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# The Sino-Soviet Split

COLD WAR IN THE  
COMMUNIST WORLD

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## Conclusion

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BUTTRESSED by the Soviet–Outer Mongolian alliance of January 1966 and following the final deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations shortly thereafter, the USSR stationed troops, heavy weaponry, and even missiles at the Chinese border. By 1968, six divisions were stationed in Outer Mongolia<sup>1</sup> and another sixteen were stationed at the Sino-Soviet border. They faced forty-seven lightly armed Chinese divisions.<sup>2</sup>

In November 1967, border skirmishes occurred on the frozen rivers of the eastern sector.<sup>3</sup> After the first (Chinese) fatalities on January 5, 1968,<sup>4</sup> the CCP MAC cabled instructions to the Shenyang military region on the planning of a “counterattack in self-defense” at a “politically opportune moment.” While no more clashes occurred before the ice thawed,<sup>5</sup> incidents did resume the following winter.<sup>6</sup> On February 19, 1969, the PLA General Staff and the PRC Foreign Ministry agreed to an ambush on Zhenbao/Damanskii Island planned by Heilongjiang provincial military command.<sup>7</sup>

On March 2, Soviet border troops opened fire as soon as they realized that they were facing an ambush. At least thirty-one Soviet border guards were killed; the number of Chinese troops lost is unknown.<sup>8</sup> Suddenly fearing a “large-scale conflict,”<sup>9</sup> the PRC wanted to limit the scale of the confrontation, as Zhou told Chen Xilian, the commander of the Shenyang military region: “We are rational, . . . if we start war it will be part of a world war, we don’t want to expand the conflict.”<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,” Stephen Kaplan, ed., *Diplomacy of Power* (Washington: Brookings, 1981), 272.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Robinson, “China Confronts the Soviet Union,” Roderick MacFarquhar et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1991), 292, 299.

<sup>3</sup> Li Ke et al., *Wenhua dagemingzhong de renmin jiefangjun* (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1989), 317.

<sup>4</sup> Gong Li, “Chinese Decision Making and the Thawing of U.S.-China Relations,” Ross, *Re-examining the Cold War*, 329. Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” *Cold War History* 1/1, 24–25.

<sup>5</sup> Xu Yan, “1969nian Zhongguo bianjie de wuzhuang chongtu,” *Dangde yanjiu ziliao* 1994/5, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Yang, “Border Clash,” 25.

<sup>7</sup> Li, *Wenhua*, 319.

<sup>8</sup> Barbara Barnouin et al., *Chinese Foreign Policy during the Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul, 1998), 88.

<sup>9</sup> ZELNP3, 284–85.

<sup>10</sup> Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* (New York: Mingjing, 2003), 402.

The March 2 incident completely surprised Moscow.<sup>11</sup> Although the USSR informed its East European allies about "necessary steps to prevent further border violations,"<sup>12</sup> Soviet border troops and regular units were ordered to counterattack. The Soviet ambush in the early morning hours of March 15, however, did not go as planned.<sup>13</sup> Although the Chinese lost a high but unsubstantiated number of lives while the Soviets suffered relatively few fatalities, the PRC was able to maintain its positions on the island.<sup>14</sup>

The failure to retake Zhenbao/Damanskii Island came as a shock to the Soviet leadership. As early as the afternoon of March 15, Soviet radio stations beamed Chinese-language broadcasts into the PRC elaborating on the capabilities of the Soviet nuclear missiles.<sup>15</sup> Although no more clashes occurred on the frozen rivers in the Eastern sector, both sides continued to militarize the entire length of the border.<sup>16</sup>

Beijing was equally concerned about its international position. On March 14 (American time), at almost the same time as the Soviet ambush in the early morning of March 15 (East Asian time), U.S. President Richard Nixon officially announced the establishment of a new Anti-Ballistic Missile system. In an attempt to ensure continued nuclear negotiations with the Soviets, the president publicly justified this system not as a safeguard against a Soviet strike but as one against "any attack by the Chinese Communists that we can foresee over the next 10 years."<sup>17</sup> This revelation disturbed Mao greatly. In a meeting of the Cultural Revolution leadership on the afternoon of March 15, he admitted: "We are now isolated. No one wants to make friends with us."<sup>18</sup>

A March 21 attempt by Kosygin to reach Mao by the high-frequency phone line failed because the Chinese operator refused to connect the

<sup>11</sup> Shevchenko, *Breaking*, 164–65.

