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A Tale of Land and Socialist Imperialism: Sino-Soviet Relations 1953-1969

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the role of territorial dispute in the 1969 Zhenbao Island conflict between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union. Whereas the existing English-language historiography has emphasized the ideological debate between Mao and Khrushchev, and the two countries' struggle for supremacy in the Communist bloc, this thesis emphasizes the historical legacy of land disputes between China and the Soviet Union, and the continuation of Soviet foreign policy towards China from Stalin to Brezhnev, which have not been given enough attention by previous scholarships. The clash at Zhenbao was essentially a territorial dispute. The Soviet leadership would not admit that the territorial treaties signed by the Russian Empire with China in the 19th century were unequal treaties, thus neglecting the sensitivity of Chinese government to the land disputes and eventually causing the bloodshed on Zhenbao Island. This dispute had important consequences such as planning for a Soviet nuclear strike on China and the normalization of Sino-US relations. This work draws on primary sources from Chinese archives, American archives and translated Russian material from the Soviet archive, and comprehensive secondary sources from both the English-language and Chinese scholarships. The main finding of the research is that the unequal treaties signed by China and the Russian Empire in the 19th century were the fundamental cause of the long-standing territorial disputes between China and the Soviet Union. While the Soviet Union considered the term "unequal treaties" contradicted the essence of Soviet Communist ideology, China considered the Soviet Union's denial of its territorial claims as a form of imperialism.

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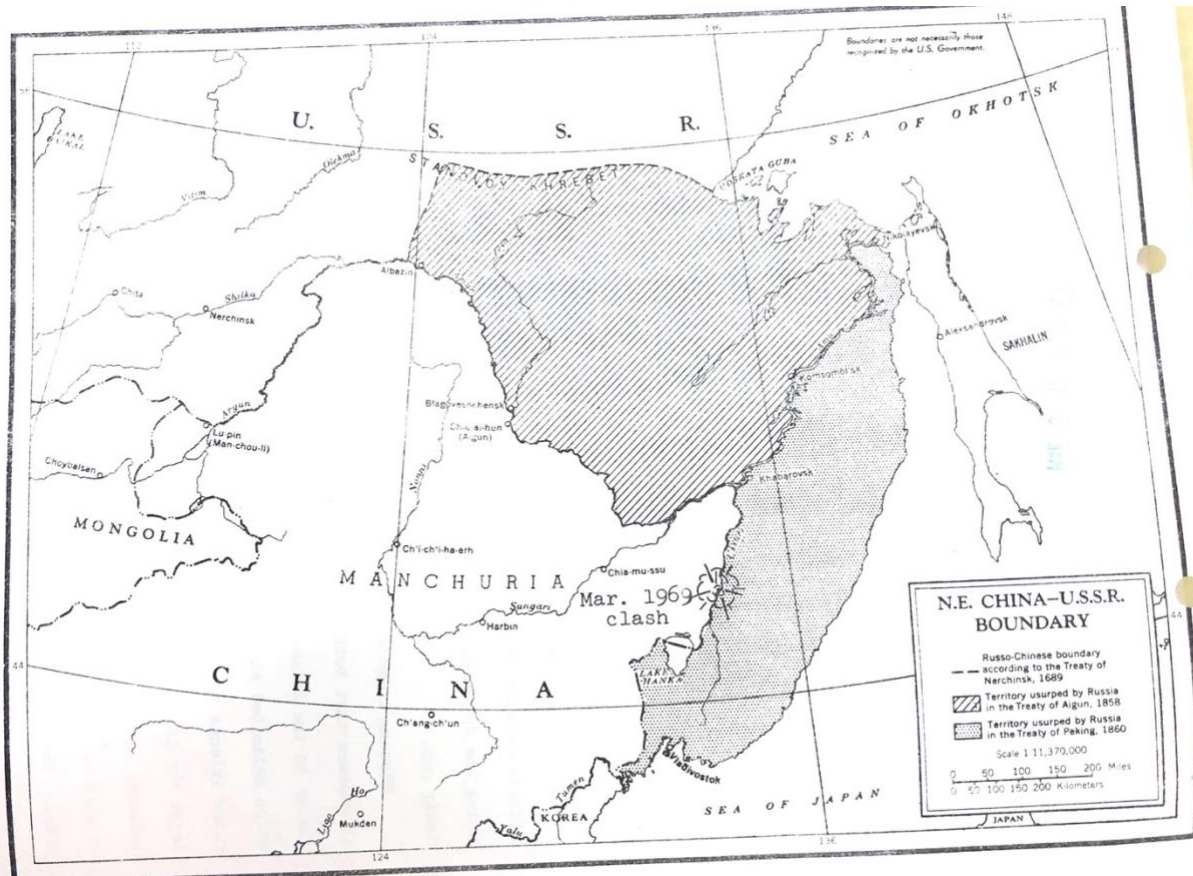


Figure 1: Sino-Soviet Border, 1969. "USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River." March 4, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On March 2, 1969, the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Soviet Union came to the brink of war over the small island of Zhenbao in the Ussuri River. The Soviets reported 58 deaths and 94 injuries, and the Chinese reported 29 deaths, 62 injuries and one missing in action.¹ Why did two socialist superpowers clash so intensely over such a small, and relatively non-strategic, island? Why did this border conflict happen in 1969, when China was at the peak of the Cultural Revolution and the Soviet Union was still dealing with the aftermath of the Prague Spring? The existing English-language historiography has emphasized the ideological debate between Mao and Khrushchev, and the two countries' struggle for supremacy in the communist bloc. Building on that work, my research adds another seemingly obvious, but a neglected cause. The clash of Zhenbao was essentially a territorial dispute. The Soviet leadership would not admit that the territorial treaties signed by the Russian Empire with China in the 19th century to be unequal treaties, thus neglecting the sensitivity of Chinese government on the land disputes and eventually causing the bloodshed on Zhenbao Island.

China and the Soviet Union shared a 7,600-kilometer long border and many sections of the borderline remained under dispute. Zhenbao Island was sitting on one of the border sections in the north-east of China. The Soviet Union refused to give hundreds of islands, including Zhenbao Island on the Ussuri River and Amur River back to China, and consequently China considered the Soviet Union exploiting the so-called unequal treaties (i.e., those treaties extorted from China since China's defeat in the First Opium War that were seen as the very embodiment of imperialism) just like Tsarist Russia did one hundred years ago. At the time of the conflict, the Chinese communist government had regarded the Soviet Union as a revisionist enemy who claimed to be the leader of

¹ "USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River", March 4, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69, 2.

the Communist world but in reality had become a social-imperialist country which in other words, was not a fraternal socialist country but a new variant of the old imperialists. This clash was rooted in ideology, but it was distinct from the Sino-Soviet rivalry within the socialist world. In Mao's eyes, the USSR was less socialist than merely Russian.

Most of the existing literature in this field considers the struggle for supremacy within the Communist bloc or the ideological debate as the cause of this serious conflict. Yet all the interactions between China and the Soviet Union during the Khrushchev era, the time of the most intense ideological controversy and intra-bloc competition, could not fully explain the 1969 border conflict on Zhanbao (Damansky) Island. Khrushchev was exiled from power for five years by 1969 and his successor, Leonid Brezhnev, was a well-known conservative who was not keen on reforms or ideological debate. Both of the countries also focused on matters other than competing for the leadership position within the Communist bloc, since China was in a half-paralyzed status due to the Cultural Revolution and the Soviet Union struggling to support its ally in the Vietnam War and contain Cold War tension with the Americans. The hypothesis that Mao created an international crisis to gain more control in domestic policy seems plausible², but it is hard to predict if Mao had anticipated the outcomes of such a border conflict and in what degree he exploited this crisis for his own benefit. It seems unlikely that Mao could have predicted the development of the border conflict—especially the actual defeat of Chinese troops and the possibility of a nuclear war—with any degree of foresight.

Therefore, this thesis aims to introduce another factor that is not well discussed in this field, the redistribution of territory after WWII. Previously, Shen Zhihua and Julia Lovell have discussed the problems China had on dealing with border disputes with an emphasis on historical

² Lorenz M. Lüthi, and American Council of Learned Societies. *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* Princeton Studies in International History and Politics. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 5.

inheritance.³ This essay would take a step further to contextualize the conflicts happening on Sino-Soviet border in the 1960s with the Taiwan Strait Crises, Vietnam War and Indo-China border conflicts in order to argue China's sensitivity to territorial disputes. On the other hand, this thesis will follow the analysis of Lyle J. Goldstein on the nuclear crisis kindled by the conflict on Zhenbao Island, arguing that China and the Soviet Union was on the brink of a nuclear war from March to August 1969. Where the Soviet Union seriously considered a nuclear strike on China's nuclear facilities and Beijing was not actively seeking peace either.⁴ According to Arkady Shevchenko, a defected former Soviet diplomat, the Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Andrei Grechko once on a Politburo conference advocated "a plan to 'once and for all get rid of the Chinese threat'" and called for "unrestricted use of multi-megaton bombs".⁵

Fortunately, both leaderships went through realistic calculations and decided not to open fire again, but the relationship between the two countries was beyond repair. Although the Soviet Union had tripled its force on the Sino-Soviet border from 1969 to 1973 and constructed a "garrison force" on the eastern border as well as militarization on the western border, it did not strike the islands again.⁶ This final split prompted both China and the Soviet Union to seek détente with the West since they both felt insecure within the Communist bloc, and the United States also welcomed the chance to avoid a nuclear war well beyond its sphere of influence.

The term "social imperialism" was a label applied to the Soviets by the Chinese after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. The official news outlet of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), *People's Daily* (Ren Min Ri Bao), published an editorial denouncing the Soviet

³ Shen Zhihua, and Julia Lovell. "Undesired Outcomes: China's Approach to Border Disputes during the Early Cold War." *Cold War History* 15, no. 1 (January 2, 2015), 92.

⁴ Lyle J. Goldstein, "Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter? The Sino-Soviet Crisis of 1969." *Political Science Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2003), 55.

⁵ Goldstein, "Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?", 64.

⁶ Elizabeth Wishnick, *Mending fences: The evolution of Moscow's China policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin*. (University of Washington Press, 2014), 30.

occupation of Czechoslovakia on August 23, 1968. The title of the editorial was “bankruptcy of modern Soviet revisionism”, which condemned the “Soviet revisionists” had fallen to be the “social-imperialists” and behaved just as the American imperialists and other old imperial countries.⁷ To Mao, who believed in continuing struggle and revolution against capitalism, the Soviet “revisionism” defined the principles in all Khrushchev’s new programs towards détente, which “emphasized peaceful coexistence with the Western capitalist countries and domestic political moderation”.⁸ *People’s Daily* defined “social-imperialism” as countries who are “labeling themselves as socialists but deep down were imperialists”⁹ and was the result of “the usurpation of the political power of the proletariat by the Soviet bourgeoisie” and “the policy of ‘peaceful evolution’ with world imperialism”.¹⁰ By mid of 1968, the Chinese communists no longer saw the Soviet Union as a socialist ally, but as an imperialist enemy as evil as the American capitalists, thus laying down the ideological justification for future conflicts with its former partner.

