

# THE SINO-SOVIET BORDER PROBLEMS OF 1969

by

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The complex ideological disputes stemming from the Sino-Soviet split that occurred after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech of 1956 led to an open disclosure of Chinese territorial claims against the Soviet Union, armed border clashes between the two communist giants, and a massive Soviet military buildup along their common 4150-mile border. By 1969 the communist bloc once thought of as "monolithic" was fragmented, and antagonisms arising in part from age-old hostilities and fears were so intense that they threatened the safety of the entire world.

The catalyst that served to thrust the border dispute into the open was the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Unhappy with the way Moscow had handled the crisis, Peking first charged the Soviets with "adventurism" for placing the missiles in Cuba and then with "capitulationism" for withdrawing them. Khrushchev, in turn, pointedly mentioned that the Chinese could hardly complain about Soviet actions because they had done nothing to liberate Hong Kong or Macao, where the "aroma is not a bit better than the smell from colonialism in Goa."<sup>1</sup>

Khrushchev's accusation brought forth a public statement from the Chinese in which they identified several Sino-Russian treaties as "unequal," i.e. forced upon a weakened China in the 19th century. This response appeared as an editorial in *People's Daily* in March 1963. It said in part,

During the hundred or so years preceding the victorious Chinese communist revolution, the colonial and imperialistic powers—the United States, Great Britain, France, Czarist Russia, Germany, Japan, Italy, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal—became unreservedly engaged in a campaign of aggression against China. They imposed on the various regimes of the old China numerous treaties . . . . By virtue of these unequal treaties they annexed Chinese territory in the north, south, east and west; and held leased territories on the seaboard and in the hinterland of China. At the time the People's Republic of China was inaugurated, our government declared it would examine the treaties that had been left over by history and would recognize, abrogate, revise, or renegotiate them according to their respective contents . . . .

You are not unaware that such questions as those of Hong Kong and Macao relate to the category of unequal treaties left over by history, treaties which the imperialists imposed on China.

It may be asked: in raising questions of this kind, do you intend to raise all questions of unequal treaties and have a general settlement? Has it ever entered your heads what the consequences would be? Can you seriously believe that this will do you any good?<sup>2</sup>

Through the summer of 1963 open polemics between the USSR and the PRC were generally confined to ideological issues and to differences over the partial nuclear test ban treaty with the United States. In August of that year, however, the Chinese sent a note to the Soviet Embassy in China, putting forward a proposal for maintaining the status quo of the boundary and averting border conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

The proposal was rejected by the Soviet Union. Less than a month later the Chinese openly accused the Soviets of violating the borders near Ili and of engaging in subversive activities by enticing and coercing several tens of thousands of Chinese citizens into going to the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup>

Two weeks later Moscow charged that Chinese servicemen and civilians had been systematically violating the Soviet frontier since 1960. The Soviets further charged that more than 5000 violations of the Soviet frontier had occurred in 1962 and that the Chinese had made attempts to "develop" some parts of Soviet territory.<sup>5</sup> They also declared that Chinese who crossed the border to fish in the area of the "disputed islands of Amur and Ussuri" were doing so under written instruction.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the Soviets warned:

Chinese propaganda has been insinuating that some parts of the Soviet-Chinese border came to be unjustly drawn in the past. To go about artificially creating territorial problems in our times, especially between socialist countries, would be to take a very dangerous course.<sup>7</sup>

While the Soviets rejected the claim of the Chinese that the treaties of Aigun (1858), Peking (1860), and Ili (1881) were "unequal" and refused to renegotiate the frontier boundaries in their entirety as demanded by the Chinese, they nevertheless insisted that they had taken the initiative in proposing consultations to specify the border "at certain points." The Soviets held the position that no territorial issues existed between themselves and the PRC, that their common border took shape historically, and that only

issues that concerned "certain sections of the frontier" could be discussed.<sup>8</sup>

Peking asserted that "after repeated suggestions" by their side, boundary negotiations were held in 1964, during which Peking expressed a willingness to respect the old treaties and to "take them as a basis for a reasonable settlement."<sup>9</sup>

In a letter issued by the PRC four days after the start of these negotiations, the Chinese declared that no progress was being made and that "serious . . . large-scale subversive activities in Chinese frontier areas" were taking place. The PRC also accused Moscow of using the press and wireless to sow discord among the minority nationalities on the Chinese side of the border and, again, of coercing tens of thousands of Chinese citizens into going to the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup>