<sup>12</sup> "Document No. 1: Soviet Report to GDR Leadership on 2 March 1969," Christian Ostermann, ed., "East German Documents on the Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969," *CWIHP Bulletin* 6–7, 189–90.

<sup>13</sup> Li, *Wenhua*, 321–23.

<sup>14</sup> A Russian source mentions forty-eight Soviet and eight hundred Chinese troops killed: "Itar-Tass Weekly News," 2005-03-03 ITA-No., <http://dlib.eastview.com.ezp2.harvard.edu/searchresults/article.jsp?art=16>, accessed on June 10, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> *Guardian*, 3/20/1969, 1.

<sup>16</sup> "Memorandum for Col. Haig," 3/27/1969, *National Archives and Record Administration* [NARA], NIXON, NSC, Box 711, USSR Vol. 1 [Dec 68–Dec. 69] [3 of 3]. "From American Embassy in Moscow to Department of State," 4/5/1969, NARA, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1850, POL—POLITICAL AFF. & REL. ASIA 1-1-67.

<sup>17</sup> NYT, 3/15/1969, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Gong, "Chinese Decision Making," 323.

call, cursing the Soviet prime minister as a "revisionist element."<sup>19</sup> Zhou was aghast: "The two countries are at war, one cannot chop the messenger."<sup>20</sup> He proposed to Mao to keep the communication channels of the foreign ministry open. The Chairman agreed: "Immediately prepare to hold diplomatic negotiations."<sup>21</sup> No high-level negotiations, however, materialized.

Under Soviet prodding,<sup>22</sup> the two sides eventually agreed to fifteen rounds of talks by the low-level Sino-Soviet Commission on the Navigation of Boundary Rivers between June 18 and August 8.<sup>23</sup> Five days after their collapse, another major border clash occurred at the western sector of the Sino-Soviet border.<sup>24</sup> In its immediate aftermath, the USSR again threatened nuclear war.<sup>25</sup> In reality, though, the Soviet leadership was in a stalemate over the use of nuclear weapons and would eventually dismiss it as an unfeasible option against a populous country like China.<sup>26</sup>

At an August 18 lunch meeting, Boris Davydov, the second secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, asked William Stearman, a midlevel State Department official, "point blank what the US would do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations."<sup>27</sup> The lack of Soviet documentation, however, makes it difficult to assert whether this was a bluff or actual policy. Anyway, nine days later, the State Department and the CIA announced that the USSR had reportedly sounded out its Warsaw Pact allies about "a conventional attack to destroy China's nuclear weapons center at Lop Nor."<sup>28</sup> The following day, once Beijing had received the news,<sup>29</sup> it ordered the general mobilization of the PLA and massive civilian and military preparations against a Soviet attack.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>19</sup> "Dear Comrades," 4/2/1969, SAPMO-BArch, DY 30/3613, 16-17. Yang, "Border Clash," 32. Wang Yongqin, "1966-1976nian ZhongMeiSu guanxi jishi (lianzai yi)," *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 1997/4, 119 (quote).

<sup>20</sup> Gao, *Wannian*, 402-3.

<sup>21</sup> ZELNP3, 286.

<sup>22</sup> *Pravda*, 3/30/1969, 1. NYT, 5/5/1969, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Liu Zhinan, "1969nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui MeiSu guanxi de yanjiu he diaozheng," *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 1999/3, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Yang, "Border Clash," 34.

<sup>25</sup> Xiong Xianghui, "Dakai ZhongMei guanxi de qianzhou," *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao* 42, 79-80. Liu, "1969nian," 45.