Historians have primarily focused more on the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Sino-Soviet relations which received less attention than they should, however, as it essentially directed Mao’s attention to the Soviet Union instead of the U.S. The territorial dispute between China and the Soviet Union had been foreshadowed by the legacy of Yalta Conference, where the the winners of WWII were essentially doing another partition of the world, and the Soviet Union acted as a legitimate empire in such territorial partition. The Soviet Union also had

⁷ In this context, the term "social imperialism" has nothing to do with the academic term used in German historiography to describe Bismarck's imperial expansion driven by social pressure. Geoff Eley, "Defining Social Imperialism: Use and Abuse of an Idea." *Social History* 1, no. 3 (1976): 265.

⁸ Li Danhui, and Xia Yafeng, "Jockeying for Leadership: Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1961–July 1964." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 16, no. 1 (2014), 25.

⁹ “What is social imperialism” *People’s Daily*, August 30, 1968, 4.

¹⁰ Dennis M. Ray, "Chinese perceptions of social imperialism and economic dependency: the impact of Soviet aid." *Stan. J. Int'l Stud.* 10 (1975): 36, 38.

a fair share of territories especially on its bordering area with China. The Soviet Union was also born a quarter century earlier than China, so by early 1949, it was overpowering the newborn Republic of China in all aspects—application of Marxist-Leninist ideology, military strength and economic development. Yet Mao Zedong did not want to accept the hegemony of Stalin’s Soviet Union. As Lorenz Lüthi describes, during the negotiation of the 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty for returning the China Eastern Railroad and Port Arthur to China, Mao’s relationship with Stalin “resembled that of a timid student quizzed by a daunting teacher”¹¹ Yet Stalin was probably the last Soviet leader that Mao dared not to challenge. Compared to his predecessor, Khrushchev lacked the basic understanding of communist ideology and pursued détente with the US, which happened to be two of Mao's least favorite stances. Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization also made Mao feel threatened, since he considered himself the “Chinese Lenin and Stalin”, having an excessive faith in the effects of ideology on a country, Mao believed that China could soon surpass Khrushchev's Soviet Union in most aspects. A not-so-secret admirer of Stalinism, Mao copied Stalin’s collective farm, commune system, crash industrialization and internal passport system in the Great Leap Forward and accelerated the development of nuclear weapon, although the Soviet Union was not sharing its nuclear weapons with China.¹² On foreign policy, Mao developed a network among countries of the Third World which had not been controlled by the Soviet Union, keeping China active in the Non-Aligned Movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Zhou’s foreign visits in Africa and South-east Asia in the 1950s had produced considerable successes, although such successes were seriously challenged by the Indo-China conflicts and China’s nuclear bomb test in 1964, as China deviated further from the principles of the Non-Aligned

¹¹ Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 31.

¹² Shen Zhihua, and Xia Yafeng "Between Aid and Restriction: The Soviet Union's Changing Policies on China's Nuclear Weapons Program, 1954-1960." *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 1 (2012), 101.

Movement.¹³ Khrushchev, who denounced Stalin vehemently on the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, could not despise more about Mao's policy and feared the increasing Chinese influence in the world. In a speech in April 1964, Khrushchev criticized Mao as "someone who had never done steelmaking because he expects the steel to come out of the furnace by itself", referring to Mao's unrealistic goals in the Great Leap Forward.¹⁴ As Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui argue, the dissonance of visions for a communist world divided China and the Soviet Union, whereas Khrushchev favored co-existence with the West but Mao insisted on the struggle with the capitalist powers.¹⁵

The signs of a split appeared for the first time in the second half of 1958 as Mao mobilized the entire country to build a People's Commune. The Soviet leadership was suspicious of the outcome of the Great Leap Forward, which escalated to the criticisms towards Mao's ideas on building China to be the communist country "faster and better than the Soviet Union"¹⁶. Mao did not publicly respond to the Soviet criticism until 1959. But other actions before that, like changing the name of the Soviet Exhibition Center in Beijing, which first opened for Khrushchev's visit in Beijing in 1954, to "Beijing Exhibition Center", foreshadowed Mao's eventual split with the Soviet leadership.

The reason for the Mao-Khrushchev split from 1958 to 1960 was controversial, and many considered it to be purely ideological. Lorenz Lüthi articulates that the crack in the Sino-Soviet relation began with the difference between Mao's and Khrushchev's communist ideologies.¹⁷

¹³ Natasa Miskovic, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Nada Boskovska, eds. *The non-aligned movement and the cold war: Delhi-Bandung-belgrade* (Routledge, 2014), 100.

¹⁴ Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive, 117-01196-06, April 15, 1964.

¹⁵ Shen Zhihua and Li Danhui, "Jie Gou Shi Heng—Zhong Su Tong Meng Po Lie De Zhen Zheng Yuan Yin", *Exploration and Free Views*, 2012(10), 5.

¹⁶ Shen Zhihua, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917-1991* (Social Sciences Academic Press (China), 2015), Vol. 2, 277.

¹⁷ Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 23.

While Khrushchev believe that communist countries could peacefully coexist with the capitalist ones, Mao believed that there would be a war between the communist countries and the capitalist countries in the near future; Khrushchev detested Stalin's methods and ideologies but Mao admired them and was implementing the same set of policy in China. His argument is that Mao was manipulating Sino-Soviet relations to fit his domestic agenda, therefore he places more responsibility on Mao for the split, while Khrushchev was constantly trying to fix the widening cracks in the relationship. Lüthi's arguments are supported by Sergey Radchenko, who argues that the Chinese leadership deliberately sabotaged the relationship with the Soviet Union.¹⁸ Radchenko also blames Khrushchev's inconsistent and spontaneous foreign policy, or even his indecisive personality for the split, but his argument was not strongly supported by the evidence presented in his book *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967*. He mentions Mao's deliberation on breaking up with the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1960, which means the split was probably on Mao's agenda for a long time. Recollections of several former Chinese diplomats indeed show that Khrushchev had an impulsive personality. Shi Zhe, one of the interpreters of Mao, described Khrushchev as uneducated and rude, knew little about the communist ideologies and often contradicted himself.¹⁹ Mao himself also described Khrushchev as a two-faced conspirator who palavered with Stalin when Stalin was alive but "denounced Stalin badly and helped imperialists blow 'typhoon' into communist world and had shaken the communist world"²⁰ after Stalin's death. Therefore, the anti-Khrushchev polemic was a pretext, not a cause for the rift which was probably more related to China's concern with

¹⁸ Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967*. Cold War International History Project Series. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 17.

¹⁹ Shi Zhe, *Zhongsu Guanxi Jian Zheng Lu* [Witnessing the Sino-Soviet Relationship] (Dangdai Zhongguo Press, 2005), 203.

²⁰ Communist Party of China Central Committee Party Literature Research Center, *Mao Zedong Nianpu* [Chronicle of Mao Zedong], (Zhongyang Wenxian Press, 2013), Vol. 5, 23.

the USSR's meddling, which was different from the anti-Khrushchev sentiments from Eastern Europe.

Many Chinese scholars who analyze the split from the Chinese perspective also emphasize the ideological debate between Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev. Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia argue in their book *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-1959: A New History* that the fundamental cause of Sino-Soviet split was the incompatibility of Mao's and Khrushchev's diplomatic ideologies²¹. Khrushchev wanted to avoid another world war at any cost, Mao considered war as an acceptable consequence of diplomatic problems. Therefore, the two leaders could not agree on the idea of "peaceful coexistence" with the western countries, or even the countries that within the Communist bloc. The fundamental debate between the two countries, of course, laid on the issue of the Great Leap Forward. Mao was copying Stalin's collective farms to achieve real "equality" on a larger scale and considered consumption and socialism as two mutually exclusive concept—a country can only have one or the other. Mao also believed that as long as people work hard enough, they can defy the basic principles of production and valuation.²² On the other hand, Khrushchev partly due to his years in the department of agriculture, promoted the development of agriculture and consumer economy while continued to accelerate the production of heavy industry.²³ Unsurprisingly, Mao's collective farms and excessive grain procurement devastated the peasants. While the actual grain production only reached half of the planned goal in 1960, the government procured 21.5 percent of the harvest and left the peasants with the amount of money that would not keep them alive.²⁴

²¹ Shen Zhihua, and Xia Yafeng, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945–1959: A New History*. (Lexington Books, 2015), 62.

²² Chen Lizhong, *Sino-Soviet Dispute, and China's Socialist Development*, (Zhong Yang Wen Xian Chu Ban She, 2015), 53.

²³ Chen, *Sino-Soviet Dispute, and China's Socialist Development*, 50.

²⁴ Thomas P. Bernstein, "Mao Zedong and the Famine of 1959–1960: A Study in Wilfulness." *The China Quarterly* 186 (2006), 435.

But as a good writer and ideologist, Mao was able to create his own logic by referring to Marx and Lenin's sacred texts. By contrast, Khrushchev was relatively inadequate in expressing his ideology in writing and speeches, and his ideas were usually inconsistent and contradicted each other. Mao was proud of his own capacity on socialist ideology and was determined to build the first real socialist society ahead of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the competition for supremacy intertwined with the discrepancy in ideologies and the top leaders of the two countries started to criticize, even insult each other in public speeches and newspaper articles in a nearly childish way. In the issues of *People's Daily* of 1957, the word "revisionism" or "revisionists" occurred in an increasing frequency. The news outlet of the CCP emphasized that anyone who did not study Marxism and Leninism thoroughly was a "revisionist" and a subversive to the party and to the country, which set up the ideological base for future denunciation of the Soviets. After the 1958 meeting in Beijing, Mao and Khrushchev gradually started to express contrasting opinions on various media and the debate escalated to blatant criticism after Khrushchev abruptly withdrew all the Soviet experts beginning in the second half of 1960. It started with the notification from Moscow on June 20, 1959 telling the Chinese that the Soviet Union would not continue supplying China with a prototype of the atomic bomb and related technical data.²⁵ This worsened China's insecurity in midst of the disastrous Great Leap Forward and its suspicion of the Soviet Union colluding with the West. The meeting in October between Khrushchev and the Chinese leadership hardly helped, especially when Khrushchev expressed that the Soviet Union would not side with China in the Indo-China border conflict.²⁶In the end, the ideological debate was only the pretense of conflicting interests and policies. Mao established the theoretical ground

²⁵ Wang Dong, *The Quarrelling Brothers: New Chinese Archives and a Reappraisal of the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959-1962*. Cold War International History Project, (Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2005), 17.

