CIT-4

(1)

Conflict on the Ussuri:

The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Dispute

James M. Baker
ORS 396b
9 April 1976

UNCLASSIFIED

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER CI 7T-4	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Conflict on the Ussuri: The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Dispute.		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Master of Arts Thesis 6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
7. AUTHOR(s) JAMES M. BAKER CAPTAIN, USAF		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s) Master's thesis
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS AFIT Student at the University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS AFIT/CI Wright-Patterson AFB OH 45433		12. REPORT DATE 9 April 1976 13. NUMBER OF PAGES 43 pages
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS(if different from Controlling Office) 12 43p.		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified 15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE

16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)

Approved for Public Release; Distribution Unlimited

14 AFIT-CI-7T-4

17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)

18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE AFR 190-17.

JERRAL F. GUESS, Captain, USAF
Director of Information, AFIT

19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)

Attached

DD FORM 1 JAN 73 1473 EDITION OF 1 NOV 65 IS OBSOLETE

012 200

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE (When Data Entered)

" The greedy paws of the European capitalists have reached out into China, and almost the first to do so was the Russian government which now swears to its 'unselfishness' ".

V. I. Lenin

1900

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
History of Border Formation	2
Background of the Current Border Dispute	9
The Fighting on Chenpao Island	24
The Claims	30
Chinese Motives	35
Bibliography	42

Introduction

In the early Spring of 1969, the world was stunned at the spectacle of two ' peace-loving, fraternal ' communist powers slugging it out over a tiny island in the frozen Ussuri River. What was the fighting all about? Did Chenpao Island (or Damansky Island as the Russians referred to it) have any special territorial value or was the bloodshed prompted by another issue of greater magnitude?

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the territorial aspect of the Sino-Soviet dispute and focus on the two military engagements that erupted along their northeastern boundary in 1969. The ultimate objective is to determine why the violence occured. To this end, the paper will present a short history of the northeastern border formation, a summary of the territorial issue in the developing Russo-Chinese rift, a description of the two military engagements on Chenpao Island, a brief insight into the frontier claims, and, finally, an analysis of Chinese motives.

History of Border Formation

During the last three centuries, Tsars, dynasties, political leaders and ideologies have all come and gone in the Far East, but the territorial dispute between Russia and China over their mutual boundaries continues. Border problems between the two countries date back into the early 17th century when Tsarist Russia first began expansion across Siberia toward Central Asia and the Pacific Ocean. Much of the land grabbed in the Far East by Russia during her imperialistic expansion belonged at one time or other to the Chinese Empire. In order to properly understand China's present territorial claims against the Russians along the northeastern frontier, it is necessary to examine briefly a series of " unequal " treaties signed between the two powers during this early period.

Beginning in the 1640s, Tsarist Russia was attracted to Siberia by the great natural wealth offered in the form of minerals, valuable furs, and abundant timber. Additionally, the Siberian and Central Asian region offered an attractive alternative to Russian expansionist ambitions which were being frustrated to the west by other major European powers. The Russian push into Asia was relentless and was accomplished initially by troops and traders rather than real settlers.

The first Russian moves into the Amur River Basin occured in 1643 when an expedition led by Vasilei Poyardov explored and

fought its way to the mouth of the Amur River in search of fertile valleys rumored to be in the area. Other exploratory expeditions followed over the next several years and bloody encounters often occured when the Russians sought tribute from native Tungus and Daurien tribes that were already paying tribute to the Manchus.[1] Despite these provocations, it was not until 1652 that the Manchu Dynasty was aroused to direct action against the encroaching Russians. Early that year a force of 2,000 Manchu warriors attacked a Russian encampment near the present-day city of Khabarovsk in the first recorded major battle between Russian and Chinese forces in Siberia. However, this was merely a prelude of things to come for over the next thirty years the Russians and Manchus would continue to clash in the Amur River Basin.

In 1683, the rate and persistence of Russian expansion in the Amur Basin provoked the Manchus to send large numbers of reinforcements to the contested region. Within two years, most of the Russian settlements in the lower Amur valley had been destroyed by the Chinese but sporadic fighting continued until the two governments agreed to negotiate a peace settlement. When Russian and Chinese representatives met in Nerchinsk in 1689, the Russians originally wanted the border to be drawn a-

---

[1] Tai Sung An, The Sino-Soviet Territorial Dispute (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973), p. 28-29.

long the Amur River but the Chinese had in mind something closer to Lake Baikal. The Chinese finally agreed to make the border close to Nerchinsk but the Russians still balked. The Chinese then surrounded Nerchinsk with 15,000 troops and the Russians, faced with an unfavorable military situation, finally agreed to the Chinese position.

On 27 August 1689, the Treaty of Nerchinsk was signed. The treaty was remarkable in historic terms for two reasons: first, it was the first treaty ever signed by China with a European power based on a concept of equality and, secondly, it formally delimited a common frontier between the two powers for the first time in history.

