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**CHINA AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA IN THE 1980s  
A CASE OF LIMITED THAW**

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Summary: After a chill of 20 years the early 1980s have witnessed a slow return to a working relationship between Czechoslovakia and China. Last year was an especially cordial year, as mutual trade and cooperation grew to levels unknown since the 1950s. This thaw, however, is largely a matter of economic pragmatism, and party relations between the two countries remain absent.

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In their commentaries on the 35th anniversary of the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October, the Czechoslovak Communist Party dailies restated Prague's position toward China. The gist of what they said was as follows: the PRC owes the USSR much for its very existence, because the latter made a decisive contribution to the collapse of Japanese imperialism; it was the USSR and its allies that were the first to recognize the new Chinese state and that selflessly contributed to the development of its economy. But did the Chinese show any gratitude? Not at all, they embarked on a virulently anti-Soviet course that was chauvinistic and hegemonistic. In 1971 it was the Soviet-led countries that were instrumental in securing UN membership for China. But once again the PRC failed to see who its real friends were. It proceeded to ally itself to American imperialism and adopted a hostile position toward the Soviet allies in Indochina, Mongolia, and most recently Afghanistan. Despite the official party view of things, however, Prague is always ready to develop constructive economic, cultural, and other relations with China.

There can be no doubt that the PRC continues to vex this most obedient and orthodox of all the Soviet allies. Apart from China's critical attitude toward the Soviet bloc, there are

issues of ideology and Chinese domestic policy that create problems for the Czechoslovak party. First, the Chinese party leadership pursued extreme leftist policies during the Cultural Revolution; the post-Mao regime then made an about-face and is now heading rapidly in the opposite direction. Indeed, Beijing is moving so fast to the Right that it is difficult for Prague, or anyone else for that matter, to keep abreast of developments in China. It is nevertheless interesting to take stock of the situation and consider where Sino-Czechoslovak relations are heading and how they fit into changing global patterns.

#### *A Retrospect*

Czechoslovakia's trade with the PRC reflected the early cordiality between the countries, growing rapidly, though not evenly, throughout the 1950s. As the trade figures in the table below show, Sino-Czechoslovak trade accounted for as much as 7% of Czechoslovakia's total turnover in 1958. After the Sino-Soviet ideological split, "fraternal" help was rapidly and unceremoniously withdrawn, evidently with the intention of causing maximum damage to the Chinese economy.<sup>2</sup> By 1964 Sino-Czechoslovak trade had dropped to only 0.6% of Czechoslovakia's total turnover. Nevertheless, between 1949 and 1964 Czechoslovakia had supplied China with machinery and equipment for more than 100 industrial complexes (mainly for power stations, chemical and cement plants, ceramics factories, sugar refineries, and printing plants). Czechoslovakia also exported items such as excavators and trucks. It imported raw materials and food products.<sup>3</sup> In the mid-1960s trade began to pick up again; this trend continued throughout the 1970s, but the share of Sino-Czechoslovak trade in Czechoslovakia's total turnover increased only slightly: the relative improvement was merely part and parcel of the general trend of intensified foreign trade relations pursued by all CMEA countries.

continued

Sino-Czechoslovak Trade, 1953-1962  
(in 1,000,000 Kcs)

	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962
Turnover	838	860	852	944	1,067	1,441	1,405	1,459	547	270
% Change Compared with Preceding Year	-	2.6	-1.0	13.0	35.1	-2.5	-2.5	3.8	-62.5	-50.6
% Share in Total CSSR Turnover	6.2	6.2	5.3	5.1	5.4	7.0	5.9	5.4	1.9	0.9
CSSR Imports	401	396	437	478	482	655	688	672	302	184
CSSR Exports	437	464	415	466	585	786	717	787	245	86
CSSR Balance	36	68	-22	-12	103	131	29	115	-57	-98

Sino-Czechoslovak Trade, 1963-1972  
(in 1,000,000 Kcs)