<sup>26</sup> Shevchenko, *Breaking*, 165-66.

<sup>27</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation," 8/18/1969, NARA, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967-1969, Box 1529, DEF 12 CHICOM.

<sup>28</sup> NYT, 8/28/1969, 8; 8/29/1969, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Wang Yongqin, "1969nian: ZhongMei guanxi de zhuanzhedian," *Dangde wenxian* 1995/6, 78.

<sup>30</sup> "The CCP Central Committee's Order for General Mobilization in Border Provinces and Regions, 28 August 1969," Chen Jian et al., eds., "All under Heaven Is Great Chaos," *CWIHP Bulletin* 11, 168-69.

On September 9, 1969, under pressure from the communist parties of Romania, North Vietnam, and Italy to find a negotiated solution,<sup>31</sup> Kosygin tried to contact the Chinese delegation during Ho Chi Minh's funeral service in Hanoi.<sup>32</sup> The Soviet prime minister met his Chinese counterpart two days later at Beijing Airport. After reviewing Sino-Soviet relations,<sup>33</sup> Kosygin and Zhou agreed to normalize governmental relations and to seek a negotiated solution to the border problems.<sup>34</sup> In the immediate aftermath, Mao and Zhou were hopeful that the prospect of negotiations would diffuse the border conflict.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese prime minister even started to draft a letter with concrete proposals to relax the situation.<sup>36</sup>

On September 16, however, Soviet leaks on preparations for an air raid on the PRC nuclear weapons test site alarmed the Chinese leadership yet again.<sup>37</sup> Although the U.S. embassy in Moscow assumed that they were a part of psychological warfare,<sup>38</sup> Mao and Zhou grew suspicious about the motives behind Kosygin's visit to China. Comparing it with Japan's duplicitous behavior before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Chinese leadership came to believe that the USSR was using diplomacy to mask its war preparations.<sup>39</sup> Of particular concern to Beijing was the fact that Washington had not indicated where it stood on the matter after it had revealed Moscow's supposed diplomatic inquiries in East Europe on August 27. In another instance of erroneous historical analogy, the Chinese leadership concluded that the United States not only supported Soviet policies but deliberately waited for war to break out, as it had in both world wars, in order to reap the spoils after joining in later.<sup>40</sup> The final version of Zhou's letter to Kosygin, sent on September 18, included

<sup>31</sup> According to what the Romanians told the Americans later: "Airgram from U.S. UN delegation to Department of State," 10/2/1969, NARA, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967-1969, Box 1974, POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-USSR 10/1/1969.

<sup>32</sup> Cong Wenzhi, "Zhongshi waijiao diaoyan, shanyu zhanlue sikao," *Waijiao xueyuan xuebao* 2001/4, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Kapitsa, *Na raznykh parallelyakh*, 81-92.

<sup>34</sup> "Document No. 3: Soviet Report on 11 September 1969 Kosygin-Zhou Meeting," Ostermann, "East German Documents," *CWIHP Bulletin* 6-7, 191-93.

<sup>35</sup> ZELNP3, 321. Gong, "Chinese Decision Making," 335.

<sup>36</sup> Niu Jun, "1969nian Zhongguo bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng," *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* 1995/6, 73.

<sup>37</sup> *London Evening News*, 9/18/1969, 7.

<sup>38</sup> "From American Embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State," September 19, 1969, NARA, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967-1969, Box 1975, POLITICAL AFF. & REL. 8/1/69.

<sup>39</sup> Yang, "Border Clash," 39. Niu, "1969nian," 74.