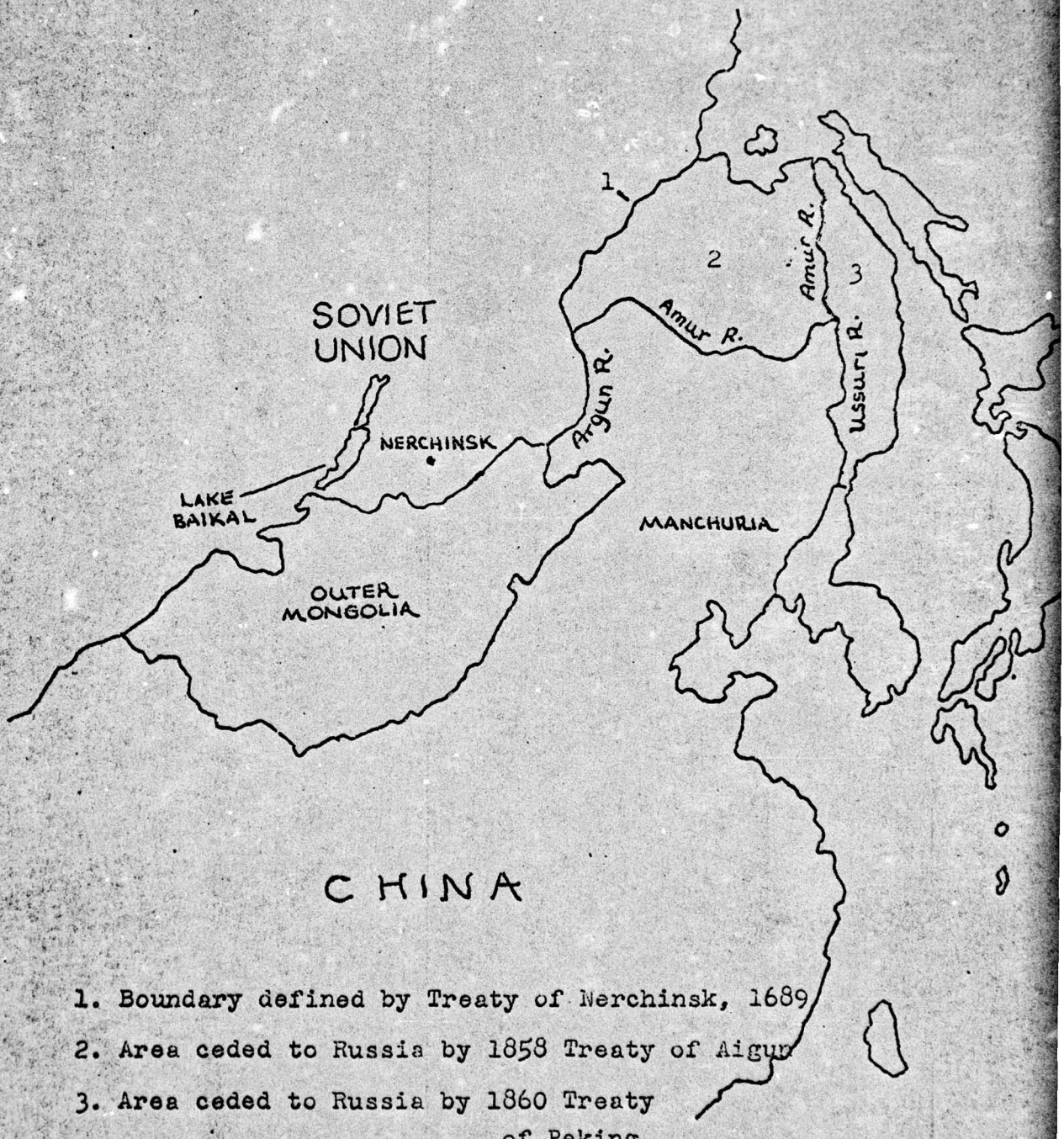
The treaty stipulated that the common border would extend from the Argun River in the west, continue along the Amur and then northward along the Shilka River to the Stanovoy Mountains. From here the boundary would continue to the east along the mountain range to the mouth of the Bay of Ud, on the Sea of Okhotsk. This allowed the entire Amur - Ussuri River Basin to remain in Chinese hands while Russia gained legal sovereignty over northeastern Siberia. China's previous claim to this Siberian wilderness was by virtue of its former possession by Genghis Khan and thus China considered 93,000 square miles of her territory had been lost.

The Sino-Russian border in the northeast remained essentially unchanged for the next 169 years until the mid-19th century when Russia's Tsar Nicholas I again encouraged the gradual resettlement of territory in China's backyard. Undoubtedly, Russia's renewed appetite was stimulated by the weakness China demonstrated in losing the Opium War to Great Britain (1839-1842). At any rate, the first clear violation of the 1689 Nerchinsk Treaty occured in 1850 when a Russian expedition established a fort at Nikolayevsk, near the mouth of the Amur River.[2] By 1853, the expanding Russian explorers had occupied important harbors in the Gulf of Tartary, established posts on Sakhalin Island, and during the course of the next three years even entrenched themselves along the entire length of the Amur River. Although the Chinese government resented Russia's de facto control of the Amur, they were in no position, militarily, to challenge it. Russia had 16,000 infantrymen, 5,000 cavalrymen, and 1,000 artillerymen stationed along the Mongolian and Manchurian borders. China, beset and weakened by internal rebellions and problems with France and Britain, was unable to forcefully resist reccgnition of Russia's conquest.

The Treaty of Aigun, signed on 28 May 1858, revised the northeast Russo-Chinese frontier by establishing the Amur and

---

2 W. A. Douglas Jackson, The Russo-Chinese Borderlands (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co. Inc, 1968), p. 46.



1. Boundary defined by Treaty of Nerchinsk, 1689
2. Area ceded to Russia by 1858 Treaty of Aigun
3. Area ceded to Russia by 1860 Treaty of Peking

Ussuri Rivers as the new boundary. In other words, China was forced to cede to Tsarist Russia the northern part of the Amur River Valley, an area of approximately 185,000 square miles which had been previously denied the Russians under the old Nerchinsk Treaty. The Russians originally desired the border to extend along the length of the Ussuri River but the 150,000 square mile area east of the river was finally placed under the joint administration of both nations.[3]

Tne next year, in 1859, Nikolai Muraveyev, Russian Governor-General of Eastern Siberia and chief negotiator of the Aigun Treaty, ordered stations to be built along the Ussuri River. Clashes with Chinese troops occured and the situation remained tense until 1860 when China once more became preoccupied by the threat of invasion from Fance and Britain. Russia exploited China's weakness again and forced another territorial settlement on the hapless Manchu government - the Treaty of Peking. Signed on 14 November 1860, the treaty gave the Russians the vast area east of the Ussuri River which had been left under joint administration by terms of the old Aigun treaty.[4] When combined with the 1858 Treaty of Aigun, the Peking treaty

---

3 As a concession to the Manchus, a very small enclave on the north bank of the Amur which contained several Manchu villages was allowed to remain under Chinese sovereignty " in perpetuity ". To the Russians, however, "perpetuity" only lasted until 1900 when the Tsarist government exploited the turmoil of the Boxer Rebellion to seize and annex the area. Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 37.

4 This treaty allowed the Russians to acquire an ice-free, deep water port on the Pacific called Vladivostok which is now the capital of an area known as the Soviet Maritime Province.

established the basic northeastern boundary still in existence today between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China.

Background of the Current Border Dispute

The question of borderlands and lost territories did not create the Sino-Soviet split, but as relations grew worse the dissension seemed to focus increasingly on the existence of frontier problems. Without delving into the complete history of the break, the following section will attempt to highlight the decline in Russo-Chinese relations with particular attention to the border issue. Hopefully, it will put the events of March, 1969, in better perspective.

