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MIDSTREAM—A Monthly Jewish Review. Published monthly, except June-July and August-September when bi-monthly, by The Theodor Herzl Foundation, Inc. Board of Directors: Kalman Sultzer, Chairman; Charlotte Jacobson, Vice-Chairman; Isadore Hamlin, Secretary; Allen Pollack, Israel Miller, Emanuel Rackman, Marie Syrkin. 515 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10022. Subscription: $10.00 a year, $18.00 for two years, $25.00 for three years. Single copy $1.00. Second class postage paid at New York, N.Y. 10001. Copyright © 1979 by The Theodor Herzl Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. Indexed in Public Affairs Information Service, Index to Jewish Periodicals and The American Humanities Index. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by return postage.
Israel, the U.S., and China

SHLOMO SLONIM

The announcement on Friday, December 15, 1978, that Washington would accord recognition to the People's Republic of China and sever its ties with Taiwan sent shock-waves throughout Israel. Israel's dismay was prompted by several considerations. One factor was the timing. Just that morning Prime Minister Begin had announced the decision of the Cabinet to reject the Egyptian attempts to modify the terms of the draft peace treaty which had been hammered out over the preceding weeks between Israel and Egyptian representatives in Washington. The Cabinet had specifically condemned the one-sided attitude of the U.S. administration and its endeavors to pressure Israel into accepting the Egyptian proposals. During the previous week, it may be recalled, President Carter himself had publicly called upon Israel to relent, and, in fact, had hinted at dire consequences to the peace process if the December 17 deadline was not met. The Israeli government chose to spurn the President's counsel on the ground that acceptance of the Egyptian terms would empty the draft treaty of any meaning. As Begin said: "Israel was prepared to sign a peace treaty, not a non-peace treaty." The government announcement foreshadowed a major confrontation with the Carter administration. Publication, therefore, of the U.S. decision to abandon Taiwan, precisely at this moment, struck many as a sharp, fast reaction to the Israeli move and seemed to offer a somber warning to Jerusalem on the possible consequences of recalcitrance.

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However, it is clear that this interpretation of the U.S. step represents a case of reading too much into the coincidence of timing. Undoubtedly, there was a connection between the U.S. pressure on Israel to accept the Egyptian terms and the announcement on Peking; but it was the reverse of what was commonly assumed. American pressure on Israel to sign the proposed peace treaty by December 17 was, it appears, prompted in no small measure by the imminent announcement on Peking which, apparently, could not be delayed. The Peking move, it is clear, had been in the works for some time, and it is not to be supposed that such a momentous decision was taken in haste or that the timing of the announcement was influenced by considerations of piety in U.S. relations with Israel.

But coincidental or not, the move seemed to hold an ominous lesson for Israel and challenged its hope, now so adversely affected by Sadat's tactics, of retaining its long-standing "special" tie with the United States. The American decision to forsake an erstwhile ally and renounce a formal treaty of defense was a matter of foremost concern to a country which does not even enjoy a treaty of alliance with the United States but which is, at the same time, asked to make major concessions for "the cause of peace." An administration which is fickle enough to adopt a new "pragmatic" attitude whenever something new arises, regardless of standing commitments, does not inspire confidence or faith. Many Israelis, including Cabinet members, asked: what reliance could be placed on a power which unilaterally and publicly announced steps toward the revocation of its treaty commitments without even according the in-

jured party the consideration? What value any American guarantee will it be to Israel, that the United States will respect the existing status quo and extend some protection to Israel's vital interests.

Viewed from this perspective, the announcement of the Egyptian decision may appear to be an effort by the Middle East nations to forestall further Israeli relocations, but it does not preclude the possibility that much to Israel could think of moving. The Middle East is at a crossroads, and the American reaction will, after all, be determined by the balance of power there.

In the first place, one must remember that the rise of Middle East nationalism underlies the U.S. administration's determination to recognize the People's Republic of China. The Chinese are well aware of the United States' growing interest in the region and the increasing military and economic aid being extended to Israel. The Chinese have been quick to exploit this situation by making clear their intentions of playing an active role in the Middle East. The recognition of the People's Republic of China by the United States will undoubtedly be seen as a significant development in the region, and it is likely to have a profound impact on the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states.

In the second place, the recognition of China by the United States is likely to have a significant impact on the region's economy. The Chinese have a large and growing market, and the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China will undoubtedly open up new opportunities for trade and investment. This will undoubtedly have a positive impact on the region's economy and will undoubtedly be seen as a significant development in the region, and it is likely to have a profound impact on the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states.

In the third place, the recognition of China by the United States is likely to have a significant impact on the region's politics. The Chinese have a strong presence in the Middle East, and the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China will undoubtedly be seen as a significant development in the region, and it is likely to have a profound impact on the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states.