<sup>40</sup> Liu, "1969nian," 46.

not only proposals on border negotiations but also the demand to stop threats against China's nuclear weapons project.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, the Chinese leadership started with emergency preparations for war. When Moscow's September 26 reply asked for negotiations to begin in the Chinese capital on October 10, Beijing believed this reply indicated the approximate date when war would begin. While Zhou immediately responded with a request to postpone the talks for another ten days,<sup>42</sup> presumably to gain more time for war preparations, Lin Biao nevertheless ordered the PLA on full alert on September 30 in anticipation of a Soviet attack on China's National Day, October 1.<sup>43</sup>

Although the Chinese leadership was surprised when the Soviet attack did not come on October 1, it remained suspicious.<sup>44</sup> War preparations continued.<sup>45</sup> In the expectation of a Soviet attack around the start of the border negotiations on October 20, the top Chinese leaders left Beijing for different locations throughout the PRC with the dual purpose of escaping possible capture and of being in the right places to lead local guerrilla wars after the Soviet invasion.<sup>46</sup> Simultaneously, a mass campaign to build air-raid shelters gathered momentum in urban centers.<sup>47</sup> On October 17, Lin Biao ordered the PLA on emergency alert.<sup>48</sup>

The Soviet Union, however, attacked neither after the start of the Sino-Soviet border talks nor after their failure on December 11.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the PRC continued to suffer from a "war psychosis" given that the border rivers would soon freeze.<sup>50</sup> The relative quiet on the Sino-Soviet borders in the winter of 1969/70 eventually convinced the Chinese leadership that the worst was over. On May 1, Mao Zedong received the head of the Soviet border negotiation delegation on Tiananmen—a rare honor—announcing: "We should negotiate well, should have good-neighborly relations, should be patient, and only fight with words."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>41</sup> "Letter, Zhou Enlai to Alexei Kosygin, 18 September 1969," Chen, "All under Heaven," 171–72.

<sup>42</sup> ZELNP3, 322–23.

<sup>43</sup> Liu, "1969nian," 48. Zheng Qian, "Zhonggong dajiu qianhou quanguo de zhanbei gongzuo," *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao* 41, 219.

<sup>44</sup> Yang, "Border Clash," 40.

<sup>45</sup> Zheng, "Zhonggong," 221.

<sup>46</sup> Liu, "1969nian," 48–49. Zheng, "Zhonggong," 219. Xiong, "Dakai," 91. ZELNP3, 329.

<sup>47</sup> Yang, "Border Clash," 41.

<sup>48</sup> Wang, "1966–1976nian," 124–25. Yang, "Border Clash," 41.

<sup>49</sup> Li, "Changes," 313. ZELNP3, 338.

<sup>50</sup> "Dear Comrade Fischer," 11/28/1969, PAAA-M/AA, Abteilung Ferner Osten -Sektor China, Microfiche C 186/74, 86.

<sup>51</sup> Zhang Baojun, "1969nian qianhou dang dui waijiao zhanlüe de zhongda tiaozheng," *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* 1996/1, 63.

In a narrow sense, the Sino-Soviet crisis in 1969 was the product of a limited, premeditated border skirmish gone awry. The combination of hardball tactics by the Soviets and of the negative impact of China's self-isolation on its ability to function in international relations helped to bring about a veritable war scare in the PRC. In a larger perspective, the border conflict was the consequence of territorial disputes that predated, but were exacerbated by, the Sino-Soviet ideological disputes. The border clashes were *not* a part of the Sino-Soviet Split, just its most visible consequence.

What caused the Sino-Soviet Split? While many factors were significant, this book has argued that among all the causes, ideology was the most important. Ideological disagreements revolved around three issues: economic development, de-Stalinization, and international relations—peaceful coexistence and world revolution.

As early as 1955, Mao had rejected the socioeconomic development model (Bureaucratic Stalinism) the PRC had adopted from the USSR. The structural economic crisis China faced in the mid-1950s was genuine. While the industrial sector had grown as a result of Soviet investments, agriculture continued to lag behind and thus threatened the country's economic health. Because Soviet credits were ending in the late 1950s, a surplus of agricultural products was supposed both to maintain the industrial sector *and* to repay the loans. Mao thus concluded that only rapid agricultural development could fulfill both these needs. However, the solution—Mao's promotion of rural policies similar to Revolutionary Stalinism—was highly ideological rather than pragmatic. It is important to note that there was no absence of alternatives; the Chinese leadership discussed Bukharinite, Titoist, and Bureaucratic Stalinist solutions, but Mao rejected all of them for ideological reasons. Nonsocialist policies, as adapted after his death, did not even cross his mind. The Socialist High Tide was eventually launched in the second half of 1955 but ran into problems similar to, though not as severe as, those of Stalin's agricultural policies from the early 1930s.

