

An analysis of the origins of the sino-soviet split and its influence on internat...

[Politics](#), [Communism](#)



A key factor to keep in mind when examining the Sino-Soviet dispute and its impact on foreign relations in South East Asia is that the region is characterised by shifting and fluid interactions and security arrangements (Yahuda, 1996: 9). This means coalitions can change, former enemies can become future allies and conflict is not easily defined. The Sino-Soviet alliance, based on a mutual belief in the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, degenerated over a period of more than ten years. While there is some disagreement about the exact duration of the conflict many scholars say it began in 1956 (Yahuda, 1996: 57) culminating in military escalation and the threat of nuclear war in 1969 (Barnett, 1977: 260). The dispute had its origins in a combination of factors. Chinese perceptions about their rightful international position, ideological differences and concerns about national security all played a part in the division of two powers that were at one stage closely aligned. These same factors defined China's response to this growing divide, and the way that it conducted its relations with the states of the East and South East Asian region. The Historical Chinese Position The Chinese description of China - Zhong guo - or Middle Kingdom, provides an excellent insight into the Chinese view of its position in the world. The traditional idea that Chinese civilisation is superior and complete, that neighboring states should offer tribute has shaped the way Chinese leaders have seen their country (Miller, 1967: 82-83). In more recent history, China's forced submission to dominant European powers, the imposition of unequal treaties and the Japanese occupation have contributed to a Chinese view of foreign powers that further defined its relations with the Soviet Union (Miller, 1967:

83). These factors combined to make the Chinese leadership during the Sino-Soviet alliance uneasy, as evidenced by the early indications that while China could benefit from Soviet assistance it must not overly rely on the Soviet Union. As early as 1956, Mao said of the Soviets " We must say to them: We learn from you, from whom did you learn? Why cannot we create something of our own??"(Schram, cited in Yahuda, 1978: 106). This sense of individualism and national identity also affected the evolution of the ideology of the Chinese communists, further inflaming the growing division between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), as shown below. Mao Zedong Thought This concept of Chinese supremacy and the methods by which the CCP achieved power affected the way the philosophy of communism in China developed. In the early years of the conflict, the basic disagreements between the two governments were expressed in vague ideological terms (Zagoria, 1962: 24-35, 197, Robinson, 1982: 176), however, by the early 1960s each government was accusing the other of being " communist traitors?(Yahuda, 1996: 58). When the CCP adopted " Mao Zedong thought? as its guiding principle, it was in effect saying that the Maoist interpretation of Marxism was superior to the Russian view. It was also suggesting that Mao was a leader of socialist thought rather than a follower of Stalin (Zagoria, 1962: 14-15). At one stage Zhou En Lai demanded that the Soviet Union officially recognise that " Mao Zedong thought? was a guiding principle of the international communist movement, a proposal not well received by the CPSU (Hart, 1987: 47). Further evidence of this dispute can be seen in the issue of the communes. In 1958 China

claimed it had solved the problem of communism in underdeveloped countries by building communes, a view the Russians did not agree with. At the heart of the issue was the implication that if China was right, that Maoist thought was better suited to underdeveloped countries, then it should assume a leadership role in the drive to build socialism in Asia, Africa and Latin America (Zagoria, 1962: 146). Permanent Revolution Another major point of contention between the CPSU and the CCP was related to the nature of conflict. The CCP view, which differed from that of the CPSU, was a product of the distinctive character of the Chinese insurrection (Yahuda, 1978: 102). This can be traced back to the historical context of the communist revolutions of both China and Russia. The Bolshevik uprising took place a generation before the Chinese equivalent, occurred relatively quickly and was largely urban in character. In contrast, the Chinese revolution took over 20 years of predominantly rural guerrilla-based violent struggle (Zagoria, 1962: 16). This led to the development of a key feature of Mao's version of Marxism-Leninism, that of *buduan geming*, or permanent revolution (Zagoria, 1962: 78). In broader terms, this relates to a preference for situations of chaos and instability as a method for furthering the goals of socialism (Gurtov, 1971: 161). With reference to the Sino-Soviet dispute, these divergent views of strategy can be seen in the disagreement between Mao and Krushchev after the successful Soviet rocket tests in 1957. By October of that year, the Soviet Union had launched the world's first two artificial satellites, Sputnik I and II, demonstrating its dominance in the so-called 'Space Race'. In China's view, this established the socialist bloc's