When Mao Tse-tung and his peasant-oriented Communist party came to power in October of 1949, he owed practically nothing to the Soviet Union. In fact, one could almost say that the Chinese Communists achieved power inspite of the Soviets.[5] Nevertheless, when Mao assumed control of the country in 1949, he was confronted with an immediate crisis in rebuilding a nation torn by many years of external aggression and civil war. The only country willing and able to supply the aid required was the Soviet Union. So, in December, Mao journeyed to Moscow and, after a lengthy delay, sign-

---

5 Since the beginning of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921, Russian advice had often been faulty, self-serving, and sometimes nearly disastrous. The Kremlin even tried to maintain normal relations with the Kuomintang government until the late 1940s. Russia's only significant aid to Mao was in turning over surrendered Japanese armaments to his forces following Japan's defeat in 1945.

ed the 30 Year Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. Without going into great detail, the treaty turned out to be nearly as "unequal" as those mentioned in the previous section. Stalin insisted on special rights such as (1) joint administration of the Changchun Railway, (2) the use of naval facilities at Port Arthur, and (3) the formation of joint-stock companies to exploit China's natural resources. Mao even had to acknowledge the independence of Outer Mongolia, an area he once told Edgar Snow would automatically revert to Chinese control upon his victory over Chiang Kai-chek.[6] The amount of money Mao received for these concessions, about $300 million, was actually not very much considering China's great size and the fact that the country was emerging from a long period of destructive war. Supposedly, the loan was only one tenth the amount Mao had asked for.[7]

Harrison E. Salisbury described the situation very well saying:

" Imagine! China had just got the international capitalists off her back, and now Moscow came along and took their place! The new companies were just like the old European capitalist concessionaries - no better, maybe worse. And these were China's communist comrades who were exploiting her. "[8]

---

6 Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 61.

7 David Floyd, Mao Against Khrushchev (New York: Praeger, 1964), p. 13-14.

8 Harrison E. Salisbury, War Between Russia and China (New York: Norton & Co., 1969), p. 43.

Nevertheless, Mao respected Stalin's position as leader of the world Communist movement and desparately needed Soviet military, diplomatic, economic, and technical aid. Accordingly, he chose not to disrupt their unity at this point by raising the question of territory and boundaries. In fact, the two countries agreed to cooperate along the northeastern frontier where the Amur River became known as " the river of friendship " and trade, in general, flourished along not only the Amur but the Argun and Ussuri Rivers as well.[9]

The Korean war erupted less than a year after the founding of the People's Republic of China. Instigated by Stalin, the war soon required the intervention of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to offset the American response. The Chinese suffered severely in both men and material during the course of the war but were required, nevertheless, to repay the Soviets for all the military aid they received during the hostilities. Furthermore, the Soviets used the war as an excuse to delay the withdrawal of their troops from Port Arthur in 1952 as had been previously agreed upon. It wasn't until 1955 that Russian troops were completely withdrawn from China - ten years after they entered to fight the Japanese and five years after Mao's victory over the Kuomintang.[10]

---

[9] Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 67.

[10] The Changchun Railway was transferred to Chinese control in 1952 and the joint-stock companies were dissolved in 1954. Jackson, Borderlands, p. 81.

During Nikita Khrushchev's first visit to China in 1954, Mao apparently brought up the question of Outer Mongolia but Khrushchev refused to discuss it. The Soviets later claimed that Peking had demanded Soviet permission to reincorporate Outer Mongolia into China on the basis that it was not really an independent country.[11] This represented China's first known attempt at discussing territorial questions with the Russians.

During this same year, a book was published in Peking containing an illustration of China still owning those territories in Asia lost to the Russians over a century before.[12] Officially, the Chinese government disassociated itself from the text but it continued to circulate nevertheless.

So, to say that even the early years of the Russo-Chinese alliance were somewhat strained would be highly accurate. Later, Khrushchev was to admit that Stalin was responsible for serious strains in Sino-Soviet relations between 1949 and his death in 1953. Supposedly they were on the verge of a full split in 1950 over the concessions Stalin extracted from Mao.[13]

---

11 New York Times, 10 September 1964, p. 3.

12 Dennis J. Doolin, Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict. Documents and Analyses (Hoover Institution Studies: 7, Stanford, 1965), p. 16, 43.

13 New York Times, 6 June 1956, p. 1, 3.

The Sino-Soviet alliance reached its harmonious zenith between Stalin's death in 1953 and the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956. But relations were not so rosey that Peking didn't feel it necessary to consolidate firm control over the borderlands of Northeastern Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and Sinkiang Province following the elimination of Soviet military presense in 1955. Intensive settlement, colonization, and Sinification were practiced along all border areas contiguous to Russia. According to an official Peking statement, over 100,000 demobilized soldiers of the PLA settled along the Amur, Ussuri, and Sungari Rivers since the early 1950s.[14]

Overt difficulties between the two countries are believed to have originated during the 20th Congress of the CPSU held in February of 1956. It was during this time that Khrushchev read the secret Central Committee report on Stalin's " crimes " and announced a policy of " de-Stalinization ". The new features of Mr. Khrushchev's report, stated briefly, included his rejection of the theory of the inevitability of war under capitalism and his acceptance of the possibility of peaceful transition to socialism. Although these theories, along with his denunciation of Stalin, were later to become the subject of bitter controversy with Peking, they

---

14 Peking Review, 10 October 1969, p. 4.

were not publicly questioned at the time by the Chinese delegation. In fact, the Chinese issued a statement on 05 April 1956 endorsing the criticism of Stalin.[15]

From this point on, with few exceptions, relations between the two communist giants seemed to unravel with building momentum. An Amur Basin development scheme was signed in 1956 in order to benefit industry and agriculture along the entire Sino-Soviet far eastern borderlands but the agreement was never implemented.[16] Also, a secret nuclear sharing agreement signed in October of 1957 was to provide Soviet scientific information and technical materials to enable China to build her own nuclear weapons.[17] It, too, would fail to be implemented.

The second known Chinese attempt to raise border questions occured during January, 1957, when Chou En-lai met with Khrushchev in Peking. Chou was frustrated in his initiative, however, for " he could not get a satisfactory answer from him (Khrushchev) at that time ".[18]

Khrushchev's de-Stalinization program in 1956, followed by his criticism of Peking's peasant communes in 1958 and

---

15 Keesing's Research Report, The Sino-Soviet Dispute (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 10.

16 Jackson, Borderlands, p. 90.

17 Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p.12.