The special vulnerability of the Sinkiang frontier region, where China's control had frequently been precarious under former regimes, and the strategic industrial importance of the Heilungkiang area made Soviet involvement in the region a serious security problem for the Chinese. Complicating the situation, the Chinese were on the verge of announcing their first successful detonation of an atomic weapon (5 October 1964), an event undoubtedly already anticipated by the Kremlin. At any rate, Mao Tse-tung himself showed his concern for these territorial regions in an interview with members of the Japanese Socialist Party in July 1964:

There are too many places occupied by the Soviet Union. At the Yalta Conference Outer Mongolia was taken away from China and made independent in name only. Actually it was controlled by the Soviet Union. The territory of Outer Mongolia is much bigger than your Kurile Islands. We already mentioned it was possible to return Outer Mongolia to China. They said impossible. It was mentioned with Khrushchev and Bulganin in 1954 when they were visiting China. They also cut a piece of land from Romania which is called Bessarabia. Again, in Germany they got a piece of land which is

a part of Eastern Germany. They drove all the Germans in that part to the west . . . [All] that could be detached they wanted to detach. Some people say they still want to take China's Sinkiang, [and] cut away Heilungkiang [Province]. They have increased their military strength at the border regions. My opinion is that all of these do not need to be detached. Soviet territory is already big enough . . . [More] than a hundred years ago [Russia] took all the land east of Lake Baikal, including Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and Kamchatka Peninsula. This account has not been clearly reckoned. We have still not presented them with this bill.<sup>11</sup>

Nine days later Premier Chou En-Lai revealed that he had discussed territorial issues with Khrushchev as early as 1957 but had received no satisfactory response.<sup>12</sup>

The border negotiations that were begun in secret in Peking in February 1964 were short-lived. Throughout most of 1964 cries of "expansionist" flew both ways across the border; the Soviets accused the Chinese of seizing Mongolia, Tibet, and Sinkiang, and the Chinese charged the Soviets with wanting to "stretch out their evil hands to invade and occupy" Chinese territory.<sup>13</sup>

**T**here was a temporary lull in the polemics following Khrushchev's ouster in October 1964. But the border issues soon began to heat up again. Vice Premier Lu Ting-yi spoke on 28 November of attempts of imperialists to sever Inner Mongolia,

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Sinkiang, Tibet, and Taiwan from China, blaming the "Chiang Kai-shek band, the reactionaries, and modern revisionism." At that time, meetings were held in Sinkiang to prepare the people for the struggle against the divisive and disruptive tactics from abroad, including "those from the north."<sup>14</sup>

From October 1964 to April 1965 the Soviet Union charged the Chinese with 36 incursions into Soviet territory.<sup>15</sup> Then, following the onset of the anti-revisionist Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, came a dramatic increase in the reported incidents of border violations. In May 1966 a PRC official charged the USSR with inciting numerous border incidents, saying, "They have deployed their troops on the Sino-Soviet border and carried out continual military maneuvers on the border, which presupposes China as the enemy."<sup>16</sup> As a result of these actions, on 19 April 1966 the PRC published the "Regulations Governing Foreign Ships on Border Rivers," which were new rules relating to traffic on rivers crossing from one country to another. Eastern affairs analyst Harold Munthe-Kaas points out that these regulations at first appear innocuous until one realizes that except for the Yalu, the only navigable waterways of China that border another country are those along the Sino-Soviet border. Another analyst describes them as a "provocative" set of regulations.<sup>17</sup> Previously, according to a 1957 treaty, both the Soviet Union and the PRC had full reciprocal navigation rights in border areas, and restrictions on the movements of crew members and passengers were kept to a minimum. These new regulations required all ships to apply for permission to enter or leave a Chinese river port from the "Port Supervision Office"; the captain was required to report to port authorities all weapons, ammunition, wireless transmitters, radio telephones, radar equipment, etc.; all weapons and ammunition were to be handed over for custody while in Chinese waters; the ship could not use its wireless transmitters, radar, signal rockets, or gun signal unless the ship was in danger; and those on board a ship entering a port on a border river or a river reaching a foreign country could not take

photographs, make drawings, swim, fish, or make soundings of the river.<sup>18</sup>

Apparently as a result of these new regulations, the 14th regular meeting of the Sino-Soviet Commission for Navigation of Boundary Rivers was not held. At least one analyst has stated, "It is from this point that we can date with assurance increasing hostility along the river boundary and the Soviet build-up of forces."<sup>19</sup>

Chinese sources claim that from October 1964 to March 1969 as many as 4189 border incidents were provoked by the Soviet Union. In response to the earlier of these border problems, in 1966 Peking declared that a 12-mile-wide strip of land along the Sinkiang border be cleared. Production and construction corps made up of 50,000 to 60,000 men were sent in to cultivate the land, build roads, and defend the area.<sup>20</sup>