military domination over the West. Mao advocated an increase in revolutionary action and that the defeat of the "paper tiger" of American imperialism was now possible (Zagoria, 1962: 154-155, 160). Krushchev, on the other hand, took a more cautious approach, preferring to seek diplomacy from this new position of strength (Zagoria, 1962: 154-155). At the heart of the matter was the disagreement over how to conduct relations with the US government (Scalapino, 1982: 167, Yahuda, 1996: 58). The Chinese leaders were concerned about the implications for their national security of a possible Soviet-American accommodation, which is illustrated below (Zagoria, 1962: 18). National Security China has a long history of foreign invasion. Within the last millennia, North China has been under foreign rule for more than 500 years (Fairbank, 1958: 67). This contributed to the rise of nationalism that has been a major force in China's modern history and placed considerable strain on its relationship with Russia in the last century. Sino-Soviet tensions developed from simple beginnings in the late 1950s into direct military clashes ten years later. By 1969, under the direction of Mao's slogan "dig tunnels deep, store grain everywhere and be prepared for war and natural disasters" the Chinese people were mobilised against a Soviet enemy (Yahuda, 1978: 225). Chinese fears of Russian encirclement began to take form in 1959 when the USSR refused to supply China with a sample atomic bomb, and began moves to negotiate with the US to prevent the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. The Chinese interpreted this as Soviet betrayal and the beginnings of an anti-Chinese Soviet-American alliance (Yahuda, 1996: 58). In 1962 the Sino-Indian border clash in Tibet,

the build up of Russian forces near Xinjiang and the American presence in Taiwan enhanced Chinese fears of encirclement (Yahuda, 1978: 112-113). These fears increased in July of that year when the Non Test Ban treaty was signed by the US and USSR (Yahuda, 1978: 113). By 1967 Soviet forces in Mongolia posed a direct threat to the PRC (Hart, 1987: 49) and the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to "safeguard the revolution" was seen as further intimidation aimed at China (Yahuda, 1996: 62). All of these factors culminated in 1969 with a number of limited border clashes between the Soviet army and the PLA, and Russian threats of a possible nuclear attack (Yahuda, 1978: 225). Further military escalation was only avoided through the formidable diplomatic skills of Zhou En Lai, in his meeting with Soviet Premier Kosygin (Hart: 1987: 48). The threats to China's territorial borders continued into the 1970s, this time concentrated on the border with Vietnam. For most of this decade, Vietnam received aid from both China and the Soviet Union (Barnett, 1977: 307). The North Vietnamese regime favoured the Soviet government, and Sino-Vietnamese relations became steadily more strained during this period. As it became more apparent that the Vietnamese regime was siding with the Soviet Union, Chinese fears of encirclement were again raised (Yahuda, 1996: 205-206). By July of 1978 the conflict reached a point where ethnic Chinese were fleeing a possible war in Vietnam and in February 1979 the Chinese army invaded, engaging in a bitter five week conflict (Yahuda, 1996: 206). Chinese concerns about the integrity of its borders developed out of fears of invasion and the traditional views of the rightful position of China on the world stage. These factors were

a major force in the evolution of the Sino-Soviet split but also influenced China's response to the growing divide, as illustrated below. Chinese Foreign Policy Chinese foreign policy during and after the Sino-Soviet split was often based in the assumption that because of China's historical legacy it should be a world power (Hinton, 1971: 10). Much of the party rhetoric of this time showed a desire for China to be the primary communist power (Hinton, 1971: 12). However, due to the comparative weakness of the Chinese military compared to the two superpowers, its range of influence was limited to East and South East Asia (Barnett, 1977: 295, Robinson, 1982: 182). In comparison, while the Soviet Union did attempt to exert influence over Asian states to prevent Chinese expansion (Robinson, 1982: 176), it behaved as a Western power which held little appeal for most Asian leaders (Barnett, 1977: 296). This demonstrated that the USSR was not really an Asian power and was more closely aligned with Europe in terms of history and culture. The Soviet impact in Asia was limited to its communist allies (Yahuda, 1996: 45). The offshore island crisis of 1958, where China commenced shelling the island of Quemoy, demonstrated both China's desire to establish its legitimacy and control over what it considered to be the territory of the PRC, and its inability to exert its authority in confrontation with a superpower (Zagoria, 1962: 207). At this point, Chinese strategy changed somewhat as it entered a period of isolation. China's approach to its neighbors during this time indicated a desire to become a great power through increasing economic and military strength (Gittings, 1974: 260-262). By 1964 China had successfully tested a nuclear device which significantly altered the power