²⁶ Wang Dong, *The Quarrelling Brothers*, 25.

for “Soviet revisionism” and “social imperialism” which would serve his future attack on the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Also, as this thesis later demonstrates, the land disputes between the two countries had already taken shape as early as mid-1950s and would continue to haunt the Sino-Soviet relations until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, the issues discussed above had only set up the conditions for the 1969 Zhenbao Island conflict. The conflict itself is still, fundamentally, a territorial dispute that could not be resolved through a more peaceful means, especially as the Soviet Union radicalized its new foreign policy and de-Stalinization on the 22nd Congress in 1961, which China regarded as a declaration of war to itself.²⁷ The 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty proved that it was possible to resolve the land dispute through peaceful negotiations, but it was largely because of the particularity of the situation. Mao held unusual admiration towards Stalin. In fact, he almost copied Stalin's policies in the 1920s and 1930s and applied them to China. The two leaders therefore also had a much smaller discrepancy in ideology, unlike Mao with Khrushchev or Brezhnev. Stalin did not view Mao as an equal partner in cooperation, but he considered the alliance with China more important than the profit brought by Port Arthur and the Chinese Changchun Railway. Unfortunately, neither Khrushchev nor Brezhnev had such insight into the psychology of the Chinese leadership—the change of view towards the Soviet Union from “the elder brother” in the Communist bloc to the social imperialist. They tried to placate Chinese leaders in other ways—technical assistance, food supply, etc.—rather than giving up several insignificant islands on the Ussuri River and Amur River. Stalin understood the importance of territorial integrity to the Chinese, whereas both Khrushchev and Brezhnev considered those issues a symptom of Mao's intransigence—that is how ideological dispute, which the USSR and China had been

²⁷ Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 69.

engaged in since 1958, has been misinterpreted as the cause of the border clashes. Like the Soviet leadership, too much scholarship has seen it as a proxy for other issues, when territorial integrity was very important to the Chinese leadership.

Chapter 2.1: A Recount on the Sino-Soviet Relationship

The power imbalance in the Sino-Soviet alliance from the beginning foreshadowed the subsequent difficulties in this relationship. This mode of inequality, in which the Soviet Union viewed China as inferior, began with Stalin. During the meeting with Mao in January 1950, Stalin expressed his contempt when Mao asked if the Soviet Union could send aid of industrial equipment more quickly, when he replied that setting an earlier start time for such shipment would be hard for the international community to understand because “an agreement could have been reached between the Soviet Union and China, which at the time did not even have its own government.”²⁸ As the result, Stalin was not in a hurry to make a formal alliance with China, especially when China was deep in a civil war and an economic crisis at the same time. Stalin wanted to keep the territories gained by the 1945 treaty from the Chinese nationalist government, which included the Chinese Eastern Railroad, Port Arthur, and outer Mongolia. Chaing Kai-Shak agreed to share the operation of the Chinese Eastern Railway with the Soviet Union, while in the meantime China took full control of Dairen (Dalian). In the Agreement Concerning Dairen, the second article states that “The harbor-master [of Dairen] and deputy harbor-master will be appointed by the Chinese Eastern Railway and South Manchurian Railway in agreement with the Mayor. The harbor-master shall be a Russian national, and the deputy harbor-master shall be a Chinese national.”²⁹ This collaboration positioned the Three Eastern Provinces under *de facto* control of the Soviet Union, since the two railways, who later combined to be Chinese Changchun Railway, were the lifelines of the Manchurian economy. On the other hand, the

²⁸ "Record of Talks between I.V. Stalin and Chairman of the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China Mao Zedong," January 22, 1950, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Archive of the President, Russian Federation (APRF), f. 45, op.1, d.329, ll. 29-38. Translated by Danny Rozas.

²⁹ "China, Soviet Union: Treaty of Friendship and Alliance." *The American Journal of International Law* 40, no. 2 (1946), 55.

Soviet navy was able to use ports in Dairen and Port Arthur (Lüshun) as the base to monitor the movement of the Japanese navy and American navy who stationed in Korea and Japan and to assert influence on Eastern Asian water. Port Arthur, therefore, became a port for a 30-year lease to a foreign power, just like Hong Kong but under looser terms. Of course, the nationalist government of China also saw this auxiliary treaty of Yalta Conference as a national disgrace³⁰ and had lost credibility to the Chinese public after the treaty was published, but the only thing Chiang Kai-Shak could do was to ask for America's help to reduce the Soviet threat. Stalin was well aware of the American threat behind Chiang Kai-Shek but at the immediate post-war time, did not see future in the Chinese communist party, so he just sent a cable on August 22, 1945, encouraging "peaceful development" between Chinese nationalists and communists.³¹, encouraging "peaceful development" between Chinese nationalists and communists.³²

But as it became clear in 1948 that the CCP would take full control, Stalin had to consider the possibility of an alliance with the Chinese communists. Previously, despite the fact that the Chinese communists tried to establish a relationship with the Soviets multiple times, Stalin was dubious about establishing close contact with the Chinese communist party before determining which party would control China eventually. One of the considerations was that the rise of another major power in the communist bloc could threaten the dominant position of the Soviet Union. Another was that Stalin himself was uncertain about permanently aligning the Soviet Union with China by a new treaty, considering the poor relations they had back to the 1920s.³³ Mao, on the other hand, was determined to invalidate the treaty the nationalist

³⁰ Sergei Goncharov, John Lewis, and Litai Xue, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*, (Stanford: 1995), 3.

³¹ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 7.

³² Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue, *Uncertain Partners*, 7.

³³ Paul Wingrove, "Mao in Moscow, 1949–50: Some new archival evidence." *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 11, no. 4 (1995), 311.

government signed with the Soviet Union, but also wanted to establish formal diplomatic relations with the most powerful communist country in the world. As a communist power, the China needed the approval of the leader of the communist world; as a country sharing thousands of miles of border with the Soviet Union, it needed to secure trade and protect its sovereignty of territories. The Chinese communists also planned to reverse the mistakes made by the nationalist government, and one of the salient examples was the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1945, which gave away large portion of land in Manchuria, the Outer Mongolia and Port Arthur. As mentioned before, the signing of this treaty sparked national indignation in China and the communist government wanted to reverse the treaty not only for fulfilling its own ideology, but also for gaining more public support and consolidate its power.

China sent out its first delegation in July but Mao himself did not go to Moscow until December 1949, to continue the previous unsuccessful negotiation on territories in Manchuria and to pressure Stalin on making an alliance. Mao expressed the desire for CCP to act as an equal partner to the Soviet Union and expected Stalin to treat him as an equal; while Stalin viewed Mao and his government more as a threat to the Soviet sphere of influence and considered the Soviet Union as the sole leader of the Communist bloc. Zhou Enlai and A. Y. Vyshinsky signed the *Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance* and auxiliary agreements on Chinese Changchun Railway, Port Arthur and Dalny (Dairen/Dalian), in which “the Soviet Government transfers gratis to the Government of the People's Republic of China all its rights in the joint administration of the Chinese Changchun Railway”³⁴ and that the “Soviet troops will be withdrawn from the jointly utilized naval base of Port Arthur”, no later by the end of 1952. Former outer Mongolia, by then the Republic of Mongolia, was lost to China

³⁴ "China-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: Communiqué." *The American Journal of International Law* 44, no. 3 (1950), 87.

forever by the treaty of 1945. Yet Mongolia would continue to be a crucial factor involved in the territorial and political struggle between the two communist powers. First, shut out of the United Nations in 1955 by China's veto, Mongolia would become another leverage in the territorial disputes in the 1960s. The Soviet Union also lent 300 million dollars of credits to the Chinese government and allowed it to pay back in a ten-year period starting from 1954.³⁵ This loan was crucial to the Chinese economy, especially to the defense industry and military installations.³⁶ Military loan totaled of 6.288 billion rubles and was 95 percent of the entire Soviet loan to China.³⁷ However, Stalin's compromise on Manchurian territories was an expediency to secure Mao's assistance in countering the West, especially as he was encouraging North Korea to start a war. The military loan could be counted as part of military aid for China in the forthcoming Korean War. The Soviet Union also benefited from the secret deal on the exclusion of "third parties" from commercial activity in north-east China and Xinjiang, and an official recognition of the independence of Outer Mongolia.³⁸

Interestingly, the new treaty was signed in February 1950 and the Korean War broke out in June 1950. There are multiple ways to interpret the timeline of events in 1950, but it is no doubt that China took a much heavier burden as a direct participant of the Korean War than the Soviet Union which was only responsible for providing weaponry and other supplies. In the early stage of the Korean War, China was not able to provide enough ammunition: the Chinese-Korean force needed about 14,100 tons of ammunition in the first quarter of 1951 but China was only capable of supplying 1,500 tons.³⁹ But with the Soviet military aid the Chinese-Korean

³⁵ "China-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: Communique.", 90.

³⁶ Shen and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-1959*, 109.

³⁷ Shen and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-195*, 110.

³⁸ Wingrove, "Mao in Moscow, 1949-50: Some new archival evidence.", 328.

³⁹ Shen and Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-1959*, 87.

military were re-equipped and modernized along the lines of the Soviet army,⁴⁰ and the war was also supported by Soviet naval equipment and its air force— in which neither China and Korea was be self-sufficient.

Stalin's strategy was a success. China was pushed into the Korean War for both the pressure from Moscow and the danger to its own territory, since North Korea shared a border with China and acted as a buffer zone in the past, but now half of the Korean peninsula was controlled by the US. Stalin considered a war in Korea a way to keep the Americans out and make the US look like the loser in the fight against communism,⁴¹ but at the same time did not want the Soviet Union to go to a war directly with the US. Therefore, he told Kim to hold back until he made sure that China would be behind the North Koreans during the war and sent Kim to talk to Mao. Initially, Mao was opposed to Kim's proposal to a war, but since China was unifying its own country at that time, and Mao could not deny the North Koreans to do the same.⁴² Stalin was also pressuring Mao for his approval by sending additional weapons to Chongjin, North Korea, and even started the planned surprise attack, designed by him and Kim, without Beijing's clear approval in June 1950.⁴³ Before Kim's attack on South Korea, Mao was generally uninterested in helping North Korea and would rather concentrate on taking back Taiwan and eliminating the remaining nationalist forces. But as the US declared war on North Korea, Mao realized that the territorial danger in the North-east was more pressing than the Taiwan Straits, and had to sacrifice his plan on Taiwan. China did not send out its "Volunteer Army" until October when a large-scaled war on the peninsula became inevitable. However, Mao held considerable grudge towards Stalin for disrupting his plan for unification of China, not

⁴⁰ Shen and Xia. *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Partnership, 1945-1959*, 88.

⁴¹ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue. *Uncertain Partners*, 142.

⁴² Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue. *Uncertain Partners*, 146.

⁴³ Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue. *Uncertain Partners*, 154.

to mention that he lost his son in the Korean War. But he did not find the chance to reciprocate since Stalin died in 1953, and Mao's alliance with Khrushchev was an entirely different matter.