18 Doolin, Territorial Claims, p. 14.

1959 prompted Chinese leaders to make clear that the new China " was not obliged to follow in the footsteps of the Russians".[19]

In addition to these problems, the alliance was weakened by the relatively austere nature of Soviet financial and economic aid to China. Although the exact amount of Soviet assistance is unknown, it is estimated to have been approximately $2.2 billion between 1949 and 1957.[20] Not exactly pocket change, but then again Moscow has made larger loans to the non-communist countries of Egypt and Iraq.[21] Plus, if one considers the fact that Russia previously had raped Manchuria of industry worth $2 billion and confiscated $3 billion in bullion and $850 million in currency, then the $2 billion in subsequent aid pales drastically in comparison.[22]

In the summer and autumn of 1959, a series of developments brought differences between the communist giants to a head. On 20 June 1959, the Soviet Union unilaterally repudiated the secret nuclear sharing pact of 1957. This policy reversal was deeply resented by the Chinese who later charged that Russia's repudiation was intended " as a gift for the

---

19 Robert C. North, " The Sino-Soviet Alliance ", The China Quarterly, No. 1, (Jan-Mar, 1960), p. 56.

20 Jackson, Borderlands, p. 114.

21 Ibid., p. 114.

22 Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 61-63.

Soviet leader to take to Eisenhower when visiting the U.S. in September. [23]

Later in the summer, in August, the Chinese and Indians skirmished along their mutual border. A month later the Soviet press reacted by expressing regret over the " deplorable " frontier incident. Later, Teng Hsiao-ping claimed it was then that the internal differences between the parties was brought into the open. [24]

In April of 1960, the Chinese party made public for the first time its ideological differences with the Soviet party. In a series of articles entitled " Long Live Leninism ", the Chinese took exception with many Soviet positions, two of which concerned the danger of war and peaceful transition to socialism as outlined at the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956. [25] In reply, the Russians proposed an international meeting to resolve their differences and the Chinese accepted. To say that the meeting, which convened in June, was counterproductive would be a mild understatement for tempers reportedly flared often with Khrushchev attacking Mao as " an ultra-leftist, ultra-dogmatist, indeed a left-revisionist! " [26]

---

[23] Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 19.

[24] Floyd, Mao Against Khrushchev, p. 374-375.

[25] For a full outline of the differences see the Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 25-26.

[26] Ibid., p. 27.

Less than a month later the Chinese government was informed that all Soviet technicians working in China would be withdrawn by August. This unilateral decision by Russia's leaders struck a devastating blow at a Chinese economy already ravaged by a period of great natural disasters. According to later reports from Peking, 343 contracts were cancelled and 257 projects of scientific and technical cooperation with the Soviets came to a halt.[27]

For nearly ten years following their rise to power on the mainland, the Chinese Communists voiced no public border complaints although privately the issue was broached several times. As relations disintegrated further during the 1960s, however, the two powers became increasingly nationalistic in their actions towards one another and the territorial issue began to emerge prominently from a field of numerous ideological differences. In a sense, it almost took on a life of its own.

The Caribbean missile crisis of October, 1962, provided the backdrop for the public injection of the frontier issue into the Sino-Soviet rift. Irritated over Peking's charges of adventurism and capitulationism in his handling of the crisis, Khrushchev saw fit to publicly remind the Chinese that they still tolerated remnants of colonialism (Kong Kong and Macao) in their own backyard. The obvious inference was that

---

[27] Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 27-29.

the Chinese were themselves engaging in capitulationism.

Furious at Khrushchev's insinuation, the Chinese retaliated by claiming the old border treaties signed between Tsarist Russia and China were unequal and were thus subject to revision. The editorial broadside ended with this profound question:

" In raising questions of this kind, do you intend to raise all the questions of unequal treaties and have a general settlement? " 28

Obviously, two of the treaties Peking had in mind were the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Treaty of Peking which shaped the present northeastern frontier.

A few months later, in July of 1962, Mao voiced his own opinion in an interview with a visiting Japanese Socialist delegation. He said, in part:

" About a hundred years ago, the area to the east of Baikal became Russian territory and since then Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Kamchatka, and other areas have been Soviet territory. We have not yet presented our account for this list." 29

Border problems between the Chinese and Indians also flared up again during October and November of 1962. The Chinese could not help but notice that they received zero public support from the Soviets over their dispute with India. But, at this point, the Chinese should not have expected their willingness to militarily rectify a border dispute to bring support from an increasingly anxious Kremlin.

---

28 Doolin, Territorial Claims, p. 42.

29 Ibid., p. 43.

Problems in Sinkiang Province surfaced again during 1962 as Soviet intrigue and propaganda provoked a mass exodus of minority tribesmen across the Chinese border into Russia. Peking's attempts to halt the defections led to riots, deaths, and widespread arrests. This was the first major border incident between the two nations and prompted the Chinese to close down Soviet consulates in the area and accuse Moscow of " large-scale subversion ".[30]

The Soviets hurled charges back at Peking claiming the Chinese were responsible for the " systematic violation of Soviet frontiers since 1960 " and no less than " 5,000 violations in 1962 alone." [31] The Kremlin further accused the Chinese of illegally trying to annex disputed territory at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers and threatened a vigorous rebuff if violations continued.

Despite a Soviet appeal for more unity, public polemics continued through 1963. In 1964, the Chinese openly advocated a split in the international communist movement saying:

" . . . like everything else, the international working class movement tends to divide itself in two. " 32

But later in the year, the Chinese agreed to discuss

---

30 Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 73.

31 William E. Griffith, The Sino-Soviet Rift (Cambridge, The M.I.T. Press, 1964), p. 174-176.

32 Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 62-63.

the border issue in secret with the Soviets on the deputy foreign minister level. After six months, the negotiators had reportedly reached agreement in principle and higher level negotiations were to begin in Moscow the following October. At this time, however, the Chinese apparently backed out and refused to continue the talks any further.

The border issue then hit the front pages again in both party newspapers with the Soviet press describing China's acquisition of Sinkiang Province in the 18th century as a " forcible enslavement of the peoples and subjugation to a most severe national-colonial yoke." Strong words indeed because for Marxists to state that a people are subject to " colonial " rule, commented the New York Times, is to mark them as candidates for national liberation!33 The Chinese apparently arrived at the same conclusion for substantial troop reinforcements were sent to seal off her northwestern frontier.34

The most virulent criticisms imaginable spewed forth from both sides until Khrushchev's removal from power in October, 1964. An uneasy truce set in for several weeks but was soon shattered by Chinese charges that the Kremlin's new lea-

33 New York Times, 14 September 1964, p. 16.
34 Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 79.

ders were implementing "Khrushchevism without Khrushchev."[35] Bickering continued over the Vietnam war and Sino-Indian relations, among other things, through 1965. Then, in March of 1966, the Chinese rejected an invitation to the 23rd Congress of the CPSU in a statement which accused the Russians of "going farther and farther down the road of revisionism, splitism, and great-power chauvinism; pursuing U.S.-Soviet collaboration for the domination of the world; and actively trying to build a ring of encirclement around Socialist China."[36]

In a letter sent to other communist parties early in 1966, the Soviets accused China of provoking the border conflict. In reply, Peking alleged the Soviets had initiated over 5,000 incidents between July of 1960 and the end of 1965, had concentrated troops on the Chinese frontier, and had conducted military manuevers which presupposed China as the enemy.[37]

As the Maoist Cultural Revolution spread through China in late 1966, relations between the Soviet and Chinese parties sank even further. Moscow claimed two million Chinese took part in mass demonstrations along the northeastern frontier in support of Peking's territorial claims during October. China was also accused of firing on Soviet ships plying the Amur River.[38] Soviet troops were reportedly required to remove Chinese squat-

---

[35] Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 76.
[36] Ibid., p. 88.
[37] Ibid., p. 113.
[38] Ibid., p. 113.

ters from disputed islands in the Amur River near Khabarovsk[39] and, needless to say, earlier agreements of cooperation along these river systems collapsed completely during the year.

