antagonize already strained Sino-American relations.¹⁸

The PRC's Relations with Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia

Both Croatia and Slovenia, after declaring independence in June 1991, sought China's official recognition of their sovereignty. For that purpose, in December 1991 and February 1992, Slovene Foreign Ministry assistant Z. Drajan and Slovene Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel traveled to the PRC. In March 1992, Croatian Foreign Minister Zvonimir Separovic also paid an unofficial visit to China with the aim of securing Beijing's recognition of Croatia's independence. The PRC's recognition of Croatia and Slovenia came on April 27, 1992, simultaneously with China's recognition of the FRY, and a few months after both republics were recognized by the European Union, as well as one year after their own declarations of independence.¹⁹ It seems that Beijing acknowledged the sovereignty of those two Yugoslav breakaway republics only after Belgrade itself conceded the irreversibility of Yugoslavia's breakup.

Despite China's officially stated opposition to secessionism, since the establishment of diplomatic relations, Beijing's diplomatic, eco-

¹⁷Ibid., 209-11. It is noteworthy that Beijing is capable of assuming a more active role in the UN when its geopolitical and strategic interests are involved. See Charles M. Lichenstein, "China in the U.N.: The Case of Kampuchea," *World Affairs* 149, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 21-24.

¹⁸For discussion of this point, see Tai Ming Cheung, "Using the UN," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, January 30, 1992, 18.

¹⁹In mid-May 1992, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo visited both republics and signed communiqués on the establishment of diplomatic relations. Xinhua, May 13, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI-92-094* (May 14, 1992): 14; Xinhua, May 12, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI-92-096* (May 18, 1992): 19.

conomic, and cultural relations with Zagreb and Ljubljana have taken on their own dynamics, irrespective of the Yugoslav crisis and Belgrade's relationship with Beijing. Starting in late 1992, high-level governmental and state visits between both sides began. In early June 1993, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman went to Beijing on a week-long state visit during which six documents on trade, economic, and diplomatic cooperation between China and Croatia were signed. While meeting Tudjman, PRC Foreign Minister Qian Qichen voiced support for the "sovereignty and territorial integrity and independence of Croatia."²⁰ His statement can be considered as Beijing's friendly and supportive gesture toward Zagreb at a time when Croatia was not under the control of Serb-held Krajina. In June 1993, Slovenia's high-level visit to China was led by Lojze Peterle, the Slovene vice premier and foreign minister. During his six-day stay in Beijing, an agreement on mutual exemption of visa requirements for diplomatic and service passports between both countries was signed.

Qian Qichen's visit to Slovenia and Croatia in September 1993 was China's most important political visit, symbolically emphasizing the significance Beijing attached to relations with the two new republics. In Slovenia, Qian signed a number of documents on cooperation in areas such as culture, education, science and technology, and foreign policy. He also reportedly praised Slovenian stability, acknowledged Slovenia as a Central European country (which apparently had a great emotional value for the Slovenes), and backed Slovenia's bid to lift the arms embargo imposed on it by the UNSC.²¹ In Croatia, Qian firmly restated China's opposition to any change of borders in the former Yugoslav region and stressed the need to respect the rights of ethnic minorities.²²

On October 12, 1993, Macedonia became the fourth post-Yugoslav republic recognized by Beijing.²³ As with Beijing's diplomatic recognition of Croatia and Slovenia, the PRC decided on establishing relations with Macedonia relatively late, doing so almost two years after

²⁰Zagreb HTV Television, June 8, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-109* (June 9, 1993): 12-13.

²¹Interview with a Slovene diplomat, Beijing, September 1994. For more details on Qian's visit to Slovenia, see Xinhua, September 8, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-173* (September 9, 1993): 18; Xinhua, September 12 and 13, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-175* (September 13, 1993): 23.

²²Xinhua, September 16, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-179* (September 17, 1993): 13.

²³*People's Daily*, October 13, 1993; Xinhua, October 15, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-198* (October 15, 1993): 11-12.

