Review by Niu Jun, School of International Studies, Peking University

The article “Mao Zedong and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis” by Enrico Maria Fardella is a very enlightening one and it bears considerable significance for studying China’s diplomacy during the Cold-War era. The significance lies in its explicit argument that “The propaganda campaign launched within the country to support the Cuban revolution and criticize Soviet revisionism helped Mao to consolidate his political struggle and win over his opponents”. The writer uses very clear logic to demonstrate his argument – to study China’s foreign policy in this period, including China’s policy in the Cuban Missile Crisis, entails efforts to identify the fundamental cause from China’s internal political developments. Alternatively, it is also necessary to study the Chinese Communist Party’s (CPC) inter-party struggle brought by the ‘Great Leap Forward Movement’, and the implications this struggle exerted on Chairman Mao Zedong’s decision-making.

As the author asserts, research on China’s policy toward the Cuban Missile Crisis are scarce. In particular, due to the limited access to historical archives, scholars are far from able to present a relatively in-depth and meticulous analysis. This has also resulted in the neglect of China’s behavior during the Crisis and its related policies. Yet, newly declassified archives reveal the value in studying this point. Fardella highlights his perspective at the beginning of this paper, to focus on the interaction between China’s internal political developments and its foreign policy. The author uses this perspective in his approach to the reasons why Chinese leader Mao Zedong launched the campaign against the Soviet revisionism during the crisis. This interpretation is very persuasive. Furthermore, the author reveals, based on newly found archives and materials, how the Chinese leadership approached the Cuban Revolution, how they gradually understood the Soviet Union’s role in igniting the crisis and coped with the evolving crisis and what were the complex facts behind Mao decision to take advantage of this crisis to criticize the Soviet revisionism.

The article makes a special contribution to the field. The author draws very detailed study on and analysis to the debate over how to cope with the Cuban Missile Crisis and how to take advantage of the contradictions between the Soviet Union and Cuba among different organizations and at different tiers within China’s
foreign policy decision-making system. Reader can use the description and analysis in this regard to envisage
the complexity of China’s foreign policy decision-making regime and process.

Furthermore, this also constitutes the point where breakthroughs have been hard to make in studying China’s
foreign policy. Based on the historical archives of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the author makes it
clear that there indeed existed different understandings and debate within China’s decision-making system,
for example, on whether and how to take advantage of the disputes emerging between the Soviet Union and
Cuba to strengthen China’s support for Cuba. The author further points out that China seemed awkward due
to its limited influence over the Soviet-Cuba relations, but it still held unrealistic faith in its ability to act,
largely because of its self-centered tradition. On the other hand, Fardella, by dint of diplomatic archives, has
demonstrated that some of the quasi-professional personnel in China’s decision-making system maintained a
cautious approach to the Sino-Cuba relations. Their role in decision-making was anything but insignificant.
These details reveal that China’s decision-making is more complex than has been imagined and that there are
still many unknown facts which can be unveiled in the future.

Besides its detailed analysis of Mao’s and China’s decision-making process, the article presents two visions.
One is the relationship of the countries within the Soviet camp, which was best embodied by the interaction
between China, the Soviet Union and Cuba at this critical time. Obviously, the author has already put
China’s decision-making process into the structure of interaction within the Socialist camp. Therefore, the
interaction between the relationship of the so-called ‘fraternal parties’ and China’s internal political
developments is ripe for further explanation. The other is a more complex one – China’s war with India on
the border areas during the evolving crisis. Because war bears special significance in national politics, a war on
the same scale as the Sino-India War largely altered the strategic priorities of the Chinese leaders. Therefore,
identifying the extent to which the Sino-India War affected China’s decision-making is conducive to scholars’
understanding of Mao Zedong’s motivations in making his decisions.

Jun Niu, a Professor in School of International Studies, Peking University, received his Ph.D. from People’s
University of China in 1988. His research is focused on China’s foreign policy making since 1949, and the
United States foreign policy and the Sino-U.S. relationship. His main recent publications include: From
Yan’an to the World: The Origin and Development of Chinese Communist foreign Policy (Norwalk: Eastbridge,
2004); 牛軍著、真水康樹訳『冷戦期中国外交の政策決定』(東京: 千倉書房，2007 年)(China’s
Foreign Policy Decision Making during the Cold War); The Introduction of Foreign Relation of PRC since 1949
(Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010); The Cold War and the Origins of PRC’s Foreign Relations 1949-1955
(Beijing: Sheke wenxian Press, 2012); The Cold War and Chinese Foreign Decision Making (Beijing: Jiuzhou
Press, 2013); and China’s Foreign Policy Analysis: Theory, History and Prospect (Beijing: Shijie zhishi Press,
2013).

© 2016 The Authors
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License