	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972
Turnover	276	215	234	331	236	319	420	404	426	376
% Change Compared with Preceding Year	2.2	-22.1	8.8	41.5	-28.7	35.2	31.7	-3.8	5.4	-11.7
% Share in Total CCSR Turnover	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.9	0.7	0.7	0.6
CSSR Imports	209	148	96	171	100	146	234	181	180	184
CSSR Exports	67	67	138	160	136	173	186	223	246	192
CSSR Balance	-142	-81	42	-11	36	27	-47	47	66	8

Sino-Czechoslovak Trade, 1973-1982  
(in 1,000,000 Kcs)

	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
Turnover	449	608	710	727	917	1,428	1,507	1,081	1,056	1,321
% Change Compared with Preceding Year	19.4	35.4	16.8	2.4	26.1	55.7	5.5	-28.3	-2.3	25.1
% Share in Total CSSR Turnover	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	1.1	1.0	0.7	0.6	0.7
CSSR Imports	238	341	321	324	503	741	727	629	601	484
CSSR Exports	211	267	389	403	414	687	780	452	455	837
CSSR Balance	-27	-74	68	79	-89	-54	53	-177	-146	353

Source: *Statistická Rocenka CSSR*, 1959 (p. 346), 1962 (p. 353), 1968 (p. 422), 1976 (p. 430), and 1983 (p. 453).

### *The Improvement of Relations in the 1980s*

The volume of Sino-Czechoslovak trade showed an appreciable jump in 1978 and again in 1979. This was a reflection of the first round of China's opening to foreign markets implemented under Deng Xiaoping; but there was another substantial fall in 1980, and trade stagnated at that level in 1981. Again, this was more the work of the Chinese rather than the Czechoslovak authorities, the former being forced to cut back on imports to slow down the pace of China's opening up. The last turn for the better came in 1982. In that year the PRC concluded agreements with all Soviet bloc countries, stipulating a 7% increase in trade with the GDR, 15% with Hungary, 30% with Poland, and 44% with Czechoslovakia.<sup>4</sup> These harbingers of a thaw proved beneficial not only because they were followed by China's second import drive but also because life began to stir in the long-frozen realm of Sino-Soviet relations. Both sides expressed a desire for normalization and began to prepare for the visit to China of First Deputy Chairman Ivan Arkhipov.<sup>5</sup>



In 1983 Beijing's diplomatic activity focused on Eastern Europe. In May the Chinese Communist Party Secretary General Hu Yaobang went to Romania and Yugoslavia--the only East European countries that maintain party relations with China. A trade delegation was dispatched to Albania and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Qian Qichen toured Hungary, the GDR, and Poland.<sup>6</sup> There was also a renewal of scientific, cultural, and sports contacts.

Prague responded to the new climate with a cautious toning down of its media commentaries on Chinese affairs; on the other hand, the Czechoslovak media gave very scanty coverage to Hu Yaobang's visit to Romania and Yugoslavia. In June 1983 Czechoslovakia played host to Ma Xusheng, head of the Soviet and East European department at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>7</sup> Chinese Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade Economic Relations and Trade Chen Jie went to Prague and concluded an agreement that called for a 50% increase in the volume of Sino-Czechoslovak trade during 1983.

Cultural relations included the celebration in Beijing of the centenary of Jaroslav Hasek, the author of the *The Good Soldier Schweik*, and the launching of the first Chinese edition of his book, a tour in China by the Fialka Pantomine Theater, and a visit to Czechoslovakia by the Shanghai folk music group.