Macedonia's declaration of independence in November 1991 and six months after Macedonia joined the UN. The establishment of relations between the two states was low-key, signed by their respective UN ambassadors. It is noteworthy that China recognized Macedonia under the name "Macedonia," not the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), under which Macedonia joined the UN. Unlike China's ties with Slovenia and Croatia, Sino-Macedonian relations have not witnessed energetic development.

The dynamic development of relations between China, Croatia, Slovenia, and (to a lesser degree) Macedonia has demonstrated Beijing's flexibility in forgoing ideological disagreements in order to pave a way for the smooth advancement of bilateral ties based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In a way, China's ties with Croatia and Slovenia have been a showcase illustrating its respect for the sovereignty of other states regardless of their size, wealth, or political orientation. It is interesting to note that Beijing willingly offered political support for Croatia's territorial integrity, Slovenia's bid to have its arms embargo lifted, and Macedonia's claim to be named "Macedonia," although it was only in the last case that it acted instead of merely declaring its stand. As far as the two former issues are concerned, the PRC has traditionally remained unwilling to take any measures going beyond verbal statements. The "please all" policy toward the three post-SFRY republics has thus secured Beijing their friendliness at minimal political cost.

Beijing and the Bosnian Issue

From the very beginning of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Beijing's stand has been consistent, firmly opposing any direct foreign military involvement in the civil war, verbally supporting all peaceful attempts to solve the conflict, and urging all three sides involved to seek peaceful settlement through negotiations. The consistency of Beijing's position has been especially visible in its UNSC voting pattern on the issue, as it has abstained from voting when even the remote possibility of external military involvement in the war has existed. In August 1992, for example, Beijing did not cast its vote on UNSC resolution 770, which called for humanitarian assistance for Sarajevo, because the resolution used the formula "all necessary measures," which implied the possibility of providing humanitarian

assistance under military protection.²⁴ Similarly, in October 1992, China abstained from voting on the issue of no-fly zones in Bosnia, claiming that the establishment of such zones “carried the possibility of the future application of military force.”²⁵ In line with its position in the UNSC, Beijing voiced its opposition to NATO air strikes in early 1993, arguing that they would only contribute to further escalation of the conflict. China also opposed the unilateral American suspension of the arms embargo on Bosnian Muslims, claiming that any lifting of the embargo “would only complicate matters and lead to a deterioration of the situation there.”²⁶

It is also noteworthy that the PRC has not assumed any constructively active posture vis-à-vis the Bosnian civil war in the UN, limiting itself to statements criticizing resolutions on the Bosnian question and consistently abstaining from voting in the UNSC. The abstentions have been meant to be expressions of disagreement, but in real terms, they have amounted to nothing more than a propaganda exercise directed at the international audience.

Bosnia was the only post-SFRY republic which Beijing has chosen not to recognize. Bosnian Foreign Minister Haris Silajdzic visited the PRC in mid-1992 to seek China’s recognition, but his efforts proved to be fruitless.²⁷ The Chinese have obviously been waiting on the decision to recognize Bosnia-Herzegovina until the peoples living in Bosnia solve their problems conclusively. Meanwhile, in May 1992, China supported the Bosnian request to join the UN.

The Chinese Press and the Yugoslav Conflict

Until the late 1980s, there was no agreement among China scholars as to what extent the dissemination of foreign news in China was controlled by the Chinese leadership.²⁸ The reintroduction of political

²⁴*People’s Daily*, September 5, 15, 17, 21, 26, 29, August 31, 1992, in *Xinhua yuebao* (Xinhua Monthly), 1992, no. 8:159-61.

²⁵*People’s Daily*, October 11, 1992.

²⁶Xinhua, November 9, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-217* (November 9, 1994): 1; *People’s Daily*, November 16, 1994.

²⁷Xinhua, July 29, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI-92-147* (July 30, 1992): 2.

²⁸See, for example, Davis B. Bobrow, Steve Chan, and John A. Kringer, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decisions: The Chinese Case* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 141; Allen S. Whiting, *China Eyes Japan* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1989), 10.

orthodoxy following the Tiananmen tragedy in 1989, however, provided evidence that the central Chinese authorities' formal and informal influence on foreign news reporting had not been relinquished. The party's heavy-handed control of the media has become so manifest in the post-1989 period that Brantly Womack's view of the Chinese media's primary function as "[serving] as the mouthpiece of the party"²⁹ can be positively verified by reading any Chinese press publication dealing with domestic or international affairs.