In the fourth place, the recognition of China by the United States is likely to have a significant impact on the region's security. The Chinese have a large and growing military, and the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China will undoubtedly be seen as a significant development in the region, and it is likely to have a profound impact on the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states.

In the fifth place, the recognition of China by the United States is likely to have a significant impact on the region's culture. The Chinese have a rich and diverse culture, and the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China will undoubtedly be seen as a significant development in the region, and it is likely to have a profound impact on the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states.

In the sixth place, the recognition of China by the United States is likely to have a significant impact on the region's environment. The Chinese have a large and growing environmental problem, and the United States' recognition of the People's Republic of China will undoubtedly be seen as a significant development in the region, and it is likely to have a profound impact on the balance of power between Israel and the Arab states.
In the first place, it is important to bear in mind the economic motivation which underlies the U.S. move. Meeting with reporters immediately after the announcement on China, President Carter predicted that the new agreement would open “a new vista of trade relations with the almost one billion people of China.” (The reference to a billion Chinese is somewhat reminiscent of the great hopes of British textile manufacturers in the 19th century who anticipated phenomenally high profits if only the masses of China could be induced to increase the length of their tunics by two inches!) And, as if to confirm the newly-found emphasis on trade, the very next day Boeing and Coca-Cola reported the conclusion of major business deals with China. In the economic ties to be developed between the two powers the issue of oil occupies a prominent place. Desiring to free itself, and the West generally, from the shackles of reliance on Arab oil, the United States has set its eyes on the vast new reservoirs that have been uncovered recently in Mexico and in China. If Mexico offers continental United States its best prospects of a new source, American oil companies are no less interested in developing China’s massive oil resources. This explains why America’s move to recognize China, at the price of ditching Taiwan, was undertaken in what may appear as unseemly haste. Ever since President Nixon visited mainland China in 1972, it was clear that the United States would sooner than later act to normalize relations with the Asian giant.

The questions arises, however, what prompted the American move precisely at this point and why it was undertaken so precipitously without forewarning and without a proper public relations build-up that might have spared the U.S. administration some adverse criticism. In order to answer this question one must take into account the sequence of events that marked the year 1978. In February, China and Japan signed a “private” trade agreement worth $20 billion over the next eight years. China was to export crude oil to Japan in return for Japanese steel and factories. During 1978 alone, Japanese trade jumped from the 1977 figure of $3.5 billion to $5 billion. In May, Presidential adviser Brzezinski visited Peking and openly endorsed Sino-American cooperation against the USSR. This visit, however, did not produce “material” benefits. In August, China and Japan signed the much-delayed peace treaty between them which opened the door for greater trade and economic cooperation. In October, Chinese Vice-Premier Teng Hsiao Ping arrived in Tokyo for the ratification ceremony. But even before he came, the two countries had decided to revise their February agreement upward from $20 billion to $80 billion and to extend it to 1990. Most important, the new agreement...
called for expanded Chinese oil sales to Japan and joint development of energy-related industries, most particularly, oil refineries, which were essential if oil sales were to grow. Early in November, James Schlesinger, the U.S. Energy Secretary, visited China with the aim of securing "an agreement providing for Sino-American cooperation in energy development." But Schlesinger returned empty-handed. The Chinese refused to conclude such an agreement until relations between the two powers were "normalized," with Washington abrogating its commitment to Taiwan. By December, the U.S. government had reached its moment of truth on the Chinese question. The U.S. oil companies and the U.S. administration, apparently, were loath to allow Japan to obtain a monopoly on oil prospecting and development in China. For its part, the Chinese government was more than happy to allow American companies to prospect and develop China's oil resources, and, indeed, the Americans were best qualified to exploit the deep-water resources of the China Sea where special technology is required. Moreover, China, with its newly found interest in Western trade and development, could not but welcome the competition between Japan and the United States for a hand in China's development. Such interest would have positive implications for China's economy and would also reinforce the already emerging de facto alliance of interest between Peking, Tokyo, and Washington vis-a-vis Moscow.

