

THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT: POST-MAO PERIOD, 1976-1979

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For more than twenty years now, Peking and Moscow have been exchanging charges and counter-charges against each other. According to a Chinese account, the Sino-Soviet dispute has a recent origin: "The truth is that the whole series of differences began more than seven years ago."¹ Thus, Peking traces the beginnings of the dispute to the 20th CPSU Congress in 1956.

Khrushchev's statements on Soviet policy provided the immediate grounds on which Sino-Soviet differences have been made public by both sides. Khrushchev's secret speech denouncing Stalin and his pronouncements on peaceful coexistence and the peaceful transition to socialism were the initial source of the immediate public exchange of polemics between Peking and Moscow.² On the ideological plane, Peking's publication of an essay entitled "Long Live Leninism," in reply to Moscow's position, marked the open break between the two countries.³

Sino-Soviet differences have deeper historical roots. It can be traced back in the remote past, especially in the development of Soviet policies in China. For instance, the current territorial dispute and boundary questions date back to tsarist Russia's days when vast areas traditionally under Chinese rule were acquired by the Soviet Union in the treaties of Aigun (1858), Peking (1860), and Ili (1881)—treaties which have become the basis of Peking's accusation of "unequal treaties" by 1963.⁴

Since 1956, a number of issues had exacerbated Sino-Soviet relations which included the following: the question posed by the

¹ See Editorial Departments of the *People's Daily* and *Red Flag*, "The Origin and Development of the Differences Between the Leadership of the CPSU and Ourselves — Comment on the Open Letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU," *People's Daily*, 6 September 1963, pp. 6-23. For a complete text, see William E. Griffith, *The Sino-Soviet Rift*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1964), pp. 338-420.

² See David Floyd, *Mao Against Khrushchev: A Short History of the Sino-Soviet Conflict*, Praeger University Series, no. 142 (New York: Frederick A Praeger Publishers, 1963), pp. 33-34.

³ See complete text in G.F. Hudson et al, *The Sino-Soviet Dispute*, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger Inc., 1961), pp. 82-112.

⁴ See "A Comment on the Statement of the Communist Party of the USA," *People's Daily* Editorial, 8 March 1963.

CCP regarding the nature of relations between the CPSU and the rest of the communist parties in the socialist camp as an offshoot of Soviet intervention in Poland and Hungary; Peking's disappointments over Moscow's lukewarm support for its stand on Taiwan and the border war with India in 1962; the Soviet refusal to support China's nuclear weapons development programs, and aggravated by the deployment of Soviet troops along the Sino-Soviet frontiers and the attendant threat of a Soviet invasion against China. Domestic developments in China were also related to Sino-Soviet differences, especially in China's campaign against "modern revisionism" which is a veiled criticism against Soviet practice. Chinese Communist leaders initiated a number of mass campaigns to underscore their own road to socialism such as the "Great Leap Forward," the "Cultural Revolution," and the struggle against the Gang of Four. The Chinese linked these tumultuous domestic campaigns with their struggle against "capitalist restoration" and "modern revisionism." Such actions constituted China's rejection and criticism of the Soviet Union and seriously undermined Sino-Soviet relations.

Post-Mao Sino-Soviet Relations

The status of Sino-Soviet relations has remained largely unchanged, even with the death of Mao Zedong who ruled China for more than three decades. Anti-Sovietism has remained the main driving force behind Peking's foreign policy.

For one, Soviet leaders had viewed leadership changes in China as a key factor in improving Sino-Soviet relations. A Pravda article on January 16, 1976 signed by "I. Alexandrov" (a pseudonym for articles approved by the highest leadership) noted that Mao and his group were governing the Chinese people by "dictatorial and bureaucratic methods," and leading them astray to realize the "great Chinese nationalist aims." It added that the achievements of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries filled Mao and his colleagues with terror because "they still have not managed and never will manage to destroy genuine patriots" who were striving to return China "to a realistic policy on to the rails of scientific socialism, on to the path of friendship and brotherhood with the peoples of the socialist system."⁵

Mikhail S. Kapitsa, the head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Far East Department, told the Rome L'Espresso, "We are counting on the new leaders who will emerge after Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai. With them, we will be able to negotiate."⁶ In the wake of the American defeat in Indochina and the acceleration of the Soviet-