In the context of Beijing's intensified control of the Chinese media, a study of the Chinese press presentation of Yugoslav events can therefore reveal not only which aspects of the former SFRY region's developments have attracted the most attention from Chinese analysts, but also how Beijing wants to present these developments to the Chinese domestic audience. It is striking how Chinese press reports on the Yugoslav conflict have not always corresponded with Beijing's official views as conveyed through diplomatic channels. Thus, it is my conviction that the Chinese print media's coverage of recent Yugoslav events can be treated as a reflection of Chinese leadership's "domestic opinion" on affairs, as opposed to the international stand examined earlier in this article.

The study of Chinese print media's reports on Yugoslavia was based on the textual analysis of a number of China's domestic press publications. The majority of the analyzed press publications were targeted at internal readership within the PRC, and included the *People's Daily*, the party newspaper organ; weekly and biweekly periodicals dealing exclusively with foreign affairs issues (such as *Shijie zhishi* and *Guoji zhanwang*); the propaganda biweekly publication *Xuanchuan shouce*; a biweekly "general politics" journal (*Banyue tan*); and social science bimonthly periodicals concerned solely with East Central Europe (*Jinri Sulian Dongou* and *Sulian Dongou wenti*, with the latter being renamed as *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu* in 1993). The target readership of the aforementioned press publications is a diversified group of the Chinese cultural and political elite (including party cadres), who have either some/strong interest in general foreign affairs, and/or ECE affairs in particular.

Chinese press coverage of the Yugoslav events from 1990 to 1994

²⁹Brantly Womack, "Editor's Introduction: Media and the Chinese Public," *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 18, nos. 3-4 (Spring-Summer 1986): 9.

was fairly uniform; this allows us to identify a number of themes that the scrutinized press publications paid consistent attention to.

Theme 1:

Secessionist Movement in the SFRY

In 1990, the Chinese press echoed the PRC Foreign Ministry's anti-secessionist pronouncements and unanimously supported Belgrade in its endeavors to "save the federation." It extensively quoted Yugoslav federal leaders on the "sabotage" of the SFRY's constitutional order by "certain forces" which were attempting to "split the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) and negate its historical role."³⁰ In reviewing the federal system (supported by the Serbs) and confederation system (advocated by the Croats and Slovenes), *Shijie zhishi* concluded that the establishment of a confederation would lead to the problematic redefinition of respective republics' borders and cause an outbreak in ethnic conflict.³¹

Theme 2:

Belgrade's Military Conflict with the Croats and Slovenes

Although Chinese diplomats officially abstained from pinpointing the "villain" in the Serbs' conflict with the Slovenes and Croats, the ten-day war in Slovenia and the subsequent military conflict between the Serbs and Croats were presented in the Chinese press as having been incited by Slovenia's and Croatia's declarations of independence in mid-1991.³² The federal government and the Serbs were portrayed as guarding the unity and security of Yugoslavia, and fighting "anti-communist forces."³³ Slovenia, according to the Chinese press, "provoked" the Yugoslav federal government by opposing its moves to restore federal control over Slovenia's borders. On the other hand, Croatian "anti-Serb ethnic" policies had aroused fears among the Serbs living in Croatia and prompted them to seek political sovereignty.³⁴

³⁰*People's Daily*, April 2, 1990, in Joint Publications Research Service (JPRS), *China Report* [hereafter cited as *JPRS-CAR*]-90-30 (April 24, 1990): 7.

³¹Shao Yunhuan, "Federation or Confederation: Debate in Yugoslavia over State Structure," *Shijie zhishi* (World Affairs), 1990, no. 3, in *JPRS-CAR*-90-13 (March 6, 1990): 13-14.

³²"Eight Disastrous Consequences of Peaceful Evolution," *Xuanchuan shouce* (Propaganda Handbook), 1992, no. 4:13-17.