relationships within the region (Yahuda, 1996: 59). This trend was complemented by the ideological desire to further the goals of international communism. In the early 1960s, the PRC was not officially recognised in many parts of the world and adopted a revolutionary stance, particularly in the Asia Pacific region, where it supported a number of extremist movements (Gittings, 1974: 220). At the same time, China was a strong advocate of non-alignment (Yahuda, 1996: 195) and sought to influence the so-called intermediate countries – those capitalist countries that were not part of the superpower blocs (Yahuda, 1996: 200). There is evidence of this philosophy as early as 1955 at the Bandung Conference, where Zhou En Lai presented China as a potential leader of the underdeveloped countries by showing a greater degree of flexibility than either the US or the USSR (Yahuda, 1996: 54). This was reinforced in April 1969 at the 9th Party Congress, where Lin Biao identified the US and USSR as imperialists, colluding to dominate the world (Barnett: 1977: 10-11). This theme was repeated in August 1973 at the 10th Party Congress where Zhou En Lai emphasised Chinese support for proletariat revolution in the Third World (Barnett: 1977: 10-11). However, as shown above, Chinese foreign policy is often a combination of ideology and practicality (Gurtov, 1971: 159), and concerns about the security of China's borders were a motivating factor in its conduct with neighboring countries. China had hostile relations with many of its neighbors in the 1960s – Thailand in 1965, Burma in 1967 and Cambodia in 1970 (Gurtov, 1971: 161). This was partly due to the Sino-Soviet competition for influence in Asia, a process that had a destabilising effect on

the region (Barnett, 1977: 312-313), but it was also due to the Chinese desire to prevent unfriendly regimes from developing on its borders and threatening national security (Gurtov, 1971: 168). A fundamental shift in the balance of power in the region occurred with the American withdrawal from Vietnam, with a corresponding shift in Chinese foreign relations. The removal of American forces from the region prompted concerns among many Asian leaders about the prospects for regional security, and initiated a move away from US reliance and a trend towards self-reliance (Barnett, 1977: 300). Asian states began broadening their diplomatic ties in an effort to keep the major powers in check, which led to an increasing Chinese focus on bilateral relations rather than the support of revolutionary forces (Barnett: 1977: 322-324). China followed a similar logic with its approach to American relations. By 1972 Sino-American relations had improved remarkably leading to a transformation of international interactions in East and South East Asia (Barnett: 1977: 322). Conclusion The relationships between the Peoples Republic of China and the Soviet Union had a significant impact on the behaviours and actions of the weaker states in the Asian Pacific region (Scalapino, 1982: 159). As this relationship changed from one of alliance and a perception of common goals to one defined by mutual fears and perceived threats, the interactions of the smaller states also changed. While ideology has been a major influence on Chinese foreign policy, it would be naïve to assume that it is the only influence. China's long history of empire and invasion, its turbulent revolution and its strong sense of nationalism have been important factors in the policy decisions made by the CCP. Bibliography

Barnett, A. Doak. 1977. *China and the Major Powers in East Asia*, Washington D. C.: The Brookings Institution. Crankshaw, Edward. 1965. *The New Cold War: Moscow v. Peking Revised Edition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Fairbank, John King. 1958. *The United States and China*, New York: Compass Books, revised edition. Gittings, John. 1974. *The World and China 1922-1972*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers. Gurtov, Melvin. 1971. *China and Southeast Asia ? The Politics of Survival: A Study of Foreign Policy Interaction*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hart, Thomas G. 1987. *Sino-Soviet Relations: Re-examining the Prospects for Normalization*. Aldershot: Gower Publishing Company Ltd. Hinton, Harold C. 1971. *The Bear at the Gate: Chinese Policymaking Under Soviet Pressure*. Washington D. C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

Miller, J. D. B., 1967, ' Communist China's Foreign Policy? in Australian Institute of Political Science 33rd Summer School Proceedings, John Wilkes (ed.) *Communism in Asia: A Threat to Australia?* Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Ojha, Ishwer C. 1969. *Chinese Foreign Policy in an Age of Transition: The Diplomacy of Cultural Despair*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Robinson, Thomas W. 1982. ' Sino-Soviet Competition in Asia? in Douglas T. Stuart and William T. Tow (eds), *China, the Soviet Union, and the West: Strategic and Political Dimensions in the 1980s*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Scalapino, Robert A. 1982. ' Containment and Countercontainment: The Current Stage of Sino-Soviet Relations? in Douglas T. Stuart and William T. Tow (eds), *China, the Soviet Union, and the West: Strategic and Political Dimensions in the 1980s*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press.

Schram, Stuart

R., 1974. Mao Tse-tung Unrehearsed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. Snow, Edgar. 1972. Red Star Over China, London: Penguin Books, revised and enlarged edition. Yahuda, Michael B. 1978. China's Role in World Affairs. New York: St. Martin's Press. Yahuda, Michael B. 1996. The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific, 1945-1995. London and New York: Routledge. Zagoria, Donald S. 1962. The Sino-Soviet Conflict 1956-1961. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.