The failure of the Socialist High Tide became apparent in early 1956, at the same time that Khrushchev began criticizing Stalin. At its eighth congress in September, the CCP returned to Bureaucratic Stalinist socioeconomic policies. Under the influence of the Hungarian Revolution, however, Mao again rethought that development model. Unlike Khrushchev, who promoted de-Stalinization in the political and ideological sphere (see below), the Chairman was willing to consider the de-Stalinization of China's economic system. The resulting liberal political and economic experiments in early 1957, however, did not survive the



Anti-Rightist Campaign of the summer. Criticism raised by intellectuals and technical specialists during the Hundred Flowers Campaign discredited both Bureaucratic Stalinism and these experiments.

The Great Leap Forward was a great flight away from the problems that had emerged in the 1955–57 period. Even more radical than the Socialist High Tide, it took inspiration from Revolutionary Stalinism, the Yan'an myths, and Mao's criticism of Bureaucratic Stalinism. Its collapse in late 1960 triggered a short period of sensible reform, which Mao increasingly considered a reintroduction of capitalism in China. The debates on economic policy from 1962 to 1966 were largely a function of the Chinese leadership struggle before the Cultural Revolution.

The Sino-Soviet disputes over political and ideological de-Stalinization that emerged in 1956 quickly overshadowed the Chinese disagreement with the Bureaucratic Stalinist economic development model. Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin's personality cult threatened to undermine the domestic position of the Chairman. Mao thus tried to pursue the double strategy of limiting the discussion of de-Stalinization in the PRC and using Stalin's supposed mistakes in the Chinese revolution to protect his own personality cult. The eighth CCP congress, however, undercut some of Mao's prerogatives for a brief time. While considering the de-Stalinization of China's economy, the Chairman blamed Khrushchev's political and ideological de-Stalinization for the Polish October and the Hungarian Revolution. Using his extraordinary skill at political maneuvering and manipulation, he was eventually able to overturn the decisions of the eighth CCP congress. Simultaneously, he launched the Great Leap Forward with the stated aim of avoiding the mistakes Stalin had committed in the early 1930s.

By 1959, Mao's personal and political ambitions triggered criticism both at home and abroad. As the Lushan conference in mid-1959 revealed, several Chinese leaders disagreed both with his Stalin-like personality cult and his deceptively positive portrayal of the Great Leap Forward. Fearing for his political survival, Mao turned this well-founded criticism into a supposed conspiracy against him. While he was able to overcome his mostly imaginary foes at home, the Soviet comrades increasingly saw him as a second Stalin. De-Stalinization subsequently disappeared, almost completely, as a topic in the Sino-Soviet debates, with the exception of the twenty-second CPSU congress in 1961 and the Stalin polemic of 1963.

The major issue that dominated Sino-Soviet debates in the 1960s—the correct policy line in international relations—had been only a minor irritant in Sino-Soviet disagreements during most of the 1950s. In 1954, together with India, China had proclaimed peaceful coexistence—*Pancha Shila*. Khrushchev's proposal for peaceful coexistence at the twentieth

CPSU congress in early 1956 expanded this idea into the arena of super-power conflict. Initially, the PRC supported Khrushchev's new policy in the hope that it might solve the Taiwan Question. However, the Polish October and the Hungarian Revolution prompted the first doubts, which were eventually reinforced by the failure of Khrushchev's peaceful co-existence policy to produce tangible results in the Taiwan Question. The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 was Mao's deliberate challenge to Khrushchev's strategy of peaceful coexistence.