On the northwestern frontier events were just as precarious. More Moslem minorities were reported to have fled into the Soviet Union where they were recruited into a Soviet-sponsored guerrilla army that made 5,000 raids into Sinkiang Province during 1966.[40]

The rhetoric exchanged during 1966 and 1967 was not only absurd, it was far in excess of that normally found in relations between states not at war. Chinese insults hurled at Soviet leaders ofter compared them with Hitler, Tsar Nicholas II, filthy revisionist swine, the Ku Klux Klan, and even " a few flies freezing to death in the whirling snow." [41] Demonstrations of unprecedented violence took place at embassies in both countries and border incidents multiplyed at an incredible rate. The Soviets, alarmed at the seemingly irrational behavior of the Chinese, increased their border guard force from 230,000 to 250,000.[42]

During 1967, border incidents on the Ussuri River exploded to the forefront with reports of " clashes " during Janua-

---

39 Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 85.

40 The Evening Bulletin, (Philadelphia), 31 January 1967, p. 16.

41 The Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 96-98.

42 Thomas W. Robinson, The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute (Santa Monica: Project Rand, 1970), 29.

ry and December.[43] The incident in January occured on Chenpao Island, the scene of future bloody encounters. Numerous other violations were recorded by the Chinese on nearby islands north and south of Chenpao.

In August of 1968 the Soviet Union and other East European forces invaded Czechoslovakia to suppress the liberal Dubcek regime. Chou En-lai described the action as " the most barefaced and typical specimin of fascist power politics displayed by the Soviet revisionist clique against its so-called allies."[44] The Chinese were quick to realize that Brezhnev's policy of " limited sovereignty " in curbing dissident allies could very easily be applied against themselves. More Chinese troops were rushed to the border areas in case of trouble. And trouble, indeed, was just around the corner.

---

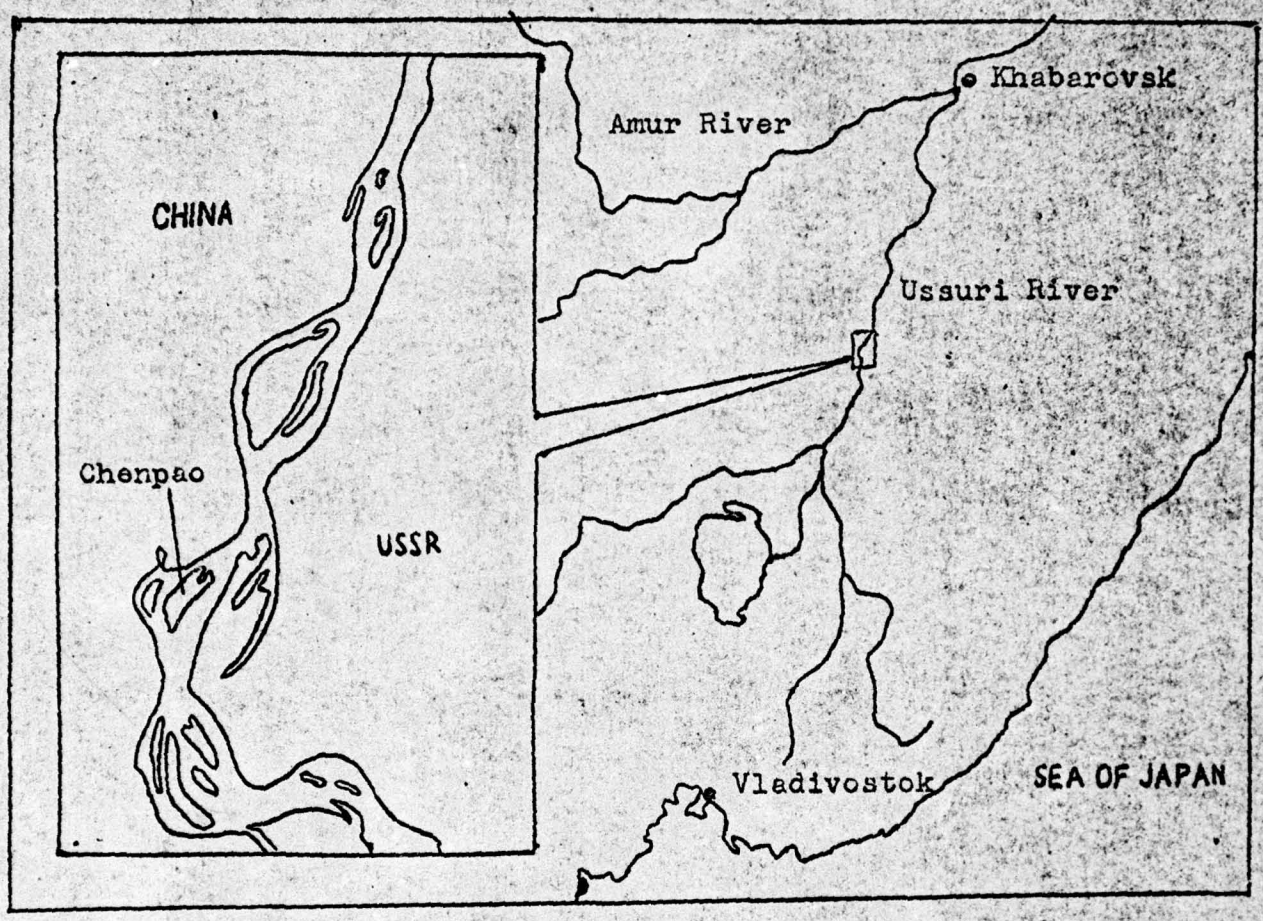
[43] Yuri Dmitriyev, " Far Away on the Border ", CDSP, Vol. 21, No. 11, 2 April 1969.

[44] Keesing's Report, Sino-Soviet Dispute, p. 105.

The Fighting on Chenpao Island

The Russians claimed that what transpired that cold morning of 2 March 1969 was a simple case of premeditated murder. The Chinese, for a variety of reasons, did not elaborate much on details of the fighting but claimed they had acted in self-defence when a Soviet force, with armored support, opened fire on a Chinese guard unit. Each side predictably blamed the other and the only thing really verifiable was that the long-standing territorial dispute had just been escalated.

Chenpao Island was hardly, of itself, worth spilling blood over. Situated in the Ussuri River about 180 miles southwest of Khabarovsk, the island is completely frozen much of the year. In size, measuring one mile long by a half mile wide, Chenpao is small by any standards. Although it's predominately forested, there are open areas and boggy marshes along both sides. The soil is not hospitable to agriculture and during the Spring thaw the isle is often flooded to some extent. Neither Soviet nor Chinese inhabit the island although both sides have apparently done logging there and Chinese fishermen have occasionally used it as a place to dry their nets. Neither side of the river is populated to any degree. At the time in question, the Ussuri River was still frozen solid making it possible to walk or drive heavy vehicles across to the island.



Chenpao Island: Scene of March 1969 Battles

Trying to determine exactly what happened that month on Chenpao is difficult because many of the participants were killed during the course of the fighting. The Chinese, as previously mentioned, have not provided much detail on their version of what happened so most of the following narrative comes from a combination of Russian sources summarized in a Rand Corporation report.[45]

During the early morning hours of 2 March, about 300 mixed border guards and regular PLA troops in white camouflage walked across the ice to Chenpao, dug into fortified positions and then laid down for the night. At approximately 11:00 a.m., another small group of Chinese began to walk toward the island shouting Maoist slogans as they came. Soviet border guards, under the command of Senior Lieutenant Ivan Ivanovich Strelnikov observed the rather boisterous Chinese and headed for the island in two armored cars to meet them. Arriving on or near the island, Lieutenant Strelnikov and seven or eight of his subordinates left the armored vehicles and strode out to warn the Chinese against trespassing as they had done so often in the past. Following Russian regulations, the Soviet troops reportedly had their weapons strapped across their chests in a non-threatening manner. As the Russian commander began to

---

45 See Thomas W. Robinson, The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute (Santa Monica: Project Rand, 1970). Corroborating information can be found in Gerard Corr's The Chinese Red Army and Tai Sung An's The Sino-Soviet Territorial Dispute.

demand their evacuation, the front row of unarmed Chinese fell aside exposing a second row which opened fire on the unsuspecting Russians with submachine guns. The Russian lieutenant and most of his comrads were killed immediately. Simultaneously, the 300 Chinese that had previously moved onto the island under cover opened fire on the remaining Russian troops from their prepared positions. Light artillery support from the Chinese bank also opened up on the outnumbered Soviets. During the melee that followed, the Chinese reportedly captured and summarily executed nineteen Soviet prisoners. What remained of the badly mauled Soviets attempted to fight back under the direction of Junior Sergeant Yuri Babinski.

Meanwhile, Soviet troops from another nearby border post had witnessed the engagement and set out to provide help. Arriving on the scene in an armored car, Senior Lieutenant Bubenin attempted to divide Chinese fire but was disabled when his vehicle was hit by rocket fire. Running to another vehicle, he directed the Soviet defense as each side charged the other. After a while, the Russians claim they managed to force the remaining Chinese to evacuate their positions and return to the west bank of the river.

The battle lasted about two hours and resulted in heavy losses for the Russians - 31 dead and 14 wounded. The Chinese also suffered casualties but released no exact figures. Both sides vacated the island claiming victory.

Approximately two weeks passed before fighting erupted again but this time, on 15 March, the engagement was much larger in every respect. Again, both sides laid blame on the other. The Russians claimed that a routine early morning patrol uncovered a Chinese force which had infiltrated the island the previous night. Peking claimed, however, that the Soviets attacked a group of Chinese border guards with a large tank force. Whatever ignited the hostilities, the battle began in earnest around 10:00 a.m. with an exchange of mortar and artillery fire. Following an intense barrage, the Chinese reportedly launched an assault with about 2,000 troops and almost succeeded in gaining control of Chenpao. The Soviets, supposedly outnumbered ten to one, raked Chinese lines with machine gun fire from armored cars as they withdrew. After allowing the Chinese to advance well onto the island, the Soviets then launched a massive counterattack supported by numerous tanks.

At approximately 1:00 p.m., recently arrived Russian artillery opened up on Chinese positions as much as four miles inland. Enjoying superior equipment and apparently employing better tactics, the Soviets, after several attempts, finally broke through Chinese lines. Retreating to the west bank, the Chinese were able to evacuate their dead and wounded indicat-

ing that the withdrawal was at least orderly.

By 7:00 p.m., the battle was over. Almost nine hours had elapsed since the fighting erupted and the casualty toll was much higher than that of the March 2nd engagement. The Russians lost approximately 60 men, including their local border post commander Colonel D. I. Leonov. Chinese casualties reportedly were about 800 killed and wounded. An enormous figure, almost certainly inflated somewhat, yet entirely possible given the size of the forces involved and the length of the engagement.

The Claims

This section of the paper will not be particularly detailed due to the fact that the actual legalities of island ownership have little bearing on either the border controversy as a whole or the 1969 border clash on the Ussuri River. If there existed any honest desire on the part of Peking to settle the frontier issue, it could have done so long ago.[46] What does exist on the part of Peking is an attempt to use the border dispute as a propaganda tool against the Soviet Union. By keeping the territorial issue alive, China can continually portray the Soviets as the colonial successors of the Tsars while arousing strong anti-Russian sentiment for use as a unifying factor within China.[47] With that concept in mind, the following pages will summarize the legal claims as they pertain to the overall boundary issue and to Chenpao Island in particular.

The two communist powers have long agreed on the desirability of a new, comprehensive border treaty. They also agree that such a treaty would involve only minor adjustments, mainly affecting riverine islands. The stumbling block was mostly Chinese insistance that Moscow admit the " inequality " of the old 19th century treaties before a new treaty could be

---

[46] Before the Sino-Soviet border negotiations of 1964 were broken off, China had already displayed a spirit of compromise in concluding new boundary agreements with Burma, Outer Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. India and Russia were the only ones left. Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 81.

[47] For more details see Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 70-80.

signed. Russia, distrusting Chinese intentions, refused but proposed instead a new treaty which would effectively supercede the old. Without the admission of inequality first, the Chinese would not agree.