⁵ Quarterly Chronicle and Documentation (QCD), *The China Quarterly* (April-June 1976): 445.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

initiated detente in Europe, Peking intensified its anti-Soviet campaigns in 1975 and 1976. Soviet spokesmen in the mid-1970s noted that Moscow had to wait for a basic change in the composition of the Chinese leadership. Likewise, Moscow predicted that "healthy forces" would emerge in China after Mao's demise.⁷ On the other hand, a CPSU Central Committee letter warned that it should not be expected that the departure of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai would lead to changes in China's policy towards the Soviet Union, rather, that the Maoist-type "nationalist" and "chauvinist" regime in China would be of long duration.⁸

During the 25th CPSU Congress in February 1976, Soviet and foreign delegates attacked China's domestic and foreign policies but failed to agree on a common international position on the issue. Setting the general tone, L. Brezhnev asserted that "Maoism" would continue to be opposed and that the Soviet Union was willing to improve relations with China on the basis of peaceful coexistence. Brezhnev repudiated the Chinese notion of the "so-called Soviet threat...either on the West or the East." Instead, he identified "Maoism" as the source of war and claimed that China's policy was aimed openly against other socialist countries. Brezhnev also noted that should China revert to a policy which is "genuinely based on Marxism-Leninism, there will be an appropriate response from our side." In his words, "the ball is on the Chinese side."⁹

Mao Zedong's death on September 9, 1976 presented Moscow with a new opportunity for improving relations with Peking. Having consistently regarded Mao Zedong as the main instigator of Peking's anti-Soviet line, Moscow initiated a series of public gestures apparently designed to show China's post-Mao leaders that the Soviet Union was willing to seek an accommodation with China.

Meanwhile, Peking continued its scathing commentaries against Soviet "social imperialism" at home and abroad. In a message issued by the Central Committee, the CCP pledged to continue Mao Zedong's policies, especially in foreign affairs.¹⁰ The Chinese outrightly rejected condolence messages for the late Chairman Mao from the Soviet and other East European parties (except Rumania, Yugoslavia, and Albania) on the grounds that there are no interparty relations between

⁷ Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Policy After the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1967*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, Inc., 1978), p. 92.

⁸ Wolfgang Berner, ed., *The Soviet Union 1975-1976: Domestic Policy, Economics, Foreign Policy*, (London: C. Hurst & Company), p. 216.

⁹ QCD, CQ 66, p. 45; Harold C. Hinton, *The Sino-Soviet Confrontation: Implications for the Future*, (New York: Crane, Russak and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 38.

¹⁰ "Message to the Whole Party, the Whole Army and the People of All Nationalities Throughout the Country," *Peking Review*, 13 September 1976, p. 11. See also QCD, CQ 69 (March 1977): 204-205.

them and China.¹¹ At the same time, they responded politely and correctly to the friendly gestures the Soviets made on the purely governmental level.

Brezhnev sent an official message of condolence on Mao's death—the first CPSU message to be sent to China in a decade. He also congratulated Hua Guofeng on his appointment as the new Chinese Communist Party chairman in October.¹²

On the occasion of China's National Day on October 1, 1976, the Soviet Government sent a message to Peking which called for the normalization of relations based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence. A Pravda commentary on the same day noted that "there are no problems that cannot be solved" between the two countries. A Pravda article by "I. Alexandrov" surveyed Sino-Soviet relations in a non-polemical tone. It expressed the standard Soviet view on Soviet-Chinese relations, particularly on the first ten years of the People's Republic and claimed that the deterioration of mutual relations was through no fault of the Soviet side.¹³

Likewise, on the occasion of the Soviet Union's 59th anniversary on November 7, Peking sent greetings that included one fairly warm sentence—"The Chinese people have always cherished their revolutionary friendship with the Soviet people."¹⁴ Amidst the mutual exchange of accusations, the two countries have continued the practice of sending messages during their national days and other special occasions.

The removal of the four leftist Chinese Politburo members which included Mao's widow, Qiang Jing, in October 1976, did not affect China's stance towards the Soviet Union. The Chinese news agency, NCNA, continued publishing criticisms on Soviet "social imperialism" since the fall of the Gang of Four. Immediately after the Gang's arrest, Chinese authorities reiterated their anti-Soviet position. In a speech welcoming the premier of Papua New Guinea, Vice Premier Li Xiannian singled out the Soviet Union, the superpower that daily clamours about "detente and disarmament", as the main source of war. He accused the Soviet union of flaunting the banner of socialism and extending its arms for expansion in all parts of the world.¹⁵

Peking's first official response to Soviet gestures of reconciliation came in a November 15, 1976 speech by Li Xiannian at a banquet for an African president. Li accused Moscow of creating "false impres-

¹¹ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 24 September 1976, p. 5.

¹² Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 92.