Nikita Khrushchev was in many ways the opposite of Stalin. He was in charge of Soviet agriculture before he rose to power and had been the commissar of troops stationed in Kiev in 1941 and witnessed the savage battle of Kiev (1941) and the chaotic wartime deployment of Stalin.⁴⁴ He was short, relatively uneducated and had a strange sense of humor.⁴⁵ He was also “preternaturally hyperactive, endlessly prone to palaver with everyone from collective farm milkmaids to heads of state”⁴⁶ but he was definitely much more than the clown that others thought him to be. He was apt at political maneuvering in which he managed to execute the gruesome head of the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs, Stalin’s secret police) Lavrentiy Beria and pushed Stalin’s designated successor Georgy Malenkov out of power soon after Stalin’s death. Khrushchev also pursued the policy of co-existence with the West and made an effort towards repairing and improving the relationship with China. In 1955, everything between USSR and China seemed harmonious. However, Khrushchev’s insistence on de-Stalinization and plans to reform the Soviet economy was exactly what Mao detested. As Mao led China further on the path of Stalinism and followed the model of Soviet “reforms” in the 1930s, the relationship between the two countries inevitably went sour.

Khrushchev visited China for the first time in 1954 and was received with great enthusiasm. China in 1954 was different from China in 1949. It had just finished the First Five Year Plan and entered the race of nuclear weapon testing and was in need of more technical and financial assistance. The negotiations started on October 3, 1954, continued for ten days, and

⁴⁴ Nikita Khrushchev, *Memoirs, Vol. 1 Commissar* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 2004), 327.

⁴⁵ William K. Medlin, "Khrushchev: A Political Profile. IV." *The Russian Review* 18, no. 3 (1959), 178.

⁴⁶ William Taubman, *Khrushchev: the man and his era* (WW Norton & Company, 2003), XIV.

ended with the Khrushchev signing a series of accords for assistance to China. He confirmed the continuation of Soviet technical assistance to China, notably the *komandirovka* system, in which the Soviet Union sent advisers from the Communist bloc to China to help the development of Chinese industry, infrastructure, and science.⁴⁷ The withdrawal of Soviet navy from Port Arthur (Lüshun), which was supposed to complete by the end of 1952 but was still in an ongoing process by the time of Khrushchev's visit, was set to a final deadline of May 30, 1955. The Soviet government also agreed to withdraw from four previously joint-managed companies with China and start building a trans-national railway from Lanzhou, China to Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan, which had been part of the Soviet Union.⁴⁸

These treaties seemed to be largely in the favor of the Chinese, but in practice the results were ambiguous. In the accord of *Mutual Assistance in Science and Technology*, the two countries agreed to exchange technical information for free. However, since the Chinese scientific research and industry was still underdeveloped, it was the Soviet Union exporting technology and experts to China at that time. While rushing to utilize such resources, however, the Chinese government also encountered problems on the treatment to Soviet experts and the issue of technology that concerned the secrecy of the Soviet technologies. As some Soviet experts requested high living standard, the Chinese government found that some of the experts were not worth the high wage paid, especially those who were alcoholic and were drunk on work. On the other hand, Mao was eager to develop China's own nuclear weapon, but Khrushchev was reluctant to give out such top secret, for obvious reasons. China in the 1950s was extremely aware of the nuclear superiority of the United States and, although Mao

⁴⁷ Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 27

⁴⁸ Shi Zhe, *Zai Juren Shenbian: Shi Zhe Hui Yi Lu* [Standing beside the Great Man: Memoirs of Shi Zhe] (Jiu Zhou Press: 2017), 408.

repetitively called the US “paper tiger”, it constantly feared nuclear strikes from the US. The treaty Mao and Stalin signed in 1950 did not contain a single word about nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union, which was the only country which had broken American nuclear monopoly, expressed no intention to help at that time.⁴⁹ Thus, it would not be surprising when Chinese government eagerly asked for technical assistance when Khrushchev took over, considering that he was viewed as a “romantic” in foreign policy and would like to have as many allies as possible.⁵⁰ Initially, in May 1955, the USSR agreed to provide China with “experimental atomic piles and accelerators, scientific and technical information, Soviet specialists, sufficient quantities of fissile materials, and the training of Chinese in nuclear physics”⁵¹, but solely for “peaceful purposes”. Yet Mao was still not satisfied with such assistance and kept asking the Soviet Union for a prototype of the atomic bomb, which Khrushchev later unwillingly agreed.⁵² In 1957 the Soviet Union finally agreed to transfer the technology of nuclear weapons and signed further agreements on the such technological exchange.⁵³ The Soviet nuclear experts travelled from the classified Soviet nuclear research town Arzamaz-16 to Beijing from June to August 1958 to help China with the designs of atomic bombs⁵⁴, and later more Soviet experts on missile productions were sent to China to help the development of the delivery of nuclear warhead. Unfortunately, the nuclear assistance program was terminated after Mao and Khrushchev broke up for their differences on the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis. The nuclear threat from the other side of the Pacific Ocean proved to be a scheme to unsettle the communist bloc and later to

⁴⁹ Gobarev, Viktor M. "Soviet policy toward China: Developing nuclear weapons 1949–1969." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, no. 4 (1999), 5

⁵⁰ Gobarev, "Soviet policy toward China", 18.

⁵¹ Amardeep Athwal, “The United States and the Sino-Soviet Split: The Key Role of Nuclear Superiority”. *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (June 2004), 276.

⁵² Athwal, “The United States and the Sino-Soviet Split”, 276.

⁵³ Shen Zhihua, and Xia Yafeng "Hidden currents during the honeymoon: Mao, Khrushchev, and the 1957 Moscow conference." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, no. 4 (2009), 85.

⁵⁴ Gobarev, "Soviet policy toward China", 25.

pressure American's enemies in Vietnam, as the Eisenhower administration believed that it was necessary to keep the perception of unpredictability on how the Americans would use its military power.⁵⁵ But the Soviet Union undoubtedly suspected the motivation of China and worried about the increasing nuclear capacity of China, which anticipated the withdrawal of Soviet experts after the unsuccessful meetings between Mao and Khrushchev in 1950. In the meantime, however, Mao's fear of American nuclear threat came close when the Chinese force clashed with American 7th fleet and air force on Taiwan Straits in 1958, and the Eisenhower administration threatened to use tactical atomic bombs.⁵⁶ The Soviet Union told Mao that the Chinese naval and air force were far inferior to that of the US, but Mao believed that was just an excuse for the Soviet Union not standing against the American imperialists.⁵⁷ The Sino-Soviet relationship entered the first phase of the split.

⁵⁵ Leopoldo Nuti, "Nixon's Nuclear Spectre: The Secret Alert of 1969, Madman Diplomacy, and the Vietnam War." *Cold War History* 17, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 446.

⁵⁶ Sheng, Michael M. "Mao and China's Relations with the Superpowers in the 1950s: A New Look at the Taiwan Strait Crises and the Sino-Soviet Split." *Modern China* 34, no. 4 (2008), 478.

⁵⁷ Gobarev, "Soviet policy toward China", 29.

Chapter 2.2: A Chronology of Land Dispute in China

China has an obsession with the borders and territories that is still very much visible in today's Chinese politics. This is largely due to the signing of a series of unequal treaties by the declining Qing dynasty with the imperialist powers in the 19th century and early 20th century, which is summarized by the term "One Hundred National Humiliations" in the propaganda of communist China. These treaties were unequal treaties from both the perspective of the Chinese people and the standard of modern international relations. Although "One Hundred National Humiliations" is overly simplistic to describe the one-hundred-year history from the First Opium War to the end of the Sino-Japanese War, it does characterize the sentiment of Chinese people in the period when China was forced to constantly give out lands and pay reparations. China first lost Hong Kong to Britain in 1842 after the First Opium War and the signing of Treaty of Nanjing, then lost 600,000 square kilometers (231,660 square miles) along the Ussuri River and Amur River to Tsarist Russia by the Treaty of Aigun in 1858⁵⁸, and lost 440,000 square kilometers (171, 428 square miles), including the previously commonly owned Ussuri River and the Sea of Japan, to Russia again in 1860 by the signing of Convention of Peking⁵⁹. In 1864 Russian took another chunk of territory from China in Central Asia and Outer Mongolia by the Treaty of Tarbagatai. Then "in 1898" the Qing let Russia "rent" Dalian (Dairen/Dalyn) and Port Arthur (Lüshun) for 25 years. Both cities would not be returned to China until 1950, as previously discussed. But most of the territories lost to the Russian Empire was never returned and now belong Russia and several former Soviet republics like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It is understandable, then, that both the Nationalist government of China and the Communist

⁵⁸ Tzou, Byron N. *China and International Law: the Boundary Disputes*. Praeger, 1990, 47

⁵⁹ Tzou, *China and International Law*, 48.

government saw the territorial issue as a key factor not only to their foreign policies but also to the legitimacy of their government.

Prior to the final split in 1960, China had been threatened by the two Taiwan Straits Crises and Mao had characterized the participation of US Navy in the crises as another manifestation of imperial power trying to rob Chinese territory again; the fear of losing territories again to the imperialists was behind more violent territorial conflicts like the Zhenbao Island conflict of 1969. China clearly expected the USSR to aid it in other territorial claims, particularly concerning its “rogue province” Taiwan, where the nationalists had fled after the Civil War and were they were sheltered by the American fleet. In particular, given that the second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 coincided with the beginning of the Great Leap Forward and the massive famine across China, Mao felt deeply insecure about the stability of the country and of his power. Khrushchev’s criticism to Mao’s domestic policies and ideology, unfortunately, did nothing but worsened Mao’s suspicion that the Soviet Union was colluding with the western imperial powers, not to mention that Khrushchev was, at that time, indeed pursuing détente with the US. Mao expressed his attitude towards the new Soviet foreign policy explicitly in one of his speeches in 1955: “Today, when the north wind [i.e., the Soviet Union] is blowing, they join the “north wind” school. . . It would lead to a mess even if every single sentence of Marx was followed... [M]any people in the Soviet Union are conceited and very arrogant.”⁶⁰

In 1958, famine caused by natural disaster and collectivization led tribesmen in Xinjiang area to cross international borders and enter Kazakhstan, seeking to start a new life under the Soviet Union. In three year’s time about 25,000 -100,000 residents of Xinjiang illegally crossed the border.⁶¹ In mid-1962 alone, about 60,000 fled from China into the Soviet republics. The

⁶⁰ Alexander Pantsov and Steven I. Levine. *Mao: The Real Story*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 429.

⁶¹ “China's Border With The Ussr Sinkiang, February 1964” CIA-RDP79-01006A000100360001-7, 7.

reason for the flight was simple: the bordering region of the Republic of Kazakhstan was one of the most productive regions in the Soviet agriculture, known for its high-yield corn, vegetables, grain, and livestock,⁶² which was part of Khrushchev's "Virgin Lands" program. Besides this defection of Chinese nationals, the Soviet Union had already had a huge influence on the local economy and culture of Xinjiang. The Soviet Union's projection of power was evident in the Ili-Tacheng-Altay area in the 1950s, especially on the bordering area between the Xinjiang province and the Soviet republic of Kazakhstan.⁶³ The Soviet Union had invested a total of 327,000 US dollar in that area by 1958, partly as an aid to the Chinese government, and influenced the residents' daily life by setting up at least 68 different books and newspapers⁶⁴. These actions were not regarded as a Soviet intrusion, but they raised the alarm level of the Chinese government because the former Russian empire had the precedent of taking land away from Xinjiang province. The alertness reached its peak in 1963 when China sent troops along the border with Kazakhstan and enforced the closure of the border and stopped any cross-border exchange for the next two decades.⁶⁵ China also became more suspicious towards the Soviet Union on the issue of Mongolia during the ideological debate. In 1955 Mongolia was used by China as political leverage against the Soviet Union when China used its veto power in the United Nation for the first and the only time to stop the admission of the People's Republic of Mongolia into the UN General Assembly.⁶⁶ The Soviet Union, therefore, was forced to lift its veto on admitting newly formed African countries in the UN in exchange for the admission of

⁶² Henryk Alff, "Getting Stuck within Flows: Limited Interaction and Peripheralization at the Kazakhstan–China Border." *Central Asian Survey* 35, no. 3 (July 2, 2016), 374.

