

Negotiating the Sino-Soviet border (1960-1991)

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For decades, thousands of kilometers of land separated the two arguably most powerful nations in Eurasia – the Soviet Union and China. Contested border territories remained a stumbling stone in the bilateral relations for years, and only at the dawn of the Soviet Empire did the two countries manage to start working toward a resolution and cut the Gordian knot.

The questions that research on the Sino-Soviet border negotiations raises can roughly be divided into three categories. Within the first category, it examines the connection between the general development of Sino-Soviet relations and the role of border issues. Another plethora of questions arises when an attempt is made to identify the most influential factors in foreign and domestic policy. Finally, the history of the Sino-Soviet border cannot be examined without a basic overview of its present day implications both for China and the post-Soviet states.

When looking at presently available sources, one cannot help but notice how the testimonies of representatives from both sides have very little in common. In fact, former career diplomats from China and the USSR still do not agree on who raised the border issue first. Chinese scholars claim that their government mentioned the issue several times prior to 1960,



while the Soviets maintain it was them who expressed concern over an unresolved boundