

Chinese Diplomacy in the 1950s: A Study of Dag Hammarskjöld's Visit to China

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Abstract: After the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, the direct war between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and United States was temporarily halted. But the subsequent issues relating to the prisons of war, China students studied at US and the collusion between US and Taiwan, made the tensions between the PRC and US government. In order to resolve the American spy case, the United States manipulated the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to pass a resolution which Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the United Nations(UNSG), was mandated to visit China to solve this issue. This incident offered the PRC government a rare opportunity to engage with the UN and participate in global affairs. Zhou Enlai, the Chinese Foreign Minister, successfully defended China's sovereignty. This engagement helped to highlight the newly established PRC's position in the international affairs during Cold War while alleviate the tense atmosphere between China and the United States. This event also provided crucial groundwork for the resolution of issues concerning Chinese-American immigrants.

Keywords: American spy case, Sino-American relations, United Nations

1. Introduction

After signing the Korean Armistice Agreement in July 1953, the relationship between the PRC and the US transformed from direct war to a relative peace stage. At the 1954 Geneva Conference, the US government transmitted the request of releasing American prisoners held in Chinese prisons. On May 27, Huang Hua, the spokesmen of the PRC delegation, announced that the PRC was willing to have direct contact with the US delegation. Huang also criticized the US unreasonable detention of Chinese nationals and students from returning to their homeland. Due to the collusion between the US and Taiwan, the gap between the PRC and US was widened. On November 23, 1954, in order to warn the Americans, the Military Tribunal of the Supreme People's Court of the PRC opened two trials of American spies. The next day, the People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*) published the full text of the verdicts of the Supreme People's Court on the two American spy cases, further adding to the tension between the PRC and the United States.

Under the US manipulation, the UNGA passed a resolution requesting Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, to intervene. Hammarskjöld arrived in Beijing on December 30, 1954. He was the first Secretary-General of the United Nations to visit the newly established PRC. From January 6 to January 10, 1955, the Foreign Minister of PRC government, Zhou Enlai, held four meetings with Hammarskjöld. Although the series of meetings did not directly

result in the release of the American spies, but they laid the foundation for future talks between the PRC and US government.

Since Hammarskjöld's visit to China was prompted by a UNGA resolution manipulated by the United States, it was still one of the few interactions between the newborn PRC government and the United Nations before the 1970s. This incident demonstrated that the international order represented by the United Nations can hardly ignore the influence of China. However, in the Chinese academic community, this event is often seen as part of the negotiations on the issue of Chinese-American nationals and has not yet received the attention it deserves, while in the English academic community, Hammarskjöld's visit to China is more often seen as an international law issue related to the UN Charter and the diplomatic role of the UN Secretary-General, failing to focus on the status and role of PRC government in global affairs, especially in East Asian region. This paper reconstructs this event based on UN documents, China and US diplomatic archives, and personal files of leaders for both sides to explore the relationship between the UN and the PRC at early stage [1].

2. The Making of the Resolution

In November 1953, US Vice President Richard Nixon visited Taiwan, during which Taiwan's "Foreign Minister" George Yeh (Yeh Kung-chao) emphasized to him the importance and necessity of a Taiwan-American mutual defense treaty. On December 8, 1954, Chiang Kai-shek's government formally submitted a draft of treaty seeking mutual defense between the US and Taiwan authority. On November 2, 1954, the negotiations for treaty officially began in Washington. The PRC government was extremely angry about the US interference in Taiwan's affairs. It warned the US by issuing the verdict on 13 American spies on November 23. The two American spy cases announced were the "John Thomas Downey and Richard George Fecteau Spy Case" and the "Colonel John K. Arnold Jr. and 11 American Pilots Intruded into China's Airspace to Conduct Defense Facility Reconnaissance". The Downey case involved two American spies, John Thomas Downey and Richard George Fecteau, and another nine former Kuomintang officers who joined a US spy organization after fleeing to Hong Kong. They received spy training in Japan, and was secretly airdropped into Northeast China "to carry out terrorist activities, collect military and economic intelligence, and organize armed rebellions, all for the purpose of preparing to assist the US in expanding its aggression against China". The second case involved eleven American pilots led by Colonel John K. Arnold Jr., who belonged to the US 581st Air Supply and Communications Squadron. "The main task of this squadron was to airdrop spies and supplies to China mainland and the USSR and maintain communication links with them" [2].