³³Da Zhou, "In-Depth Talk of the Yugoslav Civil War," *Guoji zhanwang* (World Outlook), 1991, no. 24:3-6.

³⁴Xu Kunming, "Yugoslav Federation Close to Disintegration," *Xuanchuan shouce*,

*Theme 3:**Economic Sanctions*

The Chinese domestic media presented the UN's imposition of sanctions on Belgrade in May 1992 and their reinforcement in March 1993 as a Western attempt not just to stop the war in Bosnia, but also to force the former communists of the FRY to step down from their leadership positions.³⁵ The effects of the PRC's sanctions on the Yugoslav economy were never explored; instead, a truly gloomy picture of Yugoslav economic hardships caused by the "Western" sanctions was drawn.³⁶ The easing of economic sanctions against Yugoslavia in September 1994 was predictably welcomed by the Chinese press.³⁷

*Theme 4:**The Bosnian Issue*

Examination of the Chinese domestic press reveals that in March 1992, Beijing sided with Belgrade, which claimed that any referendum concerning Bosnia's independence would only further deteriorate the political situation and possibly lead to war.³⁸ After open military conflict erupted in Bosnia-Herzegovina (reportedly caused by the ethnic contradictions³⁹), the Chinese media analyses tried to remain neutral, refraining from pinpointing who was responsible for instigating the war.⁴⁰ The Serbs were thus not portrayed as bearing any more blame for the Bosnian civil war than the Croats or Muslims. On the contrary,

1991, no. 15:58-60; Fan Jun and Bao Wenyong, "Yugoslavia: From Ethnic Contradictions to Civil War," *Jinri Sulian Dongou* (Soviet Union and Eastern Europe Today), 1992, no. 1:3-8; Li Yong and Cheng Xiwei, "A Summary of Armed Conflict Between Yugoslav Croats and Serbs," *Sulian Dongou wenti* (Problems of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe), 1992, no. 1:22-26, 34; Wang Maozhong, "The Former Yugoslav Region Faces Complicated Situation," *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu* (Research on Eastern Europe and Central Asia), 1993, no. 2:10-13.

³⁵Xu Kunming, "New Yugoslavia After Sanctions," *Banyue tan* (Fortnightly Review), 1992, no. 12:54-56; Xu Kunming, "Why It Is Difficult to Solve the Crisis in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Liaowang* (Outlook Weekly), 1993, no. 44:38-40.

³⁶See, for example, Xinhua, December 23, 1992, in *FBIS-CHI-92-247* (December 23, 1992): 10-11; Xinhua, January 4, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-004* (January 7, 1993): 8-9.

³⁷Yan Zheng, "Sanctions Do Not Work," *People's Daily*, September 26, 1994.

³⁸Yan Zheng, "Bosnia and Herzegovina: A New Hot Spot in the Yugoslav Crisis," *People's Daily*, March 10, 1992.

³⁹Yang Yang, "No End to the Conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Xuanchuan shouce*, 1993, no. 19:57-59.

⁴⁰Li Binjian, "Why War in Bosnia-Herzegovina Does Not Stop," *Xuanchuan shouce*, 1992, no. 19:57-59; Zhao Cheng, "Analysis of the Situation in New Yugoslavia," *Sulian Dongou wenti*, 1992, no. 6:39-42.

their numerous "peace proposals" were solemnly reported.⁴¹ Their attacks on Bosnian strongholds/enclaves and violation of cease-fire agreements were mentioned but not criticized.⁴² Finally, their refusals of peace plans worked out by the international mediators were justified by the Chinese media in terms of the plans' lack of realism, rather than the Serbs' insatiable territorial appetite.⁴³ Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, interviewed by the Xinhua News Agency on a few occasions, also praised the Chinese media for their "fair and objective" reporting on the war in Bosnia and "full respect for the facts."⁴⁴

Bosnia was presented in the PRC press as a theater for the major powers' rivalry for supremacy in European affairs, rather than just a civil war. Three states received particular attention in this context: Germany, Russia, and the United States, who were depicted as either trying to enhance their international status, gain/consolidate their influence in former Yugoslavia, or strive for hegemony in European affairs.⁴⁵ Western involvement in the Bosnian conflict was also shown as an ideological crusade against the Serbs, who domestically chose to support the former communist leaders.⁴⁶ In general, foreign interference in Bosnia was regarded as a catalyst of the conflict rather than a stabilizing factor.⁴⁷

Theme 5:

The Roots of the Yugoslav Conflict

Discussion of the factors contributing to the outbreak of the

⁴¹See, for example, Xinhua, April 22, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-078* (April 22, 1994): 4.