During 1959, Mao's criticism of Khrushchev's conduct in international affairs changed from the rejection of peaceful coexistence to radical support for world revolution. This change of heart was the result of two mutually enforcing developments. On the one hand, China's hard-line response to the Tibetan Uprising not only destroyed Pancha Shila but also provoked the Sino-Indian Border War. On the other, Mao's views on international relations had been radicalized since early 1959. Although the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis had sorted out some of the issues between the United States and China, the Chairman, more strongly than before, saw American imperialism in the darkest colors.

After the Lushan meeting, Mao developed uncompromising views on the correct kind of relationship that socialist countries could have with imperialist ones. This, however, did not prevent the PRC from cooperating with them economically after the 1960 withdrawal of the Soviet specialists. By 1962, the Chairman discarded the socialist camp as the primary agent in world revolution and, instead, turned his sights on national liberation movements in the Asian-African-Latin American intermediate zone. In turn, he accused the Soviet Union of selling out world revolution and of instigating the restoration of capitalism.

The ideological debates on economic development, de-Stalinization, and world revolution raise a fundamental question: did the Chinese leaders in general, and Mao in particular, use ideology as a genuine belief system or as an instrumental device? Clearly, the Chinese leaders were committed communists from a very early point in their political careers, though their individual understanding of Marxism-Leninism varied. There is no evidence that they were pure cynics who used ideological claims in a deceitful manner to achieve goals contrary to larger Marxist-Leninist postulates.

There are several clear instances when ideology served either as a belief system or as an instrumental device. The basic conception of the Great Leap Forward, on the one hand, grew out of a genuine belief in its ideological correctness. This does not contradict the fact that it was foolish, because a lack of understanding of Marxism-Leninism does not preclude a sincere belief in it. There are several instances, on the other hand, in which Mao used ideological arguments to protect his own position, such

as in the spring of 1956 or in the summer of 1959. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, the Chinese leadership collectively used pronunciations of ideological correctness to smother political dissent inside and outside of the party. And in mid-1959 and after the summer of 1962, Mao used the same tactic to attempt to silence dissent within the party leadership.

De-Stalinization, from the Secret Speech to the Anti-Party Incident to the twenty-second CPSU congress, rattled Sino-Soviet relations, although it was primarily rooted in genuine Soviet internal debates between old Stalinist stalwarts and reformers over the future of the USSR. In comparison, Mao's instrumental use of ideology in domestic politics contributed to the worsening of Sino-Soviet relations to a much greater degree. His increasing, though probably unfounded, suspicion during the first half of the 1960s that his fellow leaders were out to depose him led the Chairman to exaggerate Soviet revisionism for domestic political purposes.

Yet, the mutual influence of domestic and foreign policy was a two-way street, particularly in China. Events in Hungary in late 1956, for example, greatly influenced Mao's thinking on reform at home. Without the Hungarian Revolution, he would not have revisited the viability of Bureaucratic Stalinism for China nor would he have been willing to engage in liberal experiments. Conversely, the extremism of the Great Leap Forward demanded the instigation of a foreign policy crisis for mobilization purposes. Indeed, the timing of the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis was closely linked to the launching of the commune movement and other radical policies in the later summer of 1958. Similarly, in the mid-1960s, Mao seemed to accelerate the Sino-Soviet split for his domestic agenda in the run-up to the Cultural Revolution.

Apart from ideology and its connections to domestic politics, several other factors helped to intensify Sino-Soviet antagonism. There is no doubt that the newly established PRC sought security in an alliance with the USSR against what it perceived as an inherently aggressive, revanchist, and imperialist United States. Yet, this ideologically distorted view of the world only helped to create greater security problems after 1949. China's recognition of the DRV and its commitment to the Korean War even before its outbreak elicited the stiffening of American positions on Vietnam, Taiwan, and Korea. Not only did the continued militarization of these three fronts over the following two decades exacerbate the negative consequences of the country's increasing self-isolation but it also threatened to undermine the Sino-Soviet alliance. After provoking the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958, the PRC tried to involve the Soviet Union in a nuclear war with the United States. It was one of the reasons why Moscow approved nuclear negotiations with Washington. Although the ensuing LNTB did not restrict the PRC from developing

its own nuclear weapons, it was a major political blow for the country and its place in world affairs. Finally, China's active defense of Vietnam since 1950, as well as its constant emphasis on national liberation since 1962, helped to undermine its security after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in August 1964.