As a response to the trial verdict, the US military and political leaders quickly formulated a plan for military retaliation, including a series of measures such as a naval blockade of the Chinese mainland and bombing China railways [3]. While the US hardliners towards China were ready to take action, the US President Dwight D. Eisenhower sought to avoid further conflicts with the Communist bloc [4]. At the same time, there were also opinions within the US government that these actions were already acts of war, violating the Korean Armistice Agreement. To gain an approval by the Congress was another problem. Therefore, the US government chose to declare the people sentenced by the PRC government not spies but prisoners of war, thus accusing China of violating the treaty on repatriation of prisoners of war and seeking a unified action by 16 countries participating in the UN forces in Korean War [5].

On December 10, 1954, the 509th plenary meeting of the ninth session of the UNGA passed Resolution 906, which accused the PRC government of imprisoning American spies in violation of the Korean Armistice Agreement and called on the United Nations Secretary General Hammarskjöld "in the name of the United Nations, to seek the release, in accordance with the Korean Armistice

Agreement, of these eleven United Nations Command personnel, and all other captured personnel of the United Nations Command still detained” [6].

3. Communications before the Visit

After receiving the UN resolution, Hammarskjöld wired to Zhou Enlai expressing his intention to visit China. In the cable he expressed concern about the issue and requested a meeting with the Zhou Enlai in person. Hammarskjöld suggested a visit to Peking soon after December 26 and asked for Zhou’s availability during that time [7]. As Newly established PRC government had not yet been able to obtain representation right in the United Nations, this request was unusual for the UN Secretary-General. On December 14th, Zhou Enlai convened a meeting of officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security to discuss Hammarskjöld’s request to visit Beijing. Two days later, he convened another meeting of the Party Group of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which included Luo Ruiqing, Minister of Public Security, to discuss the matter again.

Afterwards, he met with the Soviet ambassador to China, Pavel Yudin, and informed him that two telegrams to Hammarskjöld would be sent the next day. The first telegram stated China’s firm position on handling the spy case and that China’s internal affairs could not tolerate any foreign interference. The second telegram explained China’s position on the spy case raised in his telegram, but in order to ease the international tension, he was willing to meet with the UNSG in Beijing to discuss the issue. This would “show our firm position and not reject Hammarskjöld’s request to visit in person” [8]. In his conversation with the Soviet ambassador Yudin, Zhou Enlai pointed out that if China refused Hammarskjöld’s visit, the West would continue to act through other neutral Asian countries, and this issue might be raised for discussion at the 1954 Colombo International Conference, which would be unfavorable to China and could even affect the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference. Therefore, if China refused Hammarskjöld’s visit, it would be in a passive position. Accepting Hammarskjöld’s visit was undoubtedly the best course of action [9].

After receiving Zhou Enlai’s reply, Hammarskjöld was very happy. He had told others many times that he regarded Zhou’s cable as “very courteous”, “not contentious”, and tone pleased him. In addition, Hammarskjöld secretly told Henry C. Lodge, the US representative to the United Nations at the time, that Zhou Enlai had expressed his happiness about the Secretary-General’s visit through a relative who served as Sweden’s Chargé in Beijing [10]. When Hammarskjöld met with Herman Phleger, the legal adviser to the US Department of State, Phleger believed that he was confident about his trip to Beijing [11].