Another aspect of the argument concerned Peking's contention that conditions, i.e. China's government, had changed and thus the old treaties were invalid. In international law, this legal position is referred to as " rebus sic standibus." The Soviet reply was founded in the concept of " pacta sunt servanda ", that treaties retain their validity until explicitly altered by the treaty signatories. In international law the decision always goes to the latter contention.[48]

China did not rest her case, however, and introduced early Soviet policy statements in support of her claim. Following the succesful 1917 revolution in Russia, bolshevik leaders were eager to disassociate themselves from former Tsarist policies. On 25 July 1919, the Soviet Deputy Commissar of Foreign Affairs, L. M. Karakhan, issued a declaration renouncing the " unequal " treaties and repudiating all Soviet claims to lands taken away from China by the Tsars. The declaration stated, in part:

" We are marching to free the people from the yoke of

---

[48] The standard work on the subject is Chesney Hill, The Doctrine of " Rebus Sic Standibus " in International Law, University of Missouri Studies, No. 11, 1934.

military force, of foreign money, which is crushing the life and the people of the East, and principally of the people of China . . . The Soviet Government has renounced all the conquests made by the Tsarist Government which took away from China Manchuria and other territories. The population of these territories shall decide for themselves to which country they would like to belong. " 49

An even stronger, more explicit statement was issued on 27 September 1920, when the Karakhan Manifesto declared, in part:

" The Government of the Russian Socialist Soviet Republics declares null and void all treaties concluded with China by the former Government of Russia, renounces all seizures of Chinese territory and all Russian concessions in China, and restores to China, without compensation and forever, all that had been predatorily seized from her by the Tsar's Government and the Russian bourgeoisie. " 50

In later negotiations, however, the Russians appeared to have second thoughts on the issue and backed away from their previous generosity. Today, the Soviets have great difficulty in explaining the great inconsistencies between their actions and statements. But it never hurts to try and, who knows, someone might believe you. It was doubtlessly in this spirit that V. Khvostov attempted to reject Chinese territorial claims based on the Karakhan statements. Writing in the Soviet publication, International Life, in 1965 he stated that unequal treaties were indeed abrogated by Soviet leaders after the Bolshevik Revolution, but these treaties were not

---

49 For the full English text of the Karakhan Declaration, see The China Year Book, 1924, ed. by H. G. W. Woodhead (Peking and Tientsin, 1924), p. 868-870.

50 Ibid., p. 870-872.

concerning Russian-Chinese frontiers. Rather, they referred to those imposed on China by Imperial Japan.[51]

Perhaps sensing later that more support was needed, Pravda carried a government statement dated 29 March 1969, saying:

" Following the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia, the Soviet Republic solemnly renounced the unequal and secret treaties with China, Tsarist Russia's spheres of influence in China, extraterritorial rights and consular jurisdiction . . . The nullification of the above-mentioned treaties was made official by the Agreement of General Principles . . . of May 31, 1924. This agreement did not consider Russian-Chinese treaties defining the state border to be among the unequal or secret agreements. There was no talk of their being annulled or revised. "[52]

As to the dispute along the northeastern border in particular, the Chinese refer directly to the 1860 Treaty of Peking in which only the land east of the Ussuri River was ceded to Russia. No mention was made of the riverine islands. Peking thus bases its claim to Chenpao and many other such islands on the Thalweg principle which states that in cases of riverine boundaries, the middle of the main channel or strongest downstream current forms the boundary. The problem here is that the main channel of rivers such as the Ussuri, which are prone to flooding, often change location, thus changing the relative location of many islands to the main channel.

---

51 V. M. Khostov, International Life, No. 10, October, 1965, cited in John Gittings, Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 164-166.

52 Pravda, 30 March 1969, cited in Harold C. Hinton, " Conflict on the Ussuri ", Problems of Communism, Vol. XX, Jan-Apr 1971, p. 56.

The Soviets refused to accept this argument because to do so meant they would have to relinquish claim to about 600 of 700 islands in the present river system, including Chenpao.[53] Instead, the Russians offered to use a 1:1,000,000 scale map that accompanied the 1860 Peking Treaty as the basis for negotiation. China refused the offer claiming the map scale much too small from which to determine detail and then reiterated their position based on the Thalweg principle. At this point the discussions deadlocked.

[53] Robinson, Sino-Soviet Border Dispute, p. 14.

Chinese Motives

Even given the magnitude of mutual hate that existed between Russia and China, there is probably no single causative factor which would adequately explain Peking's decision to initiate a serious border incident with so formidable an adversary. The best that can be done under the circumstances is to analize the various possibilities and attempt to find the most plausible motives.

Of the two incidents, that of 15 March is by far the easier to explain. Having been humiliated during the earlier engagement of 2 March, Moscow almost certainly was after revenge. Despite Soviet protestations of innocense, there seems to be general agreement that the Russians were the first to pull the trigger during the second incident. The ferocity of the Soviet assault would lead one to believe that tactical positioning and timing had been planned in advance. Aside from teaching the upstart Chinese a lesson, the Kremlin may have anticipated a fringe benefit if they were also able to strengthen the hand of more moderate Chinese elements during the upcoming Ninth Party Congress in Peking.

As for the first battle on 2 March, motives become much more difficult to pinpoint accurately, partly because the Chinese made so little comment on the subject. In addressing the issue, it would probably be expedient to first discuss the pos-

sibility that the incident occured strictly by chance or accident - the result of a misunderstanding during a confrontation of patroling border guards. If this was the case, the Soviets may have claimed " ambush " simply to justify why they emerged decidedly on the short end of the score. Certainly the high state of tension which existed along the northeastern border in 1969 could have provided the setting for such a chance encounter. And yet, it is probable that the Chinese would have given a more detailed account of what happened if they had indeed acted in self-defense or been involved in a misunderstanding. It also seems unlikely that the Soviets would have been so morally outraged had they not sincerely believed themselves the victims of Chinese aggression.[54]

If one then discounts the likelihood of accident, the next step is to determine whether the decision originated on the local or national level. Unfortunately, the administrative situation in China is not one that we have a great deal of information on, however we can assume that local frontier guards had the authority to defend against armed incursions without the necessity of contacting Peking for instructions. Such flexibility is decidedly within normal military procedure.

---

54 Massive anti-Soviet demonstrations were staged in various parts of China, but they were nowhere near as violent as the attack on the Chinese embassy in Moscow by a rock-throwing mob. Nor was there anything on the Chinese side comparable to the Soviet Union's highly unusual move, via diplomatic channels, to explain its case against Peking to the West German government in Bonn, and presumably to other governments as well. Hinton, "Conflict on the Ussuri", Problems in Communism, p. 48.