¹³ QCD, *CQ* 69 (March 1977): 209.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

sions" of relaxation in Sino-Soviet relations in order to confuse world opinion. He stated that Moscow was engaging in "wishful thinking and daydreaming" about a Sino-Soviet reconciliation.¹⁶ Subsequently, the Chinese stepped up their attacks on a broad range of Soviet policies.

In May 1977, Moscow resumed its attack on China and for the first time explicitly criticized Chairman Hua Guofeng, Mao's successor. A Tass commentary of May 30 noted that the "methods of the new Peking leadership have dashed hopes that the death of Mao Zedong would bring positive changes" in China. Soviet press articles claimed that China was militaristic and sought a new war. Brezhnev, on June 6, blamed the new Chinese leadership for the failure to improve relations at the state level. In a rally commemorating Lenin's death anniversary, Zinyatin, the secretary of the Soviet Central Committee, criticized China's policies as running counter to the "vital interests of all people." It marked the first public attack against China by a prominent Soviet leader since the death of Mao Zedong.¹⁷

Brezhnev also accused the Chinese leadership of following a policy which is "openly directed against the interests of the majority of the socialist states." He declared that the Soviet leadership would continue "to wage a principled and relentless struggle against Maoism."¹⁸

The Soviet Union delivered a formal note of protest to the Chinese Embassy in Moscow on May 19. Li Xiannian responded by accusing the Russians of extending differences on matters of principle to state relations. He warned that the Chinese people would not be taken in by Soviet "soft and hard methods," the former referred to overtures after the death of Mao.¹⁹

Meanwhile, border talks were resumed on November 29, 1976. Leonid Ilyichev, the head of the Soviet delegation, arrived in Peking a day before and was met by Yu Chan, his Chinese counterpart. When he left Peking eight months ago, Ilyichev commented that he would return to China only if there was a good chance of substantial progress in the border talks. But the border talks remained deadlocked.²⁰ Peking noted that the talks remained deadlocked because

¹⁶ Passages like these in Li Xiannian's subsequent speeches on 15 November (Peking Review 47, November 9), 8 December (PR 51, December 17), and 21 December (PR 52, December 24) led to walk-outs by the envoys of the Soviet-bloc countries headed by Soviet Ambassador Tolstikov. Ibid., p. 210.

¹⁷ QCD, CQ 71 (July-September 1977): 664.

¹⁸ Berner, *Soviet Union*, p. 189.

¹⁹ QCD, CQ 71, pp. 664-665.

²⁰ QCD, CQ 69, p. 211.

Moscow refused to withdraw its troops from the disputed border regions.²¹

The Soviets expected the Chinese leadership to change its views towards Moscow following the death of Chairman Mao just as the Chinese had expected a new direction from the Soviet leadership after the fall of Khrushchev in 1964. If so, they were disappointed. Despite Soviet overtures following Mao's death, there was no significant improvement in Sino-Soviet relations.

On Peking's side, reasons for criticizing the Soviet Union are legion. In Hua Guofeng's words, "The Soviet leading clique has betrayed Marxism-Leninism. Restoring capitalism and enforcing fascist dictatorship at home while pushing hegemonism, perpetrating aggression and expansion abroad, it has brought about the degeneration of the Soviet Union which has become a social-imperialist country."²²

Hua Guofeng and the Sino-Soviet Conflict

The new Chinese Communist leadership under Hua Guofeng declared that in foreign affairs, it would follow Chairman Mao's "revolutionary line." At the eleventh CCP Congress in August 1977, this stance became official. In his political report, Chairman Hua restated and defended the theory of the three worlds and provided the framework with which China's relations were to be conducted.²³

Hua Guofeng restated China's position regarding the Sino-Soviet conflict:

The Soviet leading clique has betrayed Marxism-Leninism. Restoring capitalism and enforcing fascist dictatorship at home and pushing hegemonism and perpetrating aggression and expansion abroad, it has brought about the degeneration of the Soviet Union, which has become a social-imperialist country. Our debates with the clique on matters of principle will go on for a long time. We will, of course, continue to wage a tit for tat struggle against hegemonism. At the same time, we have always held that China and the Soviet Union should maintain normal state relations on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The Soviet leading clique has not shown one iota of good faith about improving state relations between the two countries. Not only has this clique made it impossible to achieve anything in the negotiations on the Sino-Soviet boundary question which have been dragging for eight years now, it has also whipped up one anti-China wave after another to extricate itself from its dilemmas at home and abroad and divert attention by making a feint to the east in order to attack in the West. It has been trying by hook or by crook to force us to change the Marxist-Leninist line laid by chairman Mao. This is pure daydream-

²¹ Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Policy*, p. 94.