On December 20th, the British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden received a long letter from Hammarskjöld, in which he analyzed in detail the reasons for his decision to visit Beijing on behalf of the American spy suspects. Hammarskjöld recognized that he would have to overcome the rejection by the PRC in order to make progress on the American pilots’ case. Given American opinions, he understood that a more modest approach would not be effective, and therefore opted for a more assertive stance. However, inviting a third power, such as Sweden, Switzerland or India, to act as an intermediary was not feasible due to a range of factors. Transmitting a UN resolution would complicate the issue; exchanging views by telegraph would be unproductive; and suggestions for a dialogue between representatives of the PRC and UN would encounter with rebuff. Thus, the only acceptable emissary to both the PRC and US would be Hammarskjöld himself, and suggestions had to be phrased in a way that made it impossible for the PRC government to refuse. [12].

Meanwhile, this visit presented an opportunity for Hammarskjöld to investigate how the United Nations could redefine the concept of global governance during the Cold War. Prior to departing, Hammarskjöld initiated a conversation with a Soviet assistant in the Secretary-General’s office, explaining the purpose of his visit to Beijing: As Secretary General, Hammarskjöld believed that he

could not simply serve as a passive enforcer of United Nations General Assembly resolutions. Instead, he saw his role as motivating him to intervene in the situation involving the American pilots [13].

4. The Negotiations between Dag Hammarskjöld and Zhou Enlai

From January 6th to 10th, 1955, Hammarskjöld held four meetings with Zhou Enlai. The critical issue was the suspicion of espionage on the part of American pilots, which was also Hammarskjöld's primary goal in visiting China. The main disagreement between the two sides was whether the American espionage issue was primarily legal or political. Hammarskjöld stated that after the conclusion of discussions on this matter in the GA, he conducted an independent examination of the pertinent facts and legal principles with the assistance of his advisers. This study was conducted impartially, and based on all available evidence, including that presented by the opposing party as well as that which has been made public. In light of the PRC government's previous cable to him which explained its firm stance on handling the spy case [14], Hammarskjöld consistently stressed during the meetings that he had no intention of impinging upon the autonomous procedures of the Chinese courts of law, nor did he seek to question China's sovereign right to convict.

However, Hammarskjöld's logic was that if the Arnold crew were unequivocally proven to be spies, this was entirely a matter of Chinese sovereignty and domestic affairs, and he respected that. But based on Hammarskjöld's own conclusion drawn from the evidence provided by both sides (primarily provided by the United States) [15], the Arnold crew was shot down over North Korea while carrying out the mission of the United Nations Command, and then entered Chinese airspace due to force majeure rather than intentionally for espionage purposes. Therefore, they were prisoners of war rather than spies. In this case, the issue not only involved China's sovereignty and domestic affairs, but also needed to apply international law, "which laid their conclusions open to international discussion", said Hammarskjöld. But Zhou Enlai believed that, as stated in the telegram to the UN Secretary-General on December 17, 1954, China did not refuse to discuss the issue of American spies, because we have a point in this issue. However, two premises must be adhered to: (1) the UN resolution on this issue is not acceptable, and (2) China's domestic affairs cannot be interfered with. Our talks should focus on political issues, seeking solutions and measures from political aspects, and easing the tense situation. This is the fundamental way to find a way to solve the problem [8].

Regarding the two premises of the discussion, Hammarskjöld and Zhou Enlai engaged in their first confrontation. Regarding the first premise, Hammarskjöld stated that his visit to China was based on the resolution of the UNGA. If the Chinese government did not recognize the resolution, there was no need to have a conversation. Zhou Enlai immediately responded that if the meeting itself implied recognition of the resolution, the meeting could not continue. Faced with this situation, Hammarskjöld immediately made concessions, proposing that the meeting did not represent the Chinese government's recognition of the UN resolution, which Zhou Enlai agreed with. Regarding the second premise, Hammarskjöld still did not recognize the conviction of the Chinese court and insisted on prioritizing the discussion of relevant international legal issues involved in the US spy case, rather than the political issues raised by Zhou Enlai. In view of this situation, Zhou Enlai suggested that the legal issues should be discussed in the second meeting. In addition, Hammarskjöld told Zhou Enlai that the legal issues concerning the American spies/prisoners of war did not include Downey and Fectau, as they did not belong to the United Nations Command [16].