⁶³ Shen Zhihua, *After Leaning to One Side: China and Its Allies in the Cold War*, Cold War International History Project Series. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 170.

⁶⁴ Shen, *After Leaning to One Side*, 170-171.

⁶⁵ Alff, "Getting Stuck within Flows", 373.

⁶⁶ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *The China Threat: Memories, Myths, and Realities in the 1950s* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 115.

Mongolia. However, as the Sino-Soviet relations began to sour, China started applying pressure on Mongolia to change its foreign policy, but the Mongolian leadership stood with the Soviet Union.⁶⁷ As a result, China withdrew workers and canceled multiple construction projects in Mongolia, including the Sino-Soviet railroad project that was to run across Mongolia.⁶⁸

China also had an obsession with the ports and islands lost in the South, and two of the most prominent examples were Hong Kong and Taiwan. China eventually took Hong Kong back from the British government in 1997 and is still actively seeking all means to integrate Taiwan as part of China today. The Chinese government, no matter under what circumstances, never changed its discourse on "recovering lost territories". Every time it experienced a setback from a certain section of the border of the territories under dispute, it tended to be more insistent on the rest of the border issues. In the 1950s China experienced three major territorial crises, The First and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis and the Indo-China Conflict. All three of them involved armed conflict and China did not achieve its ultimate goal in any of them—Taiwan still remained under the nationalists' control and India continued to remain an unstable factor in South-east China. Beijing was extremely annoyed when the Soviet Union did not take its side in the first Indian-China border conflict in 1959, especially considering it was rare for the Soviet Union not to take a "class" position in a conflict between a socialist state and a bourgeois one.⁶⁹ The second Indian-China border conflict started in May 1962 and lasted for half a year, and eventually ended up with China's victory but no bilateral agreements on the common border.⁷⁰ As a result, the

⁶⁷ Sergey Radchenko. "Mongolian Politics in the Shadow of the Cold War: The 1964 Coup Attempt and the Sino-Soviet Split." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006), 99.

⁶⁸ Radchenko, "Mongolian Politics in the Shadow of the Cold War", 98.

⁶⁹ Mikhail Y. Prozumenshikov, "The Sino-Indian Conflict, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1962: New Evidence from the Russian Archives." *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 1997 (1996), 251.

⁷⁰ Amit R. Das Gupta and Lorenz M. Lüthi, eds. *The Sino-Indian War of 1962: New Perspectives*. (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 11.

Chinese government became more nervous over borders elsewhere and initiated the border negotiation in 1964 with the Soviet Union, under the circumstances of rapidly deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship.

Chapter 3.1: The Calm before the Storm

China had a very difficult time during the “Three Years of Natural Disaster (1959-1961)” which was actually caused by collectivization and grain requisition. Between 15 to 45 millions of people died in the famine and China’s agricultural and industrial output dropped dramatically.⁷¹ The extreme backwardness of China at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward—with a GDP per capita only of 5.8 percent that of the U.S. IN 1957⁷², and the lack of reliable, all-seeing monitoring system like the Soviet secret police, significantly delayed the Chinese government’s disaster relief actions as well.⁷³ Ironically, Mao only learned collectivization and the commune system from Stalin, but did not successfully learn to build a system of secret police like the NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs). He was “visibly shaken” when he read the horrific figures of death in Henan province in late 1960⁷⁴ and eventually decided to slow down the pace of the Great Leap Forward. As a result, China was not able to fulfill most of the contracts signed with other Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. In the year of 1960 alone, China had owed a trade debt of 1 billion rubles to the Soviet Union because it could not deliver the industrial products, grains, and minerals according to the contracts.⁷⁵ China also canceled half of the food and industrial export of 1960 to East Germany, worsening the already destabilized East German politics and economy.⁷⁶ The famine, the economic and agricultural collapses, and the death toll, or what the Chinese government called them, “difficulties”, were

⁷¹ Leslie Holmes, *Communism: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32.

⁷² CormacÓ Gráda, "Great leap into famine: A review essay." *Population and Development Review* 37, no. 1 (2011), 192.

⁷³ Gráda, "Great leap into famine", 200.

⁷⁴ Gráda, "Great leap into famine", 200.

⁷⁵ Tong Xin, “Dui 1960-1961 Nian Sulian Xiang Zhongguo Bizhai Yi Shuo De Bian Xi” [Analysis to the debt collection of the Soviet Union to China in 1960-61—New Evidence from Eastern Europe], *Cold War International History Studies*, No. 21, Summer 2016. (Shi Jie Zhi Shi Chu Ban She: 2016), 205.

⁷⁶ Tong, “Dui 1960-1961 Nian Sulian Xiang Zhongguo Bizhai Yi Shuo De Bian Xi”, 216.

kept as a top secret within the Chinese government so most of the countries affected by China's default were not aware of the situation. The Soviet leadership, on the other hand, had some ideas about the massive famine happening in China from its intelligence reports. Chervonenko reportedly told East German counselor Werner Wenning in 1961 that despite Chinese comrades were doing everything they can, some cases of death by starvation were unavoidable.⁷⁷ "Some cases" was definitely an understatement of China's situation, but the Soviet Union did express understanding and sympathy towards China, even though the Soviets and the Chinese had been fighting over communist ideology since the Bucharest Conference of June 1960. Khrushchev sent a letter to Mao in February 1960 expressing the willingness to lend 1 million tons of grain and 500,000 tons of sugar from Cuba to help China go through the "difficulties".⁷⁸ China eventually took the offer of sugar and agreed to repay the debt within five years. Mao was already embarrassed for the cancellation of trade agreements, so his attitude towards the Soviet Union softened even further when he received the aid.

Yet under the veil of peaceful cooperation and assistance hid a brewing storm. In August 1960 Chinese and Soviet guards clashed on one of the border areas under dispute in Xinjiang, near the Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan. On March 8, 1963, the People's Daily published an editorial restating that the Treaty of Aigun, Treaty of Peking and Treaty of Ili (Treaty of Saint Petersburg) were unequal treaties that the Russian Empire forced the Chinese government to sign.⁷⁹ The rhetoric of the editorial alerted the Soviet leaders as intended. They felt threatened by the "imperialist discourse" and thought that China was planning to take land from the Soviet Union by presenting the "unequal treaties" as the priority in the Sino-Soviet relationship. In

⁷⁷ Tong, "Dui 1960-1961 Nian Sulian Xiang Zhongguo Bizhai Yi Shuo De Bian Xi", 230.

⁷⁸ Tong, "Dui 1960-1961 Nian Sulian Xiang Zhongguo Bizhai Yi Shuo De Bian Xi", 208.

⁷⁹ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol.2, 503.

October 1962, China tried to compel Moscow to take a “class position” on the Indo-China border conflict and “to teach certain comrades to separate truth from untruth.”⁸⁰ However, the Soviet Union was busy dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis in the same time and despite its later concession to China as it criticized India “sliding toward chauvinism to the detriment of proletarian internationalism”⁸¹, it felt threatened by China’s request China’s request in a moment of particular weakness. To prevent the potential strike from China, the Soviet Union further strengthened its relationship with the Republic of Mongolia, adding forces to the Sino-Mongolian border to prevent Chinese strikes across Mongolia and to buy more time for Soviet mobilization if the Chinese did strike. The Soviets also increased border guards along the Sino-Soviet border in Manchuria, doubling troops along with some sections of the border.⁸²

China and the Soviet Union eventually sat down to the negotiation table in February 1964 in Beijing to redraw the border but achieved no common understanding nor agreement. The primary objective of the Chinese delegation was for the Soviet government to admit that the treaties signed between the Russian Empire and China were unequal treaties, and the areas on the treaties that originally belonged to China but were given to the Russian Empire theoretically should be returned to China unconditionally. The details of which part of the land would actually be returned to China, however, would be negotiable. In other words, Mao just wanted the Soviet government to use the term “unequal treaties” in the future reference; he even told Chinese diplomats that “if the Soviet Union admits these treaties were unequal treaties, China could give up on the 35,000 square kilometers of land lost through the treaties.”⁸³ Yet the Soviet delegation

⁸⁰ Prozumenschikov, "The Sino-Indian Conflict, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1962", 253.

⁸¹ Prozumenschikov, "The Sino-Indian Conflict, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Sino-Soviet Split, October 1962", 253.

⁸² Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 504.

⁸³ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 524.

was vehemently against making such a statement. The Soviet diplomats considered the admission of unequal treaties gave China the opportunity to question the Sino-Soviet border again in the future, and Beijing wanted the two countries to keep in a contested situation forever, even preparing for long-term military antagonism.⁸⁴ The Soviets also claimed that some academic works and maps had "inaccurate interpretation" of the Sino-Soviet border and the unequal treaties.⁸⁵

The 1964 negotiation reflected the fundamental differences between the two communist powers. While the Soviet Union under Khrushchev focused more on the practical issues of the border and land, China under Mao, with its more complicated history, focused more on the ideological superiority and narratives of China's past. Had the Soviet leader been Stalin, the two countries might be able to reach a consensus since Mao and Stalin had more common in ideology and Mao held a special admiration towards Stalin. If the islands on the Ussuri River is essential for maintaining China as an ally, Stalin probably would not hesitate giving them to China. Yet unfortunately, Mao and Khrushchev were the opposites on the understanding of communist ideology and held no respect for each other. Therefore, although the representatives had reached an agreement on drawing the borderline along the Ussuri/Amur River and returning over 400 islands to China, the Soviet delegation still refused to sign the agreement because of Mao's insistence on the terminology of "unequal treaties". The Chinese delegation made a mistake at the final meeting on August 15 by comparing the land that China lost to the Soviet Union to Hong Kong and Macao.⁸⁶ This accusation was very upsetting to the Soviet Union as it claimed to be the country built on anti-imperialism. Khrushchev was especially pained and in returned

⁸⁴ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 527.

⁸⁵ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 505.

⁸⁶ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 531.

challenged China's definition of imperialism and implied China was a "helpless dogmatist".⁸⁷ This unpleasant meeting, combining with the previous conflicts, marked the final point of the Sino-Soviet split. This disastrous negotiation was also the first time that the name Zhenbao Island appeared in the Sino-Soviet territorial dispute, which was among the 400 islands that were not returned to China this time.