²² See Hua Guofeng, "Political Report," pp. 23-57.

²³ *Ibid.*

ing. It is the Soviet leading clique and nobody else that has led Sino-Soviet relations "up in a blind alley." If it really has any desire to improve the state relations between the two countries, this clique should prove it by concrete deeds.²⁴

Hua also reminded everyone on the possibility of a Soviet invasion. Over the past years, Chinese leaders had played up the possibility of a Soviet attack. Thus, the Chinese people have been asked to "heighten their vigilance," "strengthen education for defense against nuclear attack," and "to mobilize the masses to dig tunnels deep, store grain everywhere and make adequate preparations against such an attack."²⁵ Moreover, Vice Premier Li Xiannian noted that while Russia was mainly interested in the West, it was essential for China to maintain vigilance and be ready to fight any time. He commented that the Chinese people did not intend to start any war but it could not be caught with its guard down.²⁶

Four Modernizations

At the Fourth National People's Congress in January 1975, Zhou Enlai called for the comprehensive modernization of China's industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense. Zhou Enlai noted that before the end of this century, China is "to accomplish the comprehensive modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology so that our national economy will be advancing in the front ranks of the world."²⁷ In striving to make China "a great and powerful socialist country," the Four Modernizations thrust is invariably related to the Chinese perception of the Soviet Union as the principal enemy of the moment.

The Fifth National People's Congress held in February 1978 confirmed the goal of modernization that the Chinese leadership has set to achieve: to make China a major economic power by the year 2000. Hua Guofeng, in his speech to the fifth NPC, specifically related the modernization drive to the threat posed by the Soviet Union:

Internationally, since the two hegemonist powers, the Soviet Union and the United States are locked in a fierce struggle for world domination, war is bound to break out sooner or later. The Soviet revisionists are bent on subjugating our country. We must race against time to strengthen ourselves economically and heighten our defense capabilities at top speed, for this is the only way to

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

²⁶ QCD, CQ 70 (April-June 1977): 460.

²⁷ Zhou Enlai, "Report on the Work of the Government" (Delivered on January 13, 1975, at the First Session of the Fourth National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China), in *Documents of the Fourth National People's Congress*, pp. 47-65.

cope effectively with possible social-imperialist and imperialist aggression against us. Domestically, speeding up socialist modernization in the above four fields is likewise highly important.²⁸

On February 24, 1978, (two days before the opening of China's fifth NPC), Moscow privately suggested that the two countries issue a joint statement to the effect that their mutual relations would be based on peaceful coexistence. On March 9, China rejected the Soviet proposal.²⁹ Tass complained of China's "negative stand" and noted that China had "repeated the unacceptable preliminary conditions it had advanced before." Hua Guofeng mentioned these conditions in his report to the NPC on February 26, which included the demand that Moscow honor the agreement for a mutual troop withdrawal from the disputed areas as agreed between Premiers Zhou Enlai and Kosygin in September 1969. Hua added that the Soviet forces in the Mongolian People's Republic should be withdrawn and that the situation regarding the Sino-Soviet borders should "revert to what it was in the early 1960s." Hua Guofeng held to the established line by saying that, if Moscow desired improved relations, it should prove its sincerity by deeds.³⁰ Hua further noted that "how Sino-Soviet relations will develop is entirely up to the Soviet side."³¹

The Chinese note of March 9 was a reply to the suggestion of the Soviet side that the two countries issue "a joint statement on the principles of mutual relations" and that "a meeting of the representatives of both sides" be held for this purpose. The Chinese letter stated that "responsibility for the deterioration of relations between our two countries to what they are today does not lie with the Chinese side; China is the victim." It also restated Peking's stand that "the differences of principle should not impede the maintenance of normal state relations between the two countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. And to this end it has made unremitting efforts."³²

The exchange of Sino-Soviet polemics continued unabated. On March 9, 1978, Pravda remarked that Peking's anti-Soviet propaganda was increasing "to help solve extremely complex internal problems" facing the post-Mao leadership. Pravda counted more than 100 articles which had "crudely distorted" Soviet domestic and foreign policy

²⁸ Hua Guofeng, "Unite and Strive," *Peking Review*, 10 March 1978, p. 14.

²⁹ See "Chinese Foreign Ministry's Note to the Soviet Embassy in China," *Peking Review*, 31 March 1978, pp. 17-18.

³⁰ Hua Guofeng, "Unite and Strive," p. 39. For the Soviet letter of February 24, 1978, see *Peking Review*, 31 March 1978, p. 18.