At the second meeting on January 7th, Zhou Enlai first stated that although he had carefully studied Hammarskjöld's statement, it had no effect on the irrefutable evidence of the American Spy Case. The eight basic facts presented by Hammarskjöld was no difference from the evidence presented by the US representative to the United Nations, and both were intended to cover up the spy activities of the arrested personnel. Based on this, to explain the Chinese court's verdict to Hammarskjöld, Zhou Enlai also cited the main facts on which the Chinese court relied for the conviction, the strongest

evidence being the testimony by these captured American pilots that they belonged to the CIA: “The 581st Air Supply and Communication Wing was used by the US Central Intelligence Agency for criminal activities such as airdropping, supplying, contacting, and evacuating underground spies in China and the Soviet Union, as testified by the defendant, John Knox Arnold” [17]. Zhou Enlai concluded that the various “evidence” provided by the US and the so-called “leaflet-dropping mission” were only meant to cover up the US espionage activities in China, “so much for the legal side of the question” [16].

After the discussion, Zhou Enlai turned to the political side of the issue that the PRC focused. He reiterated the standing point of the PRC government in the American Spy Case. Zhou Enlai pointed out that the conviction of American spies captured in China is entirely China’s sovereignty and domestic affairs, and the United Nations has no right to interfere according to its charter. Moreover, the Chinese court’s conviction of American spies was carefully reviewed and based on solid evidence. This sovereign action is in line with the missions and beliefs of the UN Charter and is fair. Zhou Enlai further told Hammarskjöld that the Chinese government would abide by the spirit of the Geneva Conference.

On the contrary, to conceal its acts of aggression, the United States employed the spy cases as a means of generating controversies within domestic and international spheres. The ultimate objective was to shift global public opinions away from the United States’ own aggressive designs. The acts of aggression Zhou mentioned is the signing of Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty between the US and Chiang Kai-shek government. The United Nations had “timidly” followed the United States, condemning China’s sentencing of eleven American spies for violating the Korean Armistice Agreement. It is noteworthy that despite protests lodged by the PRC government and other concerned parties, the UN failed to give due consideration to such grievances. By adopting the resolution, the majority of the United Nations allowed itself to be utilized as an instrument of US aggression [8]. At the same time, Zhou Enlai also mentioned the issue of Chinese students in the US being forbidden from returning to China by the US. He hoped that this issue would also receive the attention it deserves from Hammarskjöld [18]. However, Zhou underscored that there was no possibility of exchanging innocent students for those who had been convicted [16].

After the second meeting, Hammarskjöld had already got a full understanding of the political side relating to the American Spy Case. But judging from the conversation, he still believed that the legal issues needed further discussion. Therefore, at the third meeting, Hammarskjöld first expressed his understanding of the content presented by Zhou Enlai in the second meeting and refuted Zhou’s views on the unfair attitude of the United Nations and being manipulated by the United States. He then refuted each the facts of Chinese conviction of American spies presented by Zhou Enlai. However, Hammarskjöld also expressed at the end that he would pay attention to and attempt to solve the problem of Chinese students detained by the US government. Hammarskjöld also made two requests to Zhou Enlai. In the first request, Hammarskjöld asked Zhou to ensure that the procedures related to the policy, as explained in Geneva, were sped up as much as possible in order to reduce the time of detention or uncertainty for all parties involved. This request was made in the spirit of promoting humanitarian values. In the second request, Hammarskjöld asked Zhou to provide him with information regarding the health condition of the prisoners and any other information that was important for their families. Hammarskjöld expressed his personal attachment to this information and emphasized its importance [16].

Before starting a new round of statement, Zhou Enlai stated that although the talks were aimed at seeking consensus and mutual-understanding, unfortunately the two sides had not achieved this goal. Nevertheless, China still hoped to focus on objective facts and seek wider understanding. This series of talks should be the beginning of China’s communication with the UNSG, not the end. Hammarskjöld agreed with Zhou’s statement. Subsequently, Zhou Enlai made a sum-up regarding

political issues between China and the United States, as well as between China and the Chiang Kai-shek authority:

China is a nation that holds a profound love for peace, yet will not compromise its territory and sovereignty to implore for peace. China firmly opposes war, and will not be intimidated by the threat of war. This has been proven in the past and will continue to be validated in the future. We remain committed to fulfilling our promises and adhering unwaveringly to our policies [19].