The emergence of this de facto alliance points to the second aspect of the Washington/Peking rapprochement which may have positive implications for Israel. If the United States had merely accorded China full recognition without anything else attached, this would have been a step fraught with major significance for the constellation of forces in the international arena. With the USSR and China locked, not only in fierce ideological competition, but in a direct confrontation of potential military conflict, drastic improvements in ties with a third power (or powers) cannot but affect the international equation. But Washington went far beyond simply recognizing China. It subscribed to China's "anti-hegemony" clause, which is directed, for all intents and purposes, exclusively against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, it will be recalled, vigorously objected to Japan's acceptance of such a clause in the Japanese-Chinese treaty of peace and, as a result of Russian threats and warnings, Japan delayed conclusion of the proposed treaty for a year or more, and, in the end, introduced a qualifying statement which was designed to mollify Russian fears. The statement read: "The treaty does not affect the two countries' relations with third countries." Now, the Americans, in their eagerness to satisfy the Chinese, accepted the anti-hegemony clause and did not even find it necessary to include a formal qualification excluding the Soviet Union. The implications cannot be lost on Moscow. Brezhnev's decision to postpone his proposed visit to the United States for the signing of the SALT II Agreement and the publication by Moscow of the full text of Brezhnev's message to President Carter on the occasion of American recognition of Communist China are clear signs of the degree of Russian displeasure at the American action.

For Israel, an anti-hegemony policy of the three powers — China, Japan, and the United States — will inevitably have repercussions for the Middle East scene as well. For nearly a quarter of a century, 1945 to 1970, the world was divided into two major contending camps, East and West. During the 1960s, a split developed between Communist China and the Soviet Union and a new power emerged, turmoil in Vietnam realignment of forces in the international arena which has become the corollary of the Cold War.

The conflict in the continent resulting in a break-away provided the first opportunity for grouping of interest. Russia solidly backed United States and China. This sent the powers was drawn in the Anglo-American power struggle when Russia (by operating through MPLA, and China) feebly provided aid to UNITA. Russia in southern Africa as well as its decisive role in the battle of the Ogaden with Moscow's support to Qaddafi's Libya in the 1970s. Soviet influence is reserved to highlight which Russia had a continent at the end of the West. The Cypriot conflict has been under Western strategy, the Chinese influence of states and our domination, which could challenge Chinese domination. Not only had the unrivalled position of Chinese sub-continent, Bangladesh episode, the recent revolt in Soviet government, but a sequel. If all this were to be presented as a corollary to the Vietnamese move to reunify China, Pol Pot goes to Israel, the U.S., and G
The conflict on the Indian subcontinent resulting from Bangladesh's break-away from Pakistan in 1970 provided the first overt signs of a new grouping of international forces, with Russia solidly backing India, and the United States and China arrayed in opposition. This same division amongst the powers was even more sharply drawn in the Angolan civil war in 1975, when Russia (by means of the Cubans) intervened to ensure the victory of the MPLA, and China (and the U.S., rather feebly) provided support to the FNLA and UNITA. Russia's gains in Angola and in southern Africa generally, as well as its decisive role in promoting the Ethiopian victory over Somalia in the battle of the Ogaden Desert, coupled with Moscow's success in converting Qaddafi's Libya into a major outpost of Soviet influence and hardware — all served to highlight the major inroads which Russia had made on the African continent at the expense of China and the West. The Chinese, it is clear, viewed with alarm this pattern of steady Russian encroachment on areas previously under Western control. Soviet strategy, the Chinese maintained, was bent on encircling China with a string of states and outposts under Soviet domination, which would effectively challenge Chinese security on its flanks. Not only had the Russians gained an unrivalled position of power on the Indian sub-continent as a result of the Bangladesh episode, but by means of the recent revolt in Afghanistan a pro-Soviet government had come to power there. If all this were not enough, China must have felt the noose uncomfortably tightened with the Soviet-inspired Vietnamese move to displace the pro-Chinese Pol Pot government in neighboring Cambodia. Russia's machinations were producing a veritable hostile gauntlet on China's periphery. And, of course, China has long appreciated the implications of Russia's attempts to supplant the West, notably the Americans, in the Middle East. With Syria and Iraq solidly in the Soviet orbit, recent events in Iran only served to confirm for the Chinese the validity of their claim regarding Russia's hegemonic ambitions. And for this reason the whole policy of detente has been viewed by the Chinese as but a gigantic Russian ruse to delude the West into lowering its guard and to bring about the ultimate neutralization of Western Europe, and perhaps of the West generally.