⁴²For exemplary reports, see Xinhua, March 6, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-044* (March 7, 1994): 3; Xinhua, April 20, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-076* (April 20, 1994): 1-2.

⁴³Roundup by Yuan Bingzhong, "Death of Vance-Owen Plan Marks Turning Point in Bosnia Peace Process," Xinhua, June 19, 1993, in *FBIS-CHI-93-117* (June 21, 1993): 11-12.

⁴⁴Xinhua, February 23, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-038* (February 25, 1994): 22.

⁴⁵Xia Yun, "Four Western Powers and the Yugoslav Crisis," *Shijie zhishi*, 1992, no. 18, in *FBIS-CHI-92-216* (November 6, 1992): 16-18; Yan Zheng, "Complicated and Confusing Situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina," *People's Daily*, August 16, 1994; Xinhua, December 23, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-248* (December 27, 1994): 4-5; Lu Yansong, "Russia Takes Active Part in Mediation of Bosnia Conflict," *People's Daily*, February 24, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-038* (February 25, 1994): 1-2; Xinhua, February 22, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-036* (February 23, 1994): 1.

⁴⁶Xu Kunming, "Big Powers Intensify Their Fight over Bosnia-Herzegovina," Xinhua, December 23, 1994, in *FBIS-CHI-94-248* (December 27, 1994): 4-5; Zhao, "Analysis of the Situation in New Yugoslavia."

⁴⁷Yang Yuanke, "A View on International Interference in the Bosnia-Herzegovina Conflict," *Zhengdang yu dangdai shijie* (Parties and the Contemporary World), 1994, no. 5:4-7.

ethnic dispute, the civil war, and Yugoslavia's final disintegration was constantly featured in the Chinese press throughout the period of 1990-94. Apart from the reasons related to the disparate historical development of the republics forming the SFRY⁴⁸ and the religious, cultural, and linguistic differences between the peoples of Yugoslavia,⁴⁹ the PRC press analyses also identified a number of other factors responsible for the Yugoslav ethnic conflicts.

Subtheme one: the multiparty system. The introduction of a multiparty system in the SFRY in 1990 was held to be responsible for creating an environment in which "rightist and chauvinistic" forces could emerge and seize power in Croatia and Slovenia. Their alleged exploitation of people's dissatisfaction during elections was believed to have intensified the ethnic contradictions and increased the danger of Yugoslav disintegration. The abolishment of the one-party system also reportedly endangered the socialist cause and further deteriorated the economic situation.⁵⁰

Subtheme two: the peaceful evolution strategy/initial Western involvement in the conflict. The rise of opposition parties in Croatia and Slovenia was linked with the West's alleged strategy of using ethnic contradictions in order to produce chaos in Yugoslavia. This was a part of a greater Western scheme to abolish the rule of communist parties in East Central Europe.⁵¹ Three West European states—Germany, Austria, and Italy—were accused of direct involvement in the initial conflict between Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana. Their political, economic, and military support for Croatia and Slovenia (as reported in the Chinese press), contrasted with the pressure they applied on Serbia, was explained in terms of forcing the Serbs to change their socialist government.⁵²

⁴⁸For the exemplary article tracing back the historical causes of the Yugoslav ethnic conflicts, see Da Zhou, "Yugoslavia: Tracing Back the Historical Reasons for the Chaos," *Shijie zhishi*, 1991, no. 15:8-9.

⁴⁹See, for example, note 33 above.