#### *The Blossoming of 1984*

The thaw that took place in 1983 continued into 1984. On March 28 an agreement on cooperation was signed in Beijing by the Czechoslovak Chamber of Commerce and the Chinese Committee for the Development of International Trade. The agreement provided for cooperation in organizing exhibitions and for the exchange of information about the economies of both countries and about technological development. On March 21 the Czechoslovak engineering firm Kovo opened an exhibition in Beijing and a contract was signed for the supply of Czechoslovak Tatra and Skoda trucks to China (in June it was announced that Czechoslovakia would also supply a truck assembly line). In April Czechoslovakia participated in an exhibition of electronic goods in Beijing. In April the PRC reciprocated by taking part for the first time in seven years in the Brno industrial fair. The Chinese pavilion at the fair was visited by a relatively high-ranking Czechoslovak party official, Milos Jakes (a member of the CPCPS Presidium and CC Secretary), who reportedly praised the "delicacy" of Chinese exhibits; he was accompanied by Minister of Foreign Trade Bohumil Urban. On April 10 Czechoslovak Federal Prime Minister Lubomir Strougal held talks in Prague with Zhu Rongji, the head of a Chinese economic delegation and Deputy Minister in Charge of the State Economic Commission (as well as spending a week in Czechoslovakia Zhu also visited other CMEA countries). In late May Czechoslovak Foreign Trade Minister Urban traveled to Beijing to discuss an increase in trade with State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Chen Muhua. His visit was reciprocated by Chen's trip to Prague on June 5 (she had also visited other East European capitals). Chen was received by Strougal and discussed trade with Pavol Bahyl, the Minister of General Engineering, and Eduard Saul, the Minister of Metallurgy

and Heavy Engineering. Prior to her visit, a Czechoslovak government spokesman had expressed enthusiasm about the country's chances of getting a foothold in the vast Chinese market. The success of Chen's talks was confirmed by the signing of an intergovernmental agreement on economic and technical cooperation as well as a protocol on the setting up of an intergovernmental Commission for Economic, Scientific, and Technological Cooperation.<sup>8</sup> From November 27 to December 5 Czechoslovakia held its largest industrial exhibition in Beijing for 20 years; it was organized by 17 Czechoslovak foreign trade organizations. The exhibition was formally opened by Bahyl.<sup>9</sup> At the opening ceremony it was announced that mutual trade in 1984 had exceeded all expectations: the original agreement had envisaged a turnover reaching \$240,000,000 (that is, twice the level achieved in 1983), but feverish business activity made it possible to revise the agreement and set a much higher target of \$400,000,000.<sup>10</sup> It was also announced that in early 1985 China and Czechoslovakia would conclude a five-year trade and cooperation agreement for 1986-1990.<sup>11</sup> Finally, from December 11 to 17 Czechoslovakia was visited by the Chinese Minister in Charge of State Planning Commission, Song Ping, apparently to discuss the long-term cooperation plan. Song was received by Strougal and the State Planning Commission Chairman Svatopluk Potac. One of the highlights of his tour was a visit to the site of the nuclear plant at Jaslovske Bohunice.<sup>12</sup>

As well as these economic openings, 1984 saw a blossoming of Sino-Czechoslovak relations in other fields. On June 30 Chinese First Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Qian Qichen paid a visit to Prague on his way to Moscow, and on September 27 the Czechoslovak Foreign Affairs Minister Bohuslav Chnoupek met with his Chinese counterpart Wu Xuegian at the UN in New York. They were reported to have reviewed mutual relations and expressed a desire for beneficial cooperation.<sup>13</sup> President Gustav Husak and Federal Prime Minister Strougal dispatched congratulatory telegrams to China on the 35th anniversary of the PRC and the establishment of diplomatic relations. There were more scientific, cultural, and sports contacts (Czechoslovak films were dubbed into Chinese) and for the first time in almost 20 years the Czechoslovak tourist agency Cedok offered private tours to China.<sup>14</sup>

### *An Evaluation*

What does all this flurry of diplomatic and commercial activity amount to? Probably to no more than the restoration of something resembling normal relations after a long chill. The key to genuine warmth lies in improved party relations, and that in turn depends on the fate of the Sino-Soviet thaw. Judging by the severity of Sino-Soviet differences, any significant improvement in Sino-Soviet ties is a long way off. On the other hand, recent developments have demonstrated that, party relations apart, there is plenty of scope for beneficial advances in various fields and that both sides are keen to make the most of them. China needs spare parts for its Czechoslovak-built plants and is interested