³¹ Hua Guofeng, "Unite and Strive," p. 39.

³² "Chinese Foreign Ministry's Note to the Soviet Embassy in China," *Peking Review*, 31 March 1978, pp. 17-18.

which had appeared in a Chinese newspaper in the first two months of 1978.³³

Moscow rejected all of the Chinese preconditions in a Pravda editorial of March 21. The editorial announced also Peking's rejection of the Soviet proposal of February 24; the demands were described an "unacceptable preliminary conditions" which the Chinese had presented earlier. On April 1, a Pravda editorial explicitly and vehemently denied the existence of any agreement between Zhou Enlai and Kosygin. It strongly criticized Peking's proposal for a mutual withdrawal of armed forces from the disputed areas. Furthermore, it accused the Chinese leaders of "deliberately whipping up" the border question for their "anti-Soviet chauvinistic aims."³⁴

The Pravda editorial in effect rejected the Chinese version as to what had been agreed between Zhou Enlai and Kosygin in 1969. It took particular exception to two of China's "preliminary conditions" for negotiating a settlement: "recognition of the existence of so-called 'disputed areas' on Soviet territory adjacent to the border," and "the withdrawal of armed forces from these areas." The editorial argued that these disputed areas had no legal foundation. And if Chinese demands were acceded to, the editorial said, the borders would be open along "a front stretching for thousands of kilometers; as a result of which the Soviet population would be left without any protection and defense, while Chinese forces would remain in the old frontiers and the Chinese authorities would be given the opportunity to 'develop' these areas."³⁵ With regard to Peking's demand for a Soviet military withdrawal from Mongolia, the leadership of the People's Republic of Mongolia informed Peking on April 12 that Soviet troops were stationed in the area by their own invitation and would stay as long as the "Chinese threat" continued.³⁶

For more than twenty years now, China has continued its criticisms against the Soviet Union. Under Hua Guofeng, Mao Zedong's short-lived successor, Soviet "social imperialism" has remained a principal theme in China's confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The Principal Enemy: Soviet "Hegemonism"

China's perception of the Soviet Union has changed radically, in the course of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Peking's earlier accusation of the rise of "modern revisionism" in the Soviet Union has been upgraded to the existence of Soviet "social imperialism" in the 1970s. The shift became clear in 1972 when China openly identified the

³³ QCD, CQ 74 (April-June 1978): 477.

³⁴ QCD, CQ 75 (July-September 1978): 714.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 714-715.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 715.

Soviet Union as its most dangerous and principal enemy and initiated a rapprochement with the United States as a major step towards the formation of an anti-Soviet alliance on the international level. Subsequently, Peking has concentrated in exposing what it terms the "hegemonic designs" of the Soviet Union.

Moreover, the concept of the Soviet Union as the most dangerous enemy enables China to justify a broad range of domestic and foreign policies. China has considered the Soviet Union as its most dangerous enemy for a number of reasons. First, the Soviet Union has surpassed the United States in military power, the latter having suffered badly in Vietnam. Second, the Soviet Union has adopted an offensive strategy while the United States has shifted to strategic defense. Lastly, the Soviet Union uses deceptive words to portray itself as the champion of socialism and national liberation, especially to third world countries.

From Peking's perspective, if the Soviet Union is indeed the most dangerous enemy and its military superiority is its main source of strength, then modernization in agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology remains a primary task for China today. Chinese Communist objectives, in its most succinct form, is epitomized by the late Premier Zhou Enlai's statement to the National People's Congress in January 1975 that China wants to build a powerful and modern socialist country by the end of this century. Notably, the Four Modernizations is based on the proposition that the development of the productive forces is the principal task in socialist construction. Moreover, Chinese leaders have openly acknowledged the need for a prolonged period of peace in order to build up their economy, technology, and armed forces—essential prerequisites in the pursuit of a prosperous and powerful China.

China's anti-Soviet thesis also argues for the development of closer relations with the United States, Japan, and Western Europe, as well as with third world countries. Thus, party-to-party relations have been subordinated to state-to-state ties with any government willing to agree with Peking on the overriding priority of opposing Soviet "hegemonism". On issues concerning relations among the major powers, security, or political development affecting the global configuration of military power, China's policies appear to be shaped above all by realpolitik considerations and based on a strategy designed to strengthen worldwide opposition to its major enemy, the Soviet Union. Thus, China's current insistence that Soviet "hegemonism" is the principal threat not only for China but also for the rest of the world. In the post-Mao era, the whole course of Sino-Soviet relations rests on such a perception.