In December of that same year the PRC became a full-fledged member of the "nuclear-missile family," demonstrating the ability to fire a ballistic missile with a nuclear warhead. China was suddenly a greater threat to any potential enemy because of this unexpectedly rapid development of a delivery capability.<sup>21</sup>

Foy D. Kohler, American ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1962 to 1966, notes that the popular Soviet poet Andrei Voznesensky, reflecting an official Soviet line, implied in his poetry at this time that Mao Tse-tung and his followers were "heirs of the barbaric Mongol and Tatar warlords . . . [and] closer to Genghis Khanism than Marxism," thus reviving the old Russian fear of the "yellow peril."<sup>22</sup> By 1968, the magazine *Kommunist*, comparing the cult of Mao to that of the ancient Chinese emperors, warned: "The concept of the unconditional superiority of the Chinese nation over all other peoples and of its special historical mission is being resolutely instilled . . . [and] a hostile attitude toward the USSR . . . is being formed."<sup>23</sup>

In 1968, as border incidents continued and minority unrest intensified, Peking undertook a "Youth-to-the-Border" movement in an attempt to stabilize these areas.<sup>24</sup> During this period of the Cultural

Revolution, mass rallies were held in Sinkiang to demand the return of China's "lost territories."<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, beginning in 1965 the Soviets systematically transferred men and equipment to the Far East as they built new military bases and expanded existing ones.<sup>26</sup> In 1966 they announced their plans to build a "showcase" city on the Amur River, indicating a determination to control and develop the regions to which the Chinese had submitted claims.<sup>27</sup> The Soviet buildup along the border was given little attention by the Chinese, however, until mid-1968. By then the Cultural Revolution, which had created great internal disruption, was reasonably under control, and Chinese leaders had become alarmed by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The Brezhnev Doctrine enunciated at the time, in which the USSR proclaimed its right to use military intervention to protect what it perceived to be the common interests of communism, made the Chinese nervous. In his National Day address of 1 October 1968, Chou En-lai for the first time explicitly linked "Soviet revisionism" (and, presumably, the newly espoused concept of "limited sovereignty") with the possibility of invasion.<sup>28</sup>

**T**he most serious incidents of Soviet intrusion into Chinese territory took place, according to Chinese sources, along the Ussuri (Wusuli) and Amur (Heilung) rivers, on the waterway near Jaoho, Wupalao Island, Kapotzu Island, and Chilichin Island. The Chinese claim that Soviet troops intruded 16 times into Chenpao (Damansky) Island between 23 January 1967 and 2 March 1969, each time in disregard of Chinese protests.<sup>29</sup> On the latter date the appearance of Soviet forces resulted in large-scale armed clashes between Chinese and Soviet troops. This small, uninhabited, and previously obscure island then became the center of world attention.

Chenpao (Damansky) Island is located in the Ussuri (Wusuli) River at 133°51' east and 46°51' north. It is less than two and a half kilometers in length and about one-half kilometer in width. The Chinese claim that

“it is situated on the Chinese side of the central line of the main channel of the Wusuli River.”<sup>30</sup> “Even according to the unequal Sino-Russian Treaty of Peking,” the Chinese say, “the island was part of Chinese territory,” forming part of the bank on the Chinese side of the river at that time. Later, as a result of erosion of the river, it became an island.<sup>31</sup>

On 3 March 1969 the *New China News Agency* reported armed conflict on Chenpao Island:

Around nine o'clock on March second, large numbers of fully armed soldiers, together with two armoured vehicles, a lorry and a command car sent by the Soviet frontier authorities, flagrantly intruded into the area of Chenpao Island which is undisputed Chinese territory, and carried out provocations against the Chinese frontier guards who were on normal patrol duty on the island . . . . At nine seventeen hours, the intruding Soviet soldiers outrageously opened cannon and gun fire on the Chinese frontier guards. The Chinese frontier guards were compelled to fight back in self defense when they reached the end of their forbearance.<sup>32</sup>

The fighting appears to have lasted a little more than an hour, according to Chinese accounts, during which 70 Soviets were killed or wounded and three of the four Soviet vehicles present were destroyed. Twenty Chinese were killed and 34 were wounded, according to this report.<sup>33</sup>

The Soviet Union also released accounts of the incident, accounts that conflicted with the PRC report. A 3 March TASS report included the text of a note of protest presented to the government of the PRC. It read in part:

The Chinese authorities staged an armed provocation on the Soviet-Chinese frontier in the area of the frontier point, of Nizhne-Mikhaylovka (Damansky Island) on the Ussuri River at four hours ten minutes, Moscow time, on March second. A Chinese detachment crossed the Soviet state frontier

and proceeded towards Damansky Island. Fire from machine guns and automatic weapons was suddenly opened by the Chinese side on Soviet frontier guards protecting this area. The actions of the Chinese intruders were supported from an ambush by fire from the Chinese bank of the Ussuri River. Over 200 Chinese soldiers took part in this provocative attack on Soviet frontier guards. As a result of this gangster raid some Soviet frontier guards were killed or wounded. The impudent armed incursion into Soviet territory has been an organized provocation of the Chinese authorities and has the purpose of aggravating the situation on the Soviet frontier.<sup>34</sup>

Although the Chinese released little detailed information of the actual fighting—unlike the Soviet side, which presented several different accounts of the event<sup>35</sup>—a publication of Peking's Foreign Language Press did present pictures showing Soviet tanks in the Chenpao area and a display of arms and ammunition, radio transmitters, and other types of military equipment supposedly captured from the Soviets.<sup>36</sup>

The immediate result of the conflict was the release of a flood of accusations from the Chinese against the Soviets for previous violations of the frontier and other charges never before made public. The Chinese said that the Soviet frontier guards had intruded into the area of Chilichin Island 18 times between November 1967 and January 1968, and that they frequently disrupted production and on many occasions killed and wounded Chinese people. Intrusions into Kapotzu Island, south of Chenpao, were also made public.<sup>37</sup> It was further reported that a note of protest had been sent to the Soviet Embassy in China on 8 January 1968 demanding that the Soviet government punish those troops who had been responsible for killing four Chinese fishermen on Chilichin Island on 5 January by running armored cars over them.<sup>38</sup>

In editorials appearing in *People's Daily*, in *Liberation Army Daily*, and in provincial publications throughout China, the Chinese pointed out that even the unequal treaty of

1860 recognized that Chenpao was Chinese territory: "It has always been under China's jurisdiction and patrolled by Chinese guards since long ago. How is it that the area of Chenpao Island suddenly ran over to the side of the Soviet State frontier?"<sup>39</sup>

On 13 March the Foreign Ministry of the PRC sent a protest note to the Soviet Embassy in China listing eight fresh intrusions onto Chenpao Island or Chinese territory near the island and accusing the Soviets of carrying out military provocations in an attempt to provoke "fresh armed conflicts."<sup>40</sup> On that same day, Peking radio announced that Chinese troops and frontier guards along the Chinese-Mongolian border were on full alert.<sup>41</sup>

Then, on 15 March, dozens of Soviet tanks and armored vehicles and large numbers of armed Soviet troops crossed the main channel of the ice-bound Ussuri "to intrude into Chinese territory." The assault that followed continued intermittently from 0800 to 1900 hours as the Soviets shelled the island with heavy artillery and their troops fired on the Chinese personnel.<sup>42</sup>

Before and during the actual fighting, the Soviet Union had been building up its military forces along the border, and during the intensification of a corresponding propaganda campaign it undertook the unprecedented behavior of attacking the Chinese people themselves. The campaign was so thorough that diplomatic observers compared it to the Russian anti-German propaganda of World War II and speculated that it might be designed to prepare the Soviet people for a conflict beyond the single incident stage.<sup>43</sup> Further, Soviet ambassadors around the world made a point of briefing various foreign ministers on the events of the two weeks. They left the impression that the situation was serious and that Moscow did not expect it to be settled easily.<sup>44</sup>

After the border incidents and amid reports of a long-range Soviet military buildup in the Far East, both parties agreed to hold a joint meeting of the Sino-Soviet Border River Navigation Committee. But additional incidents of armed clashes, kidnappings, violations of airspace, gunboat

intrusions into Chinese waters, and the burning of Chinese citizens' homes were protested by the PRC throughout the spring and early summer of 1969.

On the 13th of August another serious border clash occurred in Sinkiang Province as several hundred armed Soviet troops penetrated two kilometers into the province and killed and wounded a number of Chinese frontier fighters.<sup>45</sup> In a protest note to the Soviet Embassy, the Chinese claimed that the Soviet Union was continuing to mass large numbers of troops and tanks in an attempt to provoke large-scale armed conflicts.<sup>46</sup> They also charged the Soviets with hypocrisy in professing a desire to normalize the border situation when they had "incessantly taken measures to aggravate the tension along the border and create fresh incidents of bloodshed."<sup>47</sup>

Within China a campaign was begun to mobilize the populace for war. Peking declared that there was an increase in the Soviet military threat, that Soviet forces had intensified their "anti-China" deployment, and that two Soviet marshals had "openly threatened to start a nuclear war."<sup>48</sup> The world press reported new troop movements within mainland China reflecting a nationwide preparation for the possibility of war with the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup> In central China, troop movements were so heavy that all other rail traffic was suspended for several days.<sup>50</sup> Military observers reported to *The New York Times* that these "troop shifts were not large but fit a pattern of military preparation that seems defensive and conforms with the Maoist philosophy of mobile military units and massive resistance by the populace."<sup>51</sup>

The Institute for Strategic Studies in London pointed out that the Soviet Union "encouraged" news of their military reinforcements in the Far East along with reports of "major ground and air exercises there," and that the Trans-Siberian Railway was closed to civilian traffic because of troop movements.<sup>52</sup> In August the Soviet High Command appointed a new commanding officer, Colonel General Vladimir F. Tolubko, a missile specialist, to the Far Eastern Military District.<sup>53</sup> At least one

*Pravda* editorial, on 28 August, was interpreted throughout the world as "implying the possible use of nuclear weapons by the Soviet Union."<sup>54</sup> By September rumors were circulating in Eastern Europe about the immediate possibility of a Soviet air strike against the Chinese nuclear sites in Sinkiang.<sup>55</sup> In November a new Central Asian Military District was set up to control the Soviet border with Sinkiang.<sup>56</sup>

**I**n 1978, nine years after the 1969 border skirmishes between the Soviet Union and China, the world was given additional word on how close the two had come to the brink of nuclear disaster. The H. R. Haldeman book *The Ends of Power*, published in February of 1978, released new information about the situation. Haldeman, who had been White House chief of staff under President Nixon at the time, disclosed that the Soviet Union had "moved nuclear-armed divisions to within two miles" of the Sino-Soviet border in 1969. Further, there were "hundreds of Soviet nuclear warheads stacked in piles" in the area and "eighteen thousand tents for their armored forces were erected overnight in nine feet of snow."<sup>57</sup>

Haldeman declared that Soviet leaders had been trying to convince US leaders for years that the Chinese should not be permitted to build a nuclear capability, and that as far back as 1962 the US Air Force had made a feasibility study of a surgical strike on Chinese nuclear plants. The study showed that the United States did not have a single weapon capable of a "clean" surgical strike, and as far as was known, neither did the Soviet Union. In spite of that fact, "In 1969 there were several overtures by the Soviets to the US for a joint venture in the surgical strike. Nixon turned the Soviets down, but was then informed, to his horror, that the Soviets intended to go ahead on their own."<sup>58</sup> In order to counter such a move, President Nixon and his advisor Henry Kissinger decided to signal the Soviets that the United States was "determined to be a friend" of China's.<sup>59</sup>

At this same time a Sino-American rapprochement was undertaken through

contacts in Warsaw. These moves produced "an electric effect on the Kremlin," according to Haldeman, as Moscow watched China "moving more and more under the US security umbrella." He believed that they realized the risks of an attack on the Chinese were too great, even though they also believed that if the Chinese "nuclear plants were destroyed, China would not be a military threat to them for decades."<sup>60</sup>

**I**n reexamining the sequence of events occurring from 1960 to 1969, one can reasonably conclude that the Soviet fear of a Chinese nuclear capability was probably the most powerful factor in the complex historical, political, and ideological development of national animosities between those two countries. There is little doubt that the basic problems were left over from history. Fear of the Mongols and the "yellow peril" runs deep in the Soviet Union. Obviously, China's accelerating irredentist claims could do nothing to alleviate those fears, which were further fed by the anti-revisionist thrust of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that began in 1966. Coupled with that was the development of a nuclear capability by Peking. A crescendo of polemics coincided with the various stages in that development, starting with the successful detonation of the first Chinese atomic bomb, followed by accusations and border disputes, and culminating with the successful development of a missile delivery system by Peking. By 1968-69 the Soviet fear of growing Chinese strength was so intense that the Soviets apparently were ready to attempt a surgical strike against the nuclear installations in Sinkiang. It may well be that the Soviets would have done so had it not been for the prudent steps taken by the United States.

#### NOTES

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56. *Strategic Survey, 1969*, p. 70.

57. "By H. R. Haldeman: 'The Ends of Power,' an Insider's View," *The New York Times*, 17 February 1978, p. 17.

58. H. R. Haldeman with Joseph DiMona, *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), p. 90.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