It is in the context of this vast build-up of Soviet outposts into a veritable global security network that Egypt has come to play a pivotal role in Chinese strategic thinking. Egypt is part of Africa and extends, by means of the Sinai, into Asia proper. Moreover, Cairo controls the passageway which lies at the nexus of these two continents and which provides exclusive access from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. China has come to look upon Egypt as a vital factor in thwarting Russian ambitions in the pivotal Middle East area and as an effective barrier to a Russian strangle-hold on all of Africa. By the same token, China welcomes American support for Egypt and is pleased by every sign that Washington is resolutely opposed to Russian attempts to dominate the Middle East. Sadat's moves to establish peace with Israel are doubly welcome to the Chinese since these moves do not only engage the active support of the Americans but, moreover, serve to strengthen the anti-Russian forces in this vital region. Thus China views a settlement between the two Middle Eastern countries as a firm step towards consolidation of an anti-Soviet
front in the area. Ever since Sadat became disenchanted with Moscow, China has steadily and progressively supported his diplomatic moves, which are designed to exclude the Soviet Union from a dominant role in Middle Eastern affairs and, in effect, to permit the creation of a form of Pax Americana in the area. In fact, Chinese support for Sadat has not been limited to the diplomatic sphere. Ever since the Russians denied Egypt spare parts for its MiG fighter planes, China has taken up the slack. In return, Cairo has provided Peking with at least one MiG 23, which the Chinese are now free to copy and produce. For the Chinese, any arrangement in the Middle East which will forestall Russian influence is commendable. It is, therefore, not surprising to learn of hints from various quarters suggesting that China is now more favorably disposed toward Israel than it previously had been. This is not to say that China today is on the verge of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. It does mean, however, that Peking now regards the existence of Israel as a salutary factor and as something which merits Chinese covert, if not overt, support, for Israel is willy-nilly fulfilling the role of containing Russian expansionism in the region. Peace between Egypt and Israel could see China serving as a guarantor of the settlement (via the Security Council) as well as fulfilling the concomitant requirement of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel.

From the Russian angle, the Washington-Peking rapprochement may have positive implications for Israel, as well. If it is acknowledged that Russia, ever since the Second World War (and insofar as Israel is concerned, ever since 1950), has fulfilled a disruptive goal in the Middle East in its efforts to penetrate and dominate the area, then a three-power alliance in opposition to hegemony may help curb this disruptive feature of Soviet policy. The multi-polar world which emerges from the Brzezinski strategy of diversifying global centers of power (a take-off of the Kissinger approach) should produce greater stability in the international system by a more effective operation of the balance of power. In the result, the Soviet Union will tend to gravitate to a more status quo position with less inclination to "rock the boat" in areas which could produce a major confrontation with the United States.

Traditionally, the Soviet Union has avoided "warming-up" two fronts simultaneously; it prefers to meet its challenges one front at a time. Given present tensions in the Far East, with China today actively engaged in conflict with Vietnam, and the Soviet Union carefully weighing its options in an extremely volatile situation, Moscow is not likely to welcome any attempt to stir up trouble and tension in the Middle East. Given the importance of oil to the West, such a development would only exacerbate tension with the United States unnecessarily at a time when the Russians would prefer to concentrate their near-exclusive attention on the growing Chinese menace. Furthermore, it could seriously jeopardize the prospects for a SALT II Agreement which the Russians urgently desire.

This is not to say that Moscow will henceforth desist from taking advantage of situations in the Middle East prone to exploitation and manipulation, as in the case of Iran; nor does it mean that they will refrain from continued covert penetration and extension of influence in the area. It does mean, however, that they are less likely than they would have been to underwrite an activist military policy against Israel, or to endorse the current aggressive plans of the newly-formed Syrian-Iraqi axis. For one thing, Moscow can never be certain that its side will necessarily prevail. A victory over the axis would be embarrassing; it means the Soviet Union to take a step in the context of the Middle East exploit one's head more readings get out of the Indian subcontinent the possibility of a confrontation with the United States the Far East, Moscow is likely to be interested in stabilizing the area even if all its interests in the area are cleared and the long term interests...
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certain that its side will necessarily prevail. A smashing Israeli victory over the axis would not only be embarrassing; it might compel the Soviet Union to take steps it would prefer to avoid having to take, at least in the context of the Middle East. Moreover, a Middle East explosion can only too readily get out of hand. In contrast to the Indian sub-continent and Africa, the possibility of a direct nuclear confrontation with the United States in the Middle East cannot be entirely dismissed. Two such confrontations were narrowly averted in the past. Thus, in the face of a challenge emanating from the Far East, Moscow may find it to be in its interest to stabilize the Middle East area, even if all its imperial expansionist ambitions are not fully attained. Stability in the area is clearly in Israel’s short and long term interest, and a concert of interest between Jerusalem and the powers, both East and West, may help keep the Arab-Israeli dispute on a back burner for some years.

In any case, for Israelis, the American decision on Peking/Taiwan need not be viewed with exclusive one-sided alarm. The moral of the story, that Israel’s security should not be dependent on the benevolence of any outside power, is fully confirmed. At the same time, it is worth noting that if the drive for a broader base for oil is a motivating factor in the American move toward Peking, and furthermore, if one of the consequences of this move will be a trend toward more balance and stability in great power competition, through consolidation of an anti-hegemony front, then it may yet produce positive and welcome results in Israel’s favor.