⁵⁰Zhang Yongyong, "Yugoslavia Entering the 1990s," *Sulian Dongou wenti*, 1990, no. 4:32-35; Xu Kunming, "The Grave Consequences of Yugoslavia Practicing a Multiparty System," *Xuanchuan shouce*, 1991, no. 9:10-13; Da Zhou, "Discussing the Reasons for the Chaos in Yugoslavia," *Shijie zhishi*, 1991, no. 15:6-7.

⁵¹Xu Kunming, "Yugoslavia in Danger," *Banyue tan*, 1991, no. 14:59-61; Xiong Jiaxue, "Analysis of Reasons for the Dissolution of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia," *Sulian Dongou wenti*, 1991, no. 6:33-35, 46.

⁵²Da Zhou, "Foreign Factors in the Yugoslav Chaos," *Shijie zhishi*, 1991, no. 19:13-14; Xu, "Yugoslavia in Danger"; Da, "Discussing the Reasons for the Chaos in Yugoslavia."

Subtheme three: mistaken ethnic policies of the Yugoslav leadership. The Chinese press made a comprehensive critique of President Tito's ethnic policies in Yugoslavia,⁵³ claiming that the distinctive cultural features of the peoples living in the SFRY were overemphasized, while the common features linking them together were ignored. The transfer of power from the center to the respective republics and the "federalization" of the LCY were also said to have contributed to the rise of nationalist sentiments in Yugoslavia.⁵⁴

Subtheme four: the end of the Cold War. A number of Chinese press analyses made attempts to link developments in Yugoslavia with the transition from a bipolar world system to a multipolar system. The theory was that the Yugoslav crisis exemplified the unavoidable rise of nationalism, "selfish departmentalism," and ethnic confrontations in the post-Cold War international environment.⁵⁵

Subtheme five: changes in East Central Europe and the Soviet Union. It is noteworthy that although the political and economic transformation of the ECE states has often been alluded to as one of the factors responsible for the eruption of Yugoslav ethnic conflicts, the linkage between the ECE changes and the crisis in the SFRY has never been exhaustively discussed.⁵⁶ It was most probably assumed that the connection between both developments was self-evident.

An Assessment

From 1990 until 1994, China perfected its dialectic approach vis-à-vis the Yugoslav conflict. It verbally supported Belgrade, proving its friendship by the instant recognition of the newly proclaimed Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, exchanges of high-level visits, and pro-Serbian

⁵³For an example of discussion on these "wrong" ethnic policies in Yugoslavia, see note 33 above.

⁵⁴Li Xingxing, "'A Boat Without a Helmsman' in the Nationalist Waves: Why Former Yugoslavia Disintegrated," *Shijie zhishi*, 1992, no. 18:10-12; Zhang Yongyong, "Analysis of the Reasons for the Turbulence in Yugoslavia's Political Situation," *Sulian Dongou wenti*, 1991, no. 5:5-10.

⁵⁵Bao Shifen, "Changes in International Patterns and the Yugoslav Civil War," *Guoji zhanwang*, 1992, no. 2; Ji Yin, "What Do War and Chaos in Former Yugoslavia Signify?" *Shijie zhishi*, 1992, no. 18, in *FBIS-CHI-92-215* (November 5, 1992): 18-21.

⁵⁶For example, see Li, "'A Boat Without a Helmsman' in the Nationalist Waves"; Sun Keqin, "Condensing and Dispersing—A Contest Between the Two Forces: Probing into the Reasons of the Former Yugoslav Federation's Disintegration," *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu*, 1993, no. 3:13-18.

press coverage of Yugoslav developments. Simultaneously, it followed the international community in imposing severe sanctions which ultimately damaged new Yugoslavia's economy. Beijing did not vote against the expulsion of the FRY from the UN, nor did it oppose (in practical terms) the tightening of sanctions against Belgrade. The PRC's support for the Serbs was apparent, but so was its unwillingness to do anything going beyond its verbal declarations.