in importing certain engineering items, such as trucks, from soft currency markets. Similarly, Czechoslovakia is able to purchase food and industrial raw materials from China that otherwise would have to be bought with convertible currency. There have been some signs that this new spirit of economic pragmatism might have a moderating effect on Prague's attitude toward the PRC. For example, *Rude Pravo* avoided any direct criticism of the Chinese Central Committee's decision in October to accelerate market-oriented reforms.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, it is clear to everyone, including the Prague regime, that there is now no chance of China ever returning to the Soviet fold. After so long the political map has changed too much to return to the arrangement of the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> Even if Beijing wanted to move closer to the CMEA, however, there would be limited scope for doing so: Eastern Europe is simply not the right place to shop for the advanced technology that China requires for its modernization program. The logic of Deng Xiaoping's reforms (and who knows this better than the Prague "normalizers") is likely to draw this communist giant still further into the world economic system dominated by the West. The Czechoslovak leaders know that they can have no control over these profound political, economic, and ideological shifts, which explains their recent pragmatism over relations with China. The *Rude Pravo* article mentioned at the beginning of this paper, which listed past and present Chinese sins, contained a hint of nostalgia for the golden age of unity, a sense of sorrow rather than genuine anger.

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1 See, for example, *Rude Pravo* and *Pravda* (Bratislava), 1 October 1984.

2 The quantities of Czechoslovak technology supplied to the PRC (in return for raw materials and food products) suggest that the 1961 nose dive in Sino-Czechoslovak turnover was motivated by Czechoslovakia (by 1964 Czechoslovak exports had been slashed to 3.5% of their value in 1960). The 1961-1964 turnover would have been much lower still were it not for Chinese repayments of the deficit of Kcs 378,000,000 accumulated during 1957-1960.

3 In some commodities the share of trade with China reached relatively high proportions of Czechoslovakia's overall trading. For example, in 1958 Czechoslovakia imported 34% of its sulphur from the PRC and 14% of its natural rubber; in other years as much as 100% of commodities such as tea and peanuts came from China, and nearly 30% of meat imports in 1958. Equally, 35% of Czechoslovakia's total exports of trucks went to China in 1955, 40% of excavators and 30% of complete machinery and equipment in 1957, and 50% of diesel engines in 1958.

4 *Financial Times*, 19 April 1982.



Arkhipov visited China from 21 to 29 December 1984.

- 6 See Patrick Moore, "China and Eastern Europe," RAD Background Report/116 (World Communist Movement), *Radio Free Europe Research*, 19 May 1983.
- 7 CETEKA (in English), 18 June 1984. The domestic media failed to announce this relatively high-powered visit.
- 8 *Rude Pravo*, 7 July 1984, p. 2.
- 9 The exhibition was visited by 20,000 Chinese specialist, and there were 24 seminars for a total of 800 specialists (*Rude Pravo*, 6 December 1984, p. 5).
- 10 *Svet Hospodarstvi*, no. 140, 21 November 1984, p. 2.
- 11 Xinhua (in English), 27 November 1984.
- 12 Czechoslovak Television, 15 December 1980, 7:30 P.M.
- 13 Radio Prague, 27 and 30 September 1984, 2:27 P.M.
- 14 *Noviny Vnitřního Obchodu*, 5 December 1984, p. 4.
- 15 A week after the Chinese Central Committee session *Rude Pravo* referred to the Chinese reform document indirectly by citing a bland and not too unfriendly commentary that had appeared in the Bulgarian paper *Rabotnichesko Delo*. The Soviet *Pravda*, however, had delivered the customary attack on the Chinese well before (25 October 1984). Perhaps Prague thought it inopportune to adhere to the *Pravda* line only a few weeks before the opening of the Czechoslovak industrial exhibition in Beijing.
- 16 In 1984 the value of Sino-American trade alone was estimated at \$6,000 million and Chinese trade with Japan was thought to be even higher. This compares poorly with the volume of Sino-Soviet European trade, at about \$1,000 million (that is, about 2% of China's total trade), and with the optimistic forecast for Sino-Soviet trade for 1985 of about \$1,400 million.

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