

CHINA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

By Walter Zander*

At the recent Casablanca Conference, Ghana, Guinea, and Mali joined Egypt, Morocco, Lybia, and the Algerian Nationalists in a resolution endorsing the Arab attitude towards Israel. It reaffirmed the decisions of the Bandung Conference and in addition denounced Israel for her "present policy in supporting imperialism in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia." The alignment of African States with Arab policy may be only temporary but the Arab countries will try to make it permanent. They are endeavouring to present their case to the world as part of a general struggle of the Asian and African peoples against Western rule ; and in this they are supported both by the Soviet Union and by Communist China. The latter country in particular has tried persistently for years to expand her influence in the Middle East and Africa ; and her efforts may ultimately prove more important than those of Russia.

Formosa parallel

Chinese interest in the Middle East and Africa revealed itself for the first time in 1955 at Bandung. That conference was attended by nearly all Asian and African countries which by then had secured national independence. The Soviet Union was not invited. Instead, Communist China played a leading part. In the Palestinian issue she pledged—rather surprisingly—unqualified support for the Arab case; and while India and Burma counselled moderation, Chou En-lai, the Chinese Prime Minister, proved to be more Arab than the Arabs themselves. The Arab States had agreed to a motion, submitted by Afghanistan, which proclaimed "*support of the rights of the Arab peoples of Palestine.*" But Chou En-lai proposed, albeit unsuccessfully, a more radical formulation, and claimed that the case of Palestine was in essence similar to that of Formosa. As for North Africa, China naturally supported the rights of the peoples of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria to independence.

Material aid

The next time China intervened actively in Middle East affairs was in the 1956 Suez crisis. From the nationalisation of the Canal onwards, she had identified herself with Egypt, and when hostilities broke out she passionately championed support for Egypt throughout Asia and Africa. Mass meetings were held all over the country. The Government announced that it could "*not stand idly by while Egyptian sovereignty and territory are subjected to encroachment*" and promised Egypt "*all effective measures within our ability, including material aid.*" Registration offices were opened for volunteers to fight for Egypt, and regional recruiting committees were set up as had been done prior to Chinese intervention in Korea; and the Egyptian Government

announced that, besides 50,000 volunteers each from the Soviet Union and Indonesia, 250,000 had been offered by China. Owing to the settlement of the Suez crisis no attempt was made to implement this threat, and there was only dispatched—after the withdrawal of the British, French, and Israeli forces from Egypt—a message of congratulation from Chou En-lai to Nasser, with the offer of a gift of 20,000,000 Swiss francs.

Free Algeria

Even more significant is the present support by China for the Algerian Nationalists. On September 19, 1958, Ferhat Abbas announced the establishment of the "Provisional Free Algerian Government," which was immediately recognised by the Arab States. Three days later Communist China, as the first non-Arab country, recognised this government, followed by North Korea and North Vietnam. It is noteworthy that the Soviet Union, in view of her relations with France, has withheld de jure recognition up to the present day. In fact, Mr. Khrushchev at one time even expressed confidence in President de Gaulle's efforts to promote a settlement. Only in October, 1960, when Ferhat Abbas visited Moscow, Russia stated that his visit constituted a de facto recognition. When the negotiations at Melun between the French and the Free Algerians broke down, the Vice-President of the Algerian Government, Kerkacem Krim, went to Peking. There Chou En-lai assured him that the Algerian people were not isolated but "supported by hundreds of millions of Asians and Africans." China and Algeria, the Chinese Premier added, had in the past suffered a similar fate, having been "subjected to imperialist oppression and submerged in extreme poverty and distress." He urged the Algerians not to compromise with France—contrary to the hopes expressed by Mr. Khrushchev, and the visit ended by both Governments giving a solemn pledge that Communist China and Free Algeria would "unfailingly stand together." At the same time both agreed to establish full diplomatic relations.

Welcome hero

In autumn 1960, Ferhat Abbas himself went to Peking, where he was given a hero's welcome. This time Chou En-lai proclaimed that the struggle of the Algerian people was an important development in the "*general revolutionary movement of the colonies, the significance and influence of which far exceeds the confines of Algeria.*" An agreement apparently was reached about actual support. The nature of the promised help is difficult to assess, but it seems that Chinese or Vietnamese military instructors have in fact arrived in Tunis, and money and arms are expected, if not volunteers.

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Also below government level links between the two countries are being established. Messages of good will have been exchanged between such organisations as students' federations, and great political play was made recently in China of a visit of an Algerian dance and drama group, which gave performances in Peking. Shanghai, and elsewhere.

Touring acrobats

But China's interest in Africa is not limited to Algeria. She has now established Embassies in the United Arab Republic, the Sudan, Morocco, Guinea, and Ghana. She systematically encourages visits of African delegations, and in the 18 months up to September, 1960, about a hundred such delegations have been to Peking. Chinese broadcasts to Africa now equal, or even surpass, those of Russia. In addition, popular attention is being attracted in many parts of Africa and the Middle East by such devices as touring troupes of Chinese acrobats. In the economic field, too, China is active. Thus she has given a credit of 25,000,000 dollars to Guinea as compared with 35,000,000 by Russia.

In political doctrine Communist China is more intransigent and radical than the Soviet Union is at present ; and if it is considered that China, as an Asian nation, aims at the leadership of the Asian and African peoples, it must be assumed that she will try to exert an ever-increasing influence in Africa and the Middle East.