In addition, the unequal positions of the two alliance partners within the international system increasingly separated them. On the one hand, the Soviet Union was a world power with an increasing number of commitments. These obligations, such as the Soviet-Indian friendship and superpower rapprochement over nuclear weapons, were at the root of some of the problems in the Sino-Soviet alliance. The PRC, on the other hand, was a regional power with a limited number of commitments; it was also a country that became increasingly isolated after the late 1950s, largely on account of Mao's choice. Despite claims of equality within the socialist camp and despite its difference in size from most other socialist states, the PRC was *never* equal to the Soviet Union in either the socialist camp or in world affairs. Although Chinese claims to that effect gained acceptance among some socialist states and a small number of communist parties, the majority of the international communist movement regarded Mao's China as the odd man out.

What set Mao apart from other wannabe leaders of the socialist camp was not only the size of the country he headed or the ideological pretensions he entertained, but the talent and tenacity with which he exploited conflict among diverse Soviet commitments across the world. Soviet-American rapprochement in 1959–60 served Mao to launch public polemics in early 1960, the LNTB helped him to prove the revisionism of the Soviet leadership, and the Second Vietnam War, despite Moscow's support of Hanoi, provided a platform from which the Chairman could accuse Soviets of duplicity. Mao's skills were almost matched by Khrushchev's clumsiness. The USSR was imprudent in responding so negatively to both the Sino-Indian Border Wars and the Chinese polemics of 1963–64. Soviet reactions were also often disproportionate, as revealed by the withdrawal of the specialists in 1960.

There is no doubt that personality issues contributed to the worsening of the Sino-Soviet alliance. Mao's eccentricity and megalomania irritated the Soviets. His claim that the Great Leap Forward would enable the PRC to enter communism before the Soviet Union was galling to Khrushchev. The Chairman's arrogance peaked in 1963 when he claimed that Beijing had become the center of world revolution. Khrushchev's behavior, however, could be equally harmful to Sino-Soviet relations. As his 1958 proposal to station submarines in China revealed, he did not fully understand Chinese sensitivities over sovereignty. The Soviet leader could also be brash and downright rude, especially when, in early 1960, he compared Mao to an

old pair of discarded shoes, or, the following year, he told Zhou that the CPSU no longer needed the advice of the CCP.

Territorial conflicts, by contrast, were not at the root of the Sino-Soviet conflict. Although the mutual border was partially unmarked and the PRC had not really relinquished its claim on Outer Mongolia, conflicts emerged only in the wake of the ideological disputes that began in 1960. Tenuous evidence suggests that China instigated border incidents in order to exploit them in ongoing Sino-Soviet negotiations, regardless of their relation to or independence of the border issues.

Finally, accidents contributed to the collapse of the Sino-Soviet partnership. Most importantly, the U-2 Incident was a propaganda boon for the CCP, which did not waste any time to press its radical ideological points while alienating the CPSU and its allies in the process. The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and the Malinovskii incident two years later had a similarly inadvertent negative impact. However, had it not been for Mao's willingness to use them for his own needs, they would not have had such disproportionably negative effects on Sino-Soviet relations.

This all brings us to a crucial question: could the split have been avoided if the one or the other factor had been removed from these events? Obviously, counterfactuals are not hard evidence; they are only argumentative devices that, if applied carefully, help us to consider possible alternatives. What if, for example, Stalin had not died but continued to live into old age, been intellectually alert, and remained politically active? In that case, the ideological disagreements would not have emerged, or at least not in such an acute form. Mao would certainly not have enjoyed the same room to maneuver that Khrushchev unwittingly allowed him to occupy. Indeed, Stalin's seniority, combined with his distinctively central position in the communist world, would have hardly allowed for ideological or political plurality. Given that Khrushchev played the China card in 1954 and 1957 in order to buy Chinese support for his struggle against the remaining Stalinist stalwarts, Stalin's continued presence at the helm of the Soviet Union would probably not have led to the greater economic assistance that the PRC actually received after his death. Even if the great Soviet dictator was not prone to committing gaffes or embarking on adventurous policies as Khrushchev repeatedly did, he still had his track record of devastating blunders that might have had a negative effect on his relations with Mao. Furthermore, his history of selling out foreign communist parties whenever it served his purposes might not have boded well for China. Stalin was an international leader who demanded loyalty from everybody else but was loath to return any.