Regarding the legal question, Zhou Enlai and Hammarskjöld had their second debate. Zhou once again presented the various pieces of evidence relied upon by Chinese court in convicting the American spies, while Hammarskjöld refuted each point one by one. In the end, the two sides reached a compromise, as they could not reach any common conclusion on the legal issue and decided not to discuss it further. Both Zhou Enlai and Hammarskjöld agreed that the discussions on legal issues during the series of discussions had built up a mutual respect, which will eventually lead to a fair and just conclusion.

Zhou Enlai also responded to the two requests made by Hammarskjöld. Regarding the first request, Zhou Enlai emphasized that the PRC Government would abide by the policy announced in Geneva Conference regarding the treatment of American prisoners. "What we have promised will be kept, and this applies to those who have been sentenced and those who are still under review," he said, adding that "when sentencing American criminals, we generally handled them leniently based on the facts and their own confession. After the sentence is handed down, if the prisoner behaves well, we may consider reducing the sentence or granting early release" [8]. Regarding the second request, Zhou Enlai agreed to provide information concerning the health of the American prisoners with their photos to comfort the families. Zhou informed Hammarskjöld that should the families of the aforementioned individuals wish to visit them in China, the PRC Government would gladly provide assistance for this purpose. Hammarskjöld conveyed his sincere gratitude for the responses he had received [16].

In the fourth and final meeting, Hammarskjöld expressed gratitude to the Chinese hosts for their hospitality. He felt that the visit was "pleasant" and "useful". He was convinced that the interpersonal connections forged during the visit would have warranted the trip, regardless of any additional outcomes. Zhou Enlai once again reiterated China's commitment and spirit of the Geneva Conference. He also expressed the hope that the UN Secretary-General could understand the intention of Chinese government and hear the voice of the Chinese people through this visit. He also hoped that Hammarskjöld could tell other countries concerned, especially the United States, about China's views and position. Zhou Enlai held the belief that Dag Hammarskjöld possessed the potential to advance peace due to his demonstrated character and respected status, both as an individual and in his role as Secretary-General [16]. Before Hammarskjöld's departure, a joint communiqué was issued in Beijing on January 10th, 1955, which stated the significance of the meeting in the relaxation of international tension [20]. After arriving New York, Hammarskjöld issued another statement at the airport, claiming that the talks between him and Zhou Enlai was beneficial to the release of the American prisoners [19].

5. Conclusion

Although no substantive results were achieved during Hammarskjöld's visit to China, it was an important exchange for both parties. For Hammarskjöld, he utilized the visit to give a new interpretation on the Secretary-General's responsibilities in the UN Charter, broadening the diplomatic mission of the Secretary-General's role. His approach, known as the "Peking Formula," has been praised by scholars. For the PRC side, it was even more significant. Hosting Hammer's visit demonstrated Beijing's views and positions to the outside world. It won the PRC a positive diplomatic position and alleviated the tension between China and the United States.

The visit also promoted the negotiations in Geneva and the final resolution of the detention of Chinese nationals in United States. The Secretary-General's visit to a country that had not yet obtained a UN representation seat had extraordinary diplomatic symbolic significance. Upon hearing the news of Hammer's visit to Beijing, the Taiwan authority was in a panic, fearing that Hammer might visit PRC again in the future, opening up the normalization of UN's relation with the PRC [21]. Although Hammer's views in the talks was influenced by the United States, but throughout the entire meetings, he maintained a respectful attitude towards China's sovereignty and internal affairs. This proved to the world that even though it was still not recognized by most countries, the newborn PRC government and Chinese people would no longer be constrained by the previous treaty system, but participate in the multilateral diplomacy and international affairs in a new posture. Since China's status and role in these issues cannot be ignored, it laid the foundation for China's regaining of its rights in the United Nations in the 1970s.

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