After the failed negotiation, Moscow continued sending more troops to the Sino-Soviet border for security and for intimidation. Mao was deeply alerted and started considering changes in military deployment and national security. At this point, he hadn't started to prepare for a real war but rather continued testing the Soviet Union's position through the press. In July he met with a group of Japanese delegates and, while supporting Japan's demand for lost territories to the Soviet Union, hinted that the Soviets also unjustly took Outer Mongolia from China.⁸⁸ This act was ironical since the Soviet Union helped to liberate China from Japanese occupation less than two decades previously. This time, Khrushchev took Mao's comment as a formal provocation and returned in a hawkish manner. He also met with the Japanese delegates in September and during the meeting, implicitly threatened China with nuclear war: "We created the most advanced weapon to protect our country, our people, and other countries. We are very aware of the totally destructive power of such horrible weapon, [and] we hope we will never use it.....but if other people invade us, we will use every weapon we have to protect our border."⁸⁹ Khrushchev was particularly frustrated by Mao's poor understanding of the consequences of a nuclear war⁹⁰ but had no problem threatening him with a nuclear war. This statement was the

⁸⁷ Li and Xia, "Jockeying for Leadership", 32.

⁸⁸ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 508.

⁸⁹ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 509.

⁹⁰ Rajesh Rajagopalan, "Deterrence and nuclear confrontations: The Cuban missile crisis and the Sino-soviet border war." *Strategic Analysis* 24, no. 3 (2000), 449.

final straw and incentivized Mao to prepare for war with the Soviet Union by fortifying the western side of the Sino-Soviet border and expanding intelligence work to the military movement of the Soviet Union and Mongolia.

However, before Mao finished his war plan, a sudden change in Moscow disrupted his intense preparation. In October 1964, Khrushchev was removed from power by a phone call when he was on vacation. The Cuban Missile Crisis had casted a shadow on the progress of the détente, but Khrushchev was able to secure the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) in 1963, one of the two arms control treaty of the Cold War era that has retained importance even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹¹ His successor Brezhnev preserved Khrushchev's foreign policy with the West. But Brezhnev was uninterested in improving his country's relationship with China even though the Chinese leadership's attempt. From this point on, China had entered the phase of preparation for war and the anti-Soviet discourse that the Soviets were revisionists started to be closely linked to national security.

⁹¹Vojtech Mastny, "The 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty: a missed opportunity for detente?." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008), 3.

Chapter 3.2: Way to Bloodshed

Immediately after Khrushchev's removal from power, Mao sent out delegates to repair the relationship, hoping the new leadership would have some different opinions. During the a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee of the Communist Party of China on October 27, Mao told the committee members that he hope to motivate the new Soviet leadership to a "better direction" and "do some work about it" but also warned them to not "hold the expectation too high".⁹² However, after reading Brezhnev's speech celebrating the 47th anniversary of October Revolution, Mao became more suspicious of the new Soviet leadership, saying that the new leaders were "weak, timid." Mao concluded that they "did not remove Khrushchev from power because of his policy but because of the long-accumulated grievances"⁹³, including the radical de-Stalinization and recklessness that led to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Despite the gloomy analysis, the Chinese government still sent Zhou Enlai and other delegates on November 9 to Moscow, trying to save the last hope of improving the relationship. Zhou summarized three possible conditions that the Soviets were willing to accept to repair Sino-Soviet relationship from his exchange with the new leadership: one, stop the public debate on Soviet revisionism and the right path to communism between the two countries; two, organize another international conference of communist parties; three, other suitable means were negotiable—although he did not specify which ones.⁹⁴ Brezhnev admitted that Zhou's proposal was indeed the Soviet agenda and expressed hope that the Chinese delegates could consider it. Anastas Mikoyan then set the final note of the negotiation by stating that the new Soviet leadership was totally in line with the Khrushchev administration without the slightest discrepancy. After Zhou returned and reported

⁹² *Mao Zedong Nianpu*, Vol. 5, 425.

⁹³ *Mao Zedong Nianpu*, Vol. 5, 431.

⁹⁴ *Mao Zedong Nianpu*, Vol. 5, 433.

the meeting, Mao rejected all the conditions raised by Brezhnev after listening to Zhou's report, and pointed out that the Soviet leadership had no intention changing its policy towards China and was exercising "Khrushchevism without Khrushchev"⁹⁵. Mao continued to warn that the Soviet Union wanted to conduct "subversive activities" inside the CCP, but it was better to wait and see what the real plan of Brezhnev would be. Mao's warning was not without reason—the Soviet Union did try to influence the politics within the CCP, but the extent to its success is still unclear. Li Biao, the designated successor of Mao in late 1960s, was accused of having an arrangement with the Soviet Union, attempted to assassinate Mao and died on his way defecting to the Soviet Union in 1971.⁹⁶ Now most of the scholarship, including Qiu Jin and Frederick Teiwes and Warren Sun, support that Lin was a victim to Mao's court politics, but the idea of Soviet subversion had become entrenched in the Chinese leadership.

As time proceeded, it became clear that Brezhnev indeed copied Khrushchev's policy towards China and continue to publish articles and make speeches that were provocative to China. In March 1965 *People's Daily* published an article denouncing a conference of communist and labor party members in Moscow, criticizing the similarity that the new Soviet leadership shared with the American imperialists and protested against Soviet government's suppression of the Chinese students in Moscow who were beaten by the Soviet police during protests⁹⁷, thus formally resuming the ideological debate and extinguished the last hope of reconciliation.

⁹⁵ *Mao Zedong Nianpu*, Vol. 5, 435.

⁹⁶ Qiu Jin. *The culture of power: the Lin Biao incident in the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 11.

⁹⁷ "Qianglie Kangyi Sulian Zhengfu Hengbao Zhenya Fanmei Shiwei" [Protest the Soviet Government's Suppression of Anti-America Protests]. *People's Daily*, March 8, 1965, 1.

Meanwhile, Brezhnev was also busy on building up the defense line along the Sino-Soviet border. The Soviet Union signed the Mongolian-USSR Friendship Treaty in January 1966 where both countries agreed to “render mutual assistance in ensuring the defense potential of both countries in accordance with the tasks of the constant strengthening of the defense might of the socialist community.”⁹⁸ The treaty also hinted the “colonial threat” from China and that Mongolia would always stand on the Soviet side: “The High Contracting Parties will continue their efforts..... at the achievement of general and complete disarmament and the complete liquidation of colonialism in all its forms and manifestations”⁹⁹ which referred to economic pressure and military buildup along the border with Mongolia of China. The further consolidation of cooperation between Mongolia and the Soviet Union not only served to debunk China’s former claim on unequal treaties forced China to give Outer Mongolia to the Soviet Union.

1967 was not an easy year for China. In January the Red Guards were formed to “follow the directions of Chairman Mao” and the Cultural Revolution unfolded in an organized manner through the hands of fanatical young people, which would destroy most of the things achieved after 1949. In September another conflict happened on the Indo-China border and the People’s Liberation Army was driven out from Nathu La by Indian troops. The Prague Spring in 1968 and the Soviet military activities in 1968 further raised the alertness in China, as the Chinese government considered Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was a blatant proof of the Soviet Union becoming an imperialist. The People’s Daily published an editorial on August 23, 1969 titled “The Bankruptcy of Modern Soviet Revisionism” denouncing that the Soviet Union had become the new imperialist and intended to turn the communist bloc into its own colony, which

⁹⁸ "Mongolia and U.S.S.R.: Friendship Treaty." *International Legal Materials* 5, no. 2 (1966): 342.

⁹⁹ "Mongolia and U.S.S.R.: Friendship Treaty.", 343.

was a betrayal of socialism and Marxism-Leninism.¹⁰⁰ The protests in Eastern Europe also deepened Mao's fear of a possible war with the Soviet Union and he was determined to show off strengthen to scare off the "paper tiger" of Soviet revisionists. The Soviet diplomats had sensed the increasing tension and proposed several times between 1966 and 1967 that the Soviet border troops should "attack and repulse" Chinese patrol units that appeared on the eastern section of the border.¹⁰¹ The antagonism was expanding rapidly from Beijing and Moscow and built up along the border.

There was no peace on the Ussuri River either. A conflict broke out on November 23, 1967 on Kabozi Island, 46°26'06" N, 133°53'02" E, but no death or injury on either side.¹⁰² This started the two year of minor conflicts between the Chinese residents and guards, and the Soviet guards. In January 1968, the Chinese government reported an incident where the Soviet armed vehicle ran over and killed four Chinese fishermen on Qiliqin Island, becoming the first casualties in the series of conflicts on the Ussuri River. Conflicts as such continued on the small islands and caused several casualties throughout 1968 and early 1969, but none of them was in comparison with the conflict happened in March 1969 on the Zhenbao Island.

Zhenbao Island, or known to the Russians as the Damansky Island, 46°29'08" N, 133°50'40" E, is a tiny island that measures 0.74 square kilometers (0.29 square miles). Technically, it is not an island but an extension of the Chinese side of the Ussuri River bank since during dry periods it is connected to the riverbank. Zhenbao Island also does not have a long history as it formed as an island on the Ussuri River only since 1915.¹⁰³ Despite its

¹⁰⁰ "The Bankruptcy of Modern Soviet Revisionism", *People's Daily*, August 23, 1968, page 1.

¹⁰¹ Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement." *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (2000), 24.

¹⁰² *Zhebao Dao Fengyun Lu*, (Heilongjiang Province Raohe County Consultative Council, 2002), 43.

¹⁰³ Kong Desheng, "Ji Zhan Zhenbao Dao", *Dang Shi Bo Cai* 2002.6, 16.

geographical insignificance, Zhenbao Island, along with several other small islands on the Sino-Soviet borderline along the Ussuri River, became an excellent outlet for the brewing Sino-Soviet border conflicts. These islands were relatively isolated from densely populated area but close enough to villages for troops to replenish supplies and retreat. The troops could also station in the nearby villages and sent patrols to these islands without worrying morale issue caused by isolation and insufficient supplies. China claimed that the Soviet border guards intruded onto Zhenbao Island 16 times between January 1968 and February 1969, injuring over a hundred of Chinese guards and fishermen.¹⁰⁴ The accumulation of frustration and grievances on the border was eventually exploited by the Soviet and Chinese governments to conduct a serious retaliation to show off forces and to intimidate the other side.

¹⁰⁴ *Zhebao Dao Fengyun Lu*, 5.

Chapter 3.3: The Conflict on Zhenbao (Damansky) Island

March 1, 1969 was a particularly cold day, and the temperature was below negative 30 Celsius. The ice on Ussuri River was about 2 meters thick and was safe for the passage of cars and tanks. Thousands of miles away in Beijing, the representatives from all over the country were arriving to prepare for the 9th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The Cultural Revolution was at the high point so many members who were at the 8th National Congress were either under investigation or in the prison. But it was still important for the party to boost the morale and to meet the impossible agricultural and industrial targets set under the zeal of Cultural Revolution.