What if Khrushchev had not come to power but the Soviet Union had been run by another leader closer to Stalin's outlook? While many of the considerations in the paragraph above probably apply, developments

in Sino-Soviet relations after 1953 would have also been dependent on who exactly succeeded Stalin. One of Stalin's closest associates that had participated in the October Revolution certainly would have commanded a great degree, though not all, of Stalin's authority in the communist world. A junior leader, by contrast, would have faced Mao's scrutiny, given that the Chairman dismissed the younger Khrushchev as immature as early as 1956. Such a successor might also have initiated necessary domestic reforms to shore up popular support, though on a smaller scale and with greater caution than Khrushchev. This might have led to a limited pluralism within the socialist world that, in turn, may have provided Mao with enough leeway to push through his own radical ideas. Regardless, the potential for conflict would certainly have been smaller.

What if Mao had died early or had been removed from power between 1956 and 1966? Since he was the dominant person in the worsening Sino-Soviet relationship, this is probably the most significant counterfactual consideration. As in Lenin's case, Mao's early death would have enabled him to enter history as a great revolutionary without being blamed for his subsequent mistakes while running China. Similarly, his removal for political mistakes at the eighth CCP congress in 1956, at the Lushan meeting in 1959, or at the 7,000-Cadres Conference in 1962 would have prevented him from causing further damage to the economic health and physical security of the PRC. There is little doubt that Mao was one of the most radical among the Chinese top leaders. Although Zhou, Liu, and Deng repeatedly sided with the Chairman by supporting his extreme policies, there is enough evidence to suggest that all three were comparatively moderate leaders who were capable of implementing reasonable policies. They also lacked the inflated ego of the Chairman, which made collective decision making in China so difficult and teamwork almost impossible. While Sino-Soviet disagreements may have been much less confrontational, the alliance might still have lost its internal glue over time. It would have been unlikely, however, for the alliance to degenerate into outright hostility.

What were the actual chances for Mao to be removed from power? In fact, they seemed to be limited from the beginning and were getting progressively smaller as the Sino-Soviet disagreements continued. Mao's personality cult, which the party had nourished since 1945 for political reasons, had, in the mind of many Chinese citizens, inextricably linked the Chairman to the new regime. As Zhang Wentian realized in 1959, Mao's removal may have meant a mortal blow to the party and, in turn, to the communist regime at large. In a perverse sense, then, the CCP was stuck with Mao; even if many party members might have disagreed with his radical positions, he had become indispensable to the continuation of communist rule.

Finally, was there anything Khrushchev could have done to prevent the Sino-Soviet split after his delivery of the Secret Speech? Although the Soviet leader should have done many things differently, it still does not mean that an alternative course of action could have prevented the alliance from collapse. Khrushchev's impulsiveness, his lack of consideration, and his propensity to make unfounded claims or embark on adventurous but potentially damaging policies all contributed to the split. However, they were *not* major factors in bringing about the split. The principal problem was that once he had let the genie of ideological pluralism out of the bottle, only a master politician could have tempted it back in. Thus, with de-Stalinization, the Soviet empire of ideological unity had vanished forever. Yet, as the worsening of Sino-Soviet relations continued, there was increasingly less left for Khrushchev to keep the alliance alive—short of complete ideological surrender. Of course, no great power would have ceded leadership of its domain to an ally that was militarily less powerful, economically weaker, and run by a radical megalomaniac. Only in Mao's fantasy world was this possible; few inside the PRC and even fewer outside, however, shared the Chairman's monumental delusions.