The Yugoslav crisis enabled Beijing to voice its well-known stand on the issues of secessionism, state sovereignty, economic sanctions, and Western hegemonism. It also enabled China to appear on the world arena as a self-styled protector of the suppressed and bullied, a major power with an unequivocal respect for the sovereignty and independence of other states, regardless of their size, status, or ideological orientation. The Chinese position on the Yugoslav question could thus be viewed as yet another example of China's principled and uncompromising foreign policy on such issues as big power hegemonism and interference in the internal politics of other states.⁵⁷ I would argue, nonetheless, that since China has clearly adopted a passive, purely declaratory approach toward the Yugoslav issue, its contribution to the struggle against hegemonism in practical terms has been debatable, to say the least. The "principled foreign policy" seems to have been designed more to "win hearts" in the Third World rather than to alter the direction of unwelcome developments. It also helped (to use Chih-yu Shih's observation on the PRC's behavior in the UN) "clarify how China would like to be seen" by the international community.⁵⁸ Such a foreign policy strategy clearly did not produce any tangible results which benefitted the Yugoslav peoples and/or hurt supposed "hegemonists."

A high degree of unanimity exhibited by the press analyses allows us to assume that Beijing has indeed centrally controlled the portrayal of Yugoslav developments in the domestic press. The Yugoslav crisis can thus be seen as being exploited not only to illustrate the dangers posed by emulating Belgrade's political and ethnic policies to the Chinese public, but also to display the evil intentions of the

⁵⁷This line of reasoning, for example, is pursued by Huo in his analysis of Chinese attitudes toward the Gulf War. See Hwei-Ling Huo, "Patterns of Behavior in China's Foreign Policy: The Gulf Crisis and Beyond," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (March 1992): 263-76, 272.

⁵⁸Chih-yu Shih, *China's Just World: The Morality of Chinese Foreign Policy* (Boulder & London: Lynne Rienner, 1993), 193.

Western powers involved in the Yugoslav crisis. Although the PRC press analyses have not drawn any explicit lessons from the Yugoslav tragedy relevant to Chinese readers, it is possible to identify a few *implicit* policy-oriented messages significant for Chinese policymakers and the general public. In fact, it cannot be ruled out that reports on Yugoslavia have been used to address and illustrate the internal and external political problems China itself has had to deal with since the Tiananmen incident and the collapse of communism in ECE. First, through linking the introduction of the multiparty system in Yugoslavia with the subsequent intensification of ethnic contradictions and the breakout of civil war, a clear message was sent regarding the hazards of a potential multiparty system in the PRC for China's territorial integrity. Second, the decentralization of state power and "federalization" of Yugoslavia's ruling communist party was portrayed as directly endangering the unity of the state and the party's ruling position. Therefore, the implication is that China should remain strongly centralized, with the CCP taking the lead. Third, the alleged success of the West's "peaceful evolution" strategy in former Yugoslavia has served as a warning to the Chinese Communists not to lower their guard against Western schemes to destroy socialism in China. Finally, the Western powers' "concern" for human rights, democracy, and peace has been presented as a disguise for the pursuit of their selfish interests and a tool utilized to acquire world dominance. The Yugoslav experience has thus been evidence of the West's evil intentions to pressure Beijing on the issues of human rights and democracy.

Based on the Chinese press articles examined, Beijing's support for Belgrade is unquestionable. Moreover, it has evidently been ideologically motivated. The Yugoslav Serbs have been depicted as lone fighters against the West's "peaceful evolution" strategy, the chauvinistic secessionist republics, and interference in its internal affairs by hostile Western powers, if not hegemonism in general. As China itself has struggled with similar "evils," the Chinese and the FRY's ruling elites have become "natural" political and ideological allies, and Beijing has not been able to shy away from expressing its sympathy for Belgrade's endeavors.

In sum, the PRC's leadership has not hesitated in extending its political support for various causes pursued by the post-SFRY republics. Its "please all" policy has earned it friends from all parts of former Yugoslavia at no political or financial cost. At the same time, the Yugoslav tragedy, while providing the Chinese leadership with an opportunity to reemphasize its traditional stand on questions such as

state sovereignty, secessionism, and “peaceful evolution,” has also allowed Beijing to “educate” the Chinese public on how to “correctly” view the events in (former) Yugoslavia, and what “mistakes” should be avoided so that Yugoslavia’s past will not become China’s future.