The accounts of who initiated the attack on Zhenbao Island are still unclear. The Soviet Union insisted that it was the Chinese troops who initiated the attack. China insisted in the immediate aftermath of the attack that it was the Soviet guards started to attack the Chinese first, but several sources hinted that the Chinese guards were fully prepared for an armed conflict when they landed on Zhenbao Island on March 2. One of the source published by the *History of Communist Party of China Press* stated that “Chinese government decided to launch appropriate counter attack to repulse the Soviet intrusion and armed provocation”, so “On March 2, 15 and 17, 1969, Chinese border troops were well-prepared to get on the island for armed patrol and had three relatively large-scaled battles with the Soviet border troops who were conducting armed patrol as well.”¹⁰⁵ This statement, probably approved by the high-level party officials, showed two things acknowledged by the CCP: first, the Chinese troops were prepared for an exchange of fire when they landed on the Zhenbao Island on March 2, 1969; second, the Soviet troops expected the same. Therefore, it would be pointless to discuss who initiated the conflict on

¹⁰⁵ Qi Penggei, *Da guo Jiang Yu: Dangdai Zhongguo Ludi Bianjie Wenti Lunshu* [Border of a Large Country: Discussion of Contemporary Issues of China’s Land Borders] (Zhonggong Dangshi Chubanshe, 2013), 313.

March 2 since both the military build-up of the Soviet troops—25 divisions in the area where the conflicts took place and 4-5 reserve ready to be deployed¹⁰⁶--and the Chinese troops stationed in Manchuria—2 divisions of border guards, 24 infantry divisions, 2 armed divisions and 6 artillery divisions—suggested that both governments anticipated armed conflicts and were well-prepared for it.

However, the outcome of the conflicts and the aftermath of the conflicts might be out of the predictions of either country. The official statement of the Soviet government was that there were 58 killed in action and 92 injured, while the Chinese stated that there were 29 killed in actions and 62 injured.¹⁰⁷ Yet, as the accounts participants of the conflicts on both sides demonstrate, the casualties might be larger than reported, especially on the Chinese side. On the battle of March 15, the Soviet military began the battle with a massive rocket and artillery attack which, according to one Soviet witness account, incinerated several hundred Chinese troops.¹⁰⁸ The Soviet participants also recalled that two Soviet guards were able to hold off dozens of Chinese soldiers and killed 20 of them. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese participants in the Zhenbao Island conflict also told similar stories, but in their version, it was the Chinese soldiers who were able to take out many more Soviet troops. Another article based on hitherto unpublished archival materials suggests that although the Chinese troops had a 10:1 numerical superiority, the sophisticated use of artillery of the Soviet troops enabled them to defeat the Chinese.¹⁰⁹ This article also pointed out that the Chinese troops were ill-equipped comparing to the Soviet troops

¹⁰⁶ “USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River”, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Zhang Jie and Song Zhuoru, “The Assessment, Analysis and Decision of Nixon Government on the Sino-Soviet Conflict.”, *International Forum*, March 2013, Vol. 15, No.2, 36.

¹⁰⁸ Lyle J. Goldstein, *Preventive Attack and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 78.

¹⁰⁹ D.S. Riabushkin, and V.D. Pavliuk. “Soviet Artillery in the Battles for Damanskii Island.” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20, no. 1 (March 23, 2007), 121.

and the Chinese rocket launchers were quite poorly trained.¹¹⁰ This was possible since the Chinese troops in 1969 were still using the techniques and even arms from the Korean War and were trained by *Quotations from Chairman Mao* rather than tactical specialists. Also, the cultural revolution purges had seriously weakened the Chinese officer corps and eroded its skills in the general use of tactics, as was evident from the fact that the Chinese troops were erroneously applying historically derived military lessons combining with unrealistic ideological goals.¹¹¹ The Soviet troops, however, had adopted the tactics used by the Americans in the Korean War and successfully counterattacked the Chinese.¹¹²

Regardless of the casualties, the Chinese troops still managed to expel the Soviet troops from the Zhenbao Island. Despite both countries trying to claim victory on the media, they did not make further moves on the conflicted area immediately afterwards. Beijing sensed a greater threat from the Soviet discourse, since Moscow brought out nuclear threat on March 15 when a Moscow radio station talked about the conflict on Zhenbao Island: “The nuclear bomb of the Soviet Union is powerful, and it could make the life of millions of people miserable.”¹¹³

¹¹⁰ D.S. Riabushkin “What They Fought with on Damanskii Island.” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 2006): 159.

¹¹¹ Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt. *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience since 1949: The PLA Experience since 1949* (Routledge, 2016), 214

¹¹² Ryan, Finkelstein, and McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting*, 202.

¹¹³ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 582.

Chapter 4.1: The Cooling Down

Two weeks after the final battle on Zhenbao Island, the USSR government issued a statement, giving the Soviet version of the conflict. The Soviet Union claimed that on March 23 30 Chinese servicemen violated the Soviet border on Damansky (Zhenbao Island) and a group of Soviet frontier guards went to stop them. The Chinese servicemen allowed the guards “advance to within several meters and then suddenly without warning, opened fire at them point blank.”¹¹⁴ This version of account was accredited in most of the western literature on the 1969 border conflict, even though there was no clear record on who opened fire first, and both countries blamed the other. Some historians questioned the credibility of the Chinese version because “contemporary Chinese accounts of the clashes in March 1969 were all of the sort intended for widespread public and foreign consumption.”¹¹⁵ Yet although beginning in 1990s the Chinese historians admitted there was misinformation in the original Chinese version of the report of Zhenbao Island incident, it could not be said that the Soviet version was accurate either. In fact, the Soviet government was heavy on implicit propaganda in most its published statistics and reports too. In a report of INR of US State Department on March 14, 1969, US intelligence stated that “for some time, the Soviet propaganda media have carried extremely detailed accounts of Chinese aggressiveness and assertions of Soviet determination to defend the homeland and Soviet diplomats in private conversations with Westerners have severely condemned Peking.”¹¹⁶

The Soviet statement continued to narrate the long history between China and the Soviet Union since the time of Sun Yat-Sen, stating an agreement on general principles for regulating

¹¹⁴ “USSR Government Statement”, Nixon Presidential Library, USSR Vol. 1 [Dec 68-Dec-69], page 1.

¹¹⁵ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals. *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 309

¹¹⁶ “USSR-China: Soviets Complain About Chinese to Foreign Governments” March 14, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69.

questions between the Soviet Union and China was signed on May 31, 1924 in which that the Russian-Chinese treaties defining the state border were not considered as inequitable or secret.¹¹⁷ Instead of directly addressing the border disputes and Soviet's violation of the Thalweg Principle, which determines the borderline of two countries separated by a river as the center of the navigable channel. This statement continued on emphasizing the Soviet economic and industrial aid to China in the past two decades, and then denounced the 1964 negotiation of the Sino-Soviet border.

Unsurprisingly, the Chinese had a totally different narrative on the origin of the Zhenbao Island incident. In multiple articles and books published by the History of the Chinese Communist Party Press, the official publisher of the Chinese communist party, that it was the Soviet troops who provoked the incident. All the sources claimed that the soldiers on the Zhenbao Island, equipped with guns instead of stakes they used before, advanced to the Chinese guards on patrol and surrounded them. The Chinese discourse was that the Soviet soldiers opened fire first and, after a brief exchange of fires there were deaths and injuries on both sides. Eventually both sides sent out armored cars and tanks and continued the battle on March 15 and 17. In fact, the Chinese version did not deviate much from the Soviet version of the story except for the side who provoked the conflict, yet many sources that recorded this incident were produced during the peak of the Cultural Revolution, and therefore were filled with sensational language for propaganda purposes. The factual information—counts of deaths, injuries and use of arms—is not as inflated to serve for Chinese public consumption as some historians claim.

Yet it was evident from the comparison of the two narratives that China and the Soviet Union had never reached a consensus on the way to resolve territorial disputes. To the Chinese

¹¹⁷ “USSR Government Statement”, 4.

government, the land disputes and the Soviet aid were two totally different things and one could not compensate for another. Because of their complicated history, both the Chinese government and the public had a high sensitivity to territorial disputes, even the area under dispute was not strategically significant nor economically profitable. The Soviet Union, without understanding such sensitivity, considered the land dispute as one of the many factors in the Sino-Soviet relationship and was just as important as the issue of economic assistance. Brezhnev was under the impression that the Soviet Union had given China enough help on all aspects and had no obligation to engage in the border negotiations initiated by the Chinese. Brezhnev did put great effort to understand China by sponsoring a series of international conference which studied China and the Sino-Soviet relations, known as *Interkit*, which encouraged output from Eastern European countries and East Germany on issues of China.¹¹⁸ Unfortunately, the analysis from Hungarians, Germans, Bulgarians and Czechs did not help the Soviet Union much on understanding China. Before the Zhenbao Island incident, the Soviet leadership might not be able to predict how far China was willing to go to take the land “lost by unequal treaties”.

Now since the damage had been done to the two countries and the split had passed the point of no return, each country had to quickly decide its next steps since they shared a very long border other than the Amur/Ussuri River borderline and were closely linked in trade. But China suddenly shut down to any of negotiation requests from the Soviet Union since late March and left both the Soviet Union and the western observers in confusion.

¹¹⁸ David Wolff, “Interkit: Soviet sinology and the Sino-Soviet rift.” *Russian History* 30, no. 4 (2003), 447.

Chapter 4.2: Americans Worried About War Among Communists

As the archenemy of the communist world, the United States paid constant, close attention to the tension between China and the Soviet Union and followed the Zhenbao Island clash closely. The US had been ambivalent on the issue of Sino-Soviet relationship: it did not want either of the country to become a stronger rival of the US by getting the upper hand in this relationship, but it did not want the two countries to go to war with each other either. The reasons were simple: US saw the opportunity to utilize Sino-Soviet split to alleviate the stress in Vietnam but did not want a third World War started from the communist bloc. Especially after Richard Nixon was elected in 1968, the US government adopted a more nuanced foreign policy towards the communist countries and put forward real effort towards international nuclear disarmament.

Unfortunately, even though the American intelligence community had been analyzing the situation in the east for more than two decades, they still underestimated the seriousness of the Zhenbao Island conflict. In a report produced by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research(INR) of the State Department on March 4 immediately after the first battle, the US intelligence stated that this fight was likely to be initiated by either side and it was unlikely that the USSR intended to attack China, but further incidents similar to the one on March 2 would be possible if the Soviets continued its aggressive patrolling along the border.¹¹⁹ Again, on another report on March 7 the INR considered that the Soviet leadership would be unlikely to engage in a round of “retaliatory measures which could get out of hand.”¹²⁰ However, as the second and the third clashes happened on March 15 and 17, the INR had to admit that the situation on the Ussuri River was more dire than previously predicted: “Peking’s willingness to try local conciliation, its

¹¹⁹ “USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River”, 2.