But to imply that a local guard unit or even a regional headquarters would plan and execute an ambush of such magnitude and consequence without explicit authority from Peking stretches the imagination. Certainly the disorder and factionalism of the Cultural Revolution could have made such an initiative theoretically possible but there is no evidence currently available to support this likelihood.

So authority for the clash most likely came from Peking, but why? Considering both the domestic and international situation in early 1969, China's leaders were probably influenced by a variety of factors. Several considerations stem from Peking's desire to reunify the country in the wake of many months of internal chaos spawned by the Cultural Revolution. Deep divisions had developed within the Chinese hierchy with some elements in favor of a rapproachment with Russia and a reactivation of the 1950 Treaty of Friendship. For the Maoists, this was unthinkable. Seemingly, nothing would rally popular resentment against these revisionist elements as well as a border confrontation with Soviet soldiers. In the face of this foreign threat, massive anti-Russian demonstrations would serve to unify the country and aid in reconstructing at least a foundation for national cohesion.

The approach of the oft-delayed Ninth Party Congress in

Peking may also have influenced the need to find a problem around which to rally. Faced with increasing opposition from a variety of internal groups hostile to proposed reform measures[55], the Maoists may have felt that a foreign threat was necessary to support Mao's position and push through the disputed reforms. A border skirmish would also serve as proof of the need to follow Mao's directive to " grasp revolution and promote production and preparedness against war. "[56] Workers and farmers would be exhorted to support their border guards by increasing output in industry and farming.

Several observers feel that Mao, aging and fearful that Soviet " revisionism " would creep back into China once he passed from the scene, decided to create an incident that would permanently alienate the Chinese people from the Soviet ideological menace. A well planned and propangandized border incident would probably do the job by sowing " dragon's teeth " between the two countries that would endure long after Mao's own demise.[57]

In terms of foreign policy considerations, Peking may have hoped to embarass the Kremlin prior to a world-wide communist conference scheduled for June in Moscow. By casting

---

55 Included in the reforms were plans to relocate several tens of millions of urban residents to the country. Robinson, Sino-Soviet Border Dispute, p. 50.

56 Tai, Territorial Dispute, p. 100.

57 Robinson, Sino-Soviet Border Dispute, p. 54.

the Soviets as aggressors against the fraternal Chinese, Peking probably intended to rekindle the painful memory of the 1968 Czechoslovak invasion for the benefit of other delegates scheduled to attend.

More important was China's acute sensitivity to a significant Soviet military buildup along their northeastern border since 1966.[58] Aware that Russia's Red Army had invaded Czechoslovakia in time to forestall a party congress expected to bolster the Dubcek regime, Peking had good reason to fear a similar move against China prior to their own Ninth Party Congress scheduled for March. Aggravating China's suspicions was a Soviet directive placing its border troops on " No. 1 combat readiness " issued sometime after 16 February 1969.[59] Mao may have concluded that the Russians would be thrown off balance if China struck a warning blow first.

Fear of strong Soviet retaliation was probably mitigated by the recent return to China of Soviet embassy personnel dependents after two years hiatus and Moscow's simultaneous involvement in another dispute in Europe over West Berlin. Also, it was deemed likely that the Kremlin would exercise restraint in order not to resurrect the ghost of Czechoslovakia.

---

[58] Robinson, Sino-Soviet Border Dispute, p. 27.

[59] Hinton, Problems in Communism, p. 47.

There is much foundation from which to state that the history of relations between Russia and China, especially since 1950, has been a general attempt on the part of the former to dominate the latter. True, some will point out that the Soviet government initially gave aid to the fledgling Communist Chinese government but it was done in a niggardly fashion and with great distrust. Furthermore, many observers feel that the Soviets cultivated China's economic and military dependence solely to achieve leverage over Peking's affairs - witness the withdrawal of aid in 1960 over disagreement with China's direction. What ultimately developed was a building Maoist nationalism in direct conflict with an equally assertive Soviet nationalism. As William Griffith said, " The primary cause of the rift has been the determination of Mao and his associates that China should become a superpower and the determination of the Soviet leadership to prevent it. " [60]

Based on these observations, it is probable that China's attack on Soviet border guards in early March of 1969 was influenced by a combination of foreign and domestic considerations. Peking's apprehension of the massive Soviet buildup on her northeastern frontier and the possibility that Moscow might attempt to militarily intervene in China coincided with the

---

[60] Griffith, Sino-Soviet Rift, p. 4.

need to find a ' foreign devil ' which would unify the Chinese people behind Mao's leadership. Mao's desire to permanently alienate the masses from the hated Soviet " revisionism " clearly added additional impetus. On the basis of these factors it is most likely that Maoist forces issued instructions to the northeastern regional military commander to initiate a violent incident at a time and place of his choosing in the near future. Such a bold military stroke would hopefully improve both the foreign and domestic situation.

Selected Bibliography

Corr, Gerard. The Chinese Red Army. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.

Dmitriyev, Yuri. 'Far Away on the Border.' CDSP. Vol. 21, No. 11, 2 April 1969.

Doolin, Dennis J. Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict. Documents and Analyses. Hoover Institution Studies: 7, Stanford, 1965.

Evening Bulletin (Philadelphia.) 31 January 1967.

Floyd, David. Mao Against Khrushchev. New York: Praeger, 1964.

Gittings, John. Survey of the Sino-Soviet Dispute. Oxford University Press, 1968.

Griffith, William E. The Sino-Soviet Rift. Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1964.

Hill, Chesney. The Doctrine of "Rebus Sic Standibus" in International Law. University of Missouri Studies, No. 11, 1934.

Hinton, Harold C. "Conflict of the Ussuri." Problems of Communism. Vol. XX, (Jan-Apr) 1971.

Jackson, W. A. Douglas. The Russo-Chinese Borderlands. Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co. Inc, 1968.

Keesing's Research Report. The Sino-Soviet Dispute. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1968.

Khostov, V. M. International Life. No. 10, October 1965.

New York Times. 10-14 September 1964.

New York Times. 6 June 1956.

North, Robert C. 'The Sino-Soviet Alliance.' The China Quarterly. No. 1, (Jan-Mar) 1960.

Pravda. 30 March 1969.

Robinson, Thomas W. *The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*. Santa Monica: Project Rand, 1970.

Salisbury, Harrison E. *War Between Russia and China*. New York: Norton & Co., 1968.

Tai, Sung An. *The Sino-Soviet Territorial Dispute*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973.

Woodhead, H. G. W., ed. *The China Year Book*. Peking and Tientsin, 1924.