¹²⁰ “USSR-China: Moscow Publicizes Its Losses in March 2 Border Clash”, March 7, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69,

silence on the extent of its casualties (if any) during the second and third encounters, and its less belligerent language of protest all suggest that Peking senses a greater danger of military escalation now than it did in the days immediately after March 2 and is approaching the problem of what to do in a much more sober fashion.”¹²¹ Also in the note where Richard Sneider, the then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, referred this report to Henry Kissinger, he suggested that “the Chinese have realized that they are in a very bad “face” situation” since “they cannot dislodge the Soviets from Chenpao[Zhenbao] Island without an unacceptable risk of escalation.”¹²² Evidently, the US government was correct about China’s reluctance to further escalate the situation on the border, but did not seem to expect either country to seriously consider going into war.

From the conversation notes between Marshal V.I. Chuikov, the Assistant Minister of Defense for Civil Defense of the Soviet Union and General Earle Wheeler, it was clear that the US was still very concerned after the release of the Soviet statement on March 29 and was still suspicious of a possible war between China and USSR. Chuikov assured Wheeler that the incidents—he avoided using the word “clash” to describe the conflicts on Zhenbao Island—on the border were not grave, and the Soviet government “does not desire any increase in tensions in the problem and has declared its readiness to resolve the problems peacefully.”¹²³ Throughout the conversation, Chuikov stressed the Soviet willingness to discuss the problem with the Chinese, and that the US should not worry that the conflict would escalate. Unfortunately,

¹²¹ “Sino-Soviet Border: Has Peking Bitten Off More Than It Can Chew?”, March 18, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69.

¹²² “Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger”, March 20, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69,

¹²³ “Metting between General Wheeler and Marshal Chuikov”, April 1, 1969. C.G. Fitzgerald, Policy Planning Staff, International Security Affairs, Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69, page 1.

Chuikov and the rest of the Soviet leadership misinterpreted the signs from the Chinese government. They were not able to achieve any agreements in the next few months because of China's refusal to negotiate with the Soviet Union in any form.

Aleksei Kosygin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, tried to contact Mao or Zhou by phone starting on March 22 but was rejected by the Chinese operator.¹²⁴ China did not respond to the statement made by Soviet government on March 29 and refused to talk with the Soviet Union on April 11. The Chinese government kept its silence until May 24 when it made a statement reiterating its willingness to resolve border disputes through negotiations. But when the Soviet Union proposed a meeting on July 26, China did not respond to the request. In hindsight, the Soviet Union possessed a larger military capacity and was more ready to mobilize its military than China, but it seemed less willing to solve the border dispute by force than China. It was understandable since the Soviet forces were split in Eastern Europe countries to monitor the political instability and to deliver military equipment to North Vietnam and now along the Sino-Soviet border to prevent possible attacks and to intimidate Chinese forces, so it would be disastrous if the Soviet Union was forced into another war with the second largest communist country. Yet the Soviet leadership would not sit and wait for China to respond either. On April 3 the Soviet border troops bombarded the Zhenbao Island to force Chinese troops withdraw, and also to pressure Beijing to respond its negotiation request.¹²⁵ The longer Beijing kept being silent, the more Moscow panicked. There was one question in the mind of Brezhnev and his generals: if China started a war with the Soviet Union, and if China find itself losing the war, will it use a nuclear weapon? Moscow had encountered an uncertainty in the Zhenbao Island conflict that it had never experienced before: "Damansky was a very dangerous precedent. ...

¹²⁴ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 585.

¹²⁵ *Mao Zedong Nianpu*, Vol. 6, 240.

Nothing like this had ever occurred in the US-Soviet rivalry.... they attacked the island and killed our soldiers....”¹²⁶, said Valentin Karymov, a sinologist who served on the staff of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee. The uncertainty continued as China refused to reopen negotiation on its border. In fact, from hindsight, China’s silence was understandable: it knew that Brezhnev would not redraw the border as China wanted and the negotiations would produce no results, so it preferred to not provoke the Soviets again through negotiations. It was also worrying about its southern border since the Sino-Vietnamese split in 1968 when Hanoi decided to enter negotiations with the US.¹²⁷ But since the Soviet Union had never reached an understanding with China, the initial confusion became the speculation of China being increasingly dangerous uncertainty to the border security of the Soviet Union.

This speculation haunted the Soviet leadership and, as the result, caused them to make a plan for strikes towards China’s nuclear weapon facilities and even a nuclear strike on China. One of the generals proposed the use of “a limited number of nuclear weapons in a kind of ‘surgical operation’ to intimidate the Chinese and destroy their nuclear facilities.”¹²⁸ The possibility of nuclear strikes seemed to be increasing in July and August 1969. American intelligence reported a seven-day long air stand-down of Soviet air force, which was usually one of the classic indicators of preparations to initiate military strikes.¹²⁹ On August 13, the Soviets deployed two airplanes, tanks, armed vehicles and over three hundred armed soldiers into Tielieketi area of Xijiang Province, killing a platoon of Chinese border guards.¹³⁰ This invasion startled both China and the US. Mao issued a direction through the CCP Central Committee,

¹²⁶ Goldstein, "Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?", 63.

¹²⁷ Odd Arne Westad and Sophie. Quinn-Judge. *The Third Indochina War: Conflict between China, Vietnam and Cambodia, 1972-79*. Cass Series--Cold War History; 11. (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 14.

¹²⁸ Goldstein, "Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?", 64.

¹²⁹ “Stand down of Soviet Air Forces”, August 8, 1969. Nixon Presidential Museum and Library, National Security Council Files USSR Vol. 1, Dec. 68-Dec. 69.

¹³⁰ Shen, *Reviewing and Reconsidering the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*, Vol. 2, 586.

urging the areas bordering the Soviet Union to prepare for a counter-invasion. On the same day, *Pravda* published an editorial hinting the nuclear threat from China: "Chinese arsenals [are] being filled with ever more new weapons . . . a war would involve lethal weapons and modern delivery systems... ." ¹³¹ *The Washington Post* immediately responded and published an article on the first page which was titled "Russia Reported Eyeing Strikes at China A-Sites", detailing the development on the Sino-Soviet border and the location of China's nuclear plants and test sites. The pressure from the border and from international press finally forced China to reopen the negotiations with the Soviet Union on September 11, when Kosygin turned around on his way from Ho Chi Minh's funeral back to Moscow, to meet with Zhou in Beijing's airport. This meeting finally ended months of war scare in both countries but produced no concrete results, just as the Chinese leadership suspected. On October 18, the Chinese government issued a statement which began the long-term border talk that lasted for nine years. From October 1969 to June 1978, high-level delegates from both countries met for 40 times and 156 smaller-scaled talks took place. ¹³² This marathon of negotiations produced no written agreement but alleviated the tension on the Sino-Soviet border, and no bleeding happened after this reconciliation on the border. The final redrawing of the Sino-Soviet border, however, only took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union. ¹³³

¹³¹ Goldstein, "Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?", 61.

¹³² Qi Pengfei, *Da guo Jiang Yu*, 332.

¹³³ Neville Maxwell, "How the Sino-Russian boundary conflict was finally settled: from Nerchinsk 1689 to Vladivostok 2005 via Zhenbao Island 1969." *Critical Asian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2007), 252.

Conclusion

The Zhenbao Island conflict between the PRC and USSR were never resolved. Only after the fall of the USSR did the PRC resolve the conflict with the Russian Federation under Boris Yeltsin. Thus, after escalating to the brink of nuclear war, the conflict produced a 16-year-long ice age between China and the Soviet Union. The rift between the PRC and USSR was so deep that it catalyzed the communist world's reconciliation with the United States. After China and USSR found their relationship was damaged beyond repair, they both turned to the US and pursued détente with the West. The Soviet Union actively participated in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) I and signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 1972. In the same year, Richard Nixon visited China and started the normalization of US-China relations. The tension within the communist bloc gradually decreased as the détente developed and the influence and power of the Soviet Union degraded.¹³⁴

The PRC and the Soviet Union resumed border negotiation resumed in 1986 after Gorbachev made his famous Asian initiative speech in Vladivostok. It was the first time since Stalin that a Soviet leader made concessions on a border issue. Notably, China signed the final border agreement not with the Soviet Union, but with the new independent Russian Federation in 1992. Why was it so hard for China and the Soviet Union, the supposed “brothers in arms”, to reach consensus on border dispute?

For China, the principal impediment was Mao's ideology on “continuing war with capitalism and imperialism”, which interpreted territorial concessions by China in terms of nineteenth-century imperialism. Even today, China is still engaging in a discourse of “unequal treaties” and the principle of no concession on land disputes. For the Soviet Union, neither

¹³⁴ Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Restoring Chaos to History: Sino-Soviet-American Relations, 1969." *The China Quarterly*, no. 210 (2012), 396.

Khrushchev nor Brezhnev was willing to give up the most important leverage against China—the disputed territories—because they needed it to maintain the power balance within the Communist bloc.

Remarkably, neither side wanted an armed conflict, but feared aggression by the other side. Judging by the reaction of the Soviet leadership after the Zhenbao Island conflict, the Soviets themselves were also surprised by the China belligerence. At some point between March and September, the Soviet leadership had seriously considered a preventive nuclear strike to destroy China's nuclear sites. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the nuclear war plan was only on the discussion table and never made to practice.

Was China preparing for a war in 1969? The answer is probably also no. In fact, Mao seemed to be worried that Soviet Union would start a war. He felt threatened by the Soviet military build-up along the border and possibly secretly ordered the region between the border and Beijing to prepare for possible Soviet attacks. In a document found in the Beijing Municipal Archive, the Beijing Transportation Bureau received an order for preparation for a war in January 1969, before the Zhenbao Island conflict, and it was directed to destroy top secret material and transfer less important material to secure locations.¹³⁵ But considering the zealous atmosphere in the first few years of the Cultural Revolution, “war preparation” was not as serious as it meant to be in the context of 1969. Although Lin Biao issued the “First Order” in October 1969 mobilizing the entire country for war preparation, his action was widely regarded as a political attempt to seize power from Mao and the old leadership and had little to do with real strategic planning. In fact, the Zhenbao Island conflict and the war scare made Mao realize that he needed to restore order and provide a backbone of political authority in the chaos of the

¹³⁵ Chinese Foreign Ministry Archive, 117-002-00229

Cultural Revolution, and his dissatisfaction with Lin Biao arose from the poor performance and condition of the army.¹³⁶

Zhenbao Island is not even a square kilometer in size, but it brought two super powers to the brink of war. The importance of the island was magnified because of its place in Maoist ideology. China's intention was very simple from the beginning, that it wanted the land lost by the unequal treaties to the Russian empire. When such pursuit cannot be understood and fulfilled by China's trusted partner in the communist bloc, the land dispute raised to the level of differences in communist ideology and understanding of history. The Soviet Union thus became the imperialist under the disguise of the "socialist big brother." This rift can be considered "ideological," but the question was not the nature of socialism. Rather, in Mao's eyes, Soviet territorial claims were effectively imperialist ill-concealed by a socialist veneer. Thus, while the PRC and USSR did not go to war over outer Mongolia (1.5 million square kilometers) in 1945, they fought and fractured the socialist world over the several tiny islands on the Ussuri River.

¹³⁶ Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun. *The Tragedy of Lin Biao: Riding the Tiger during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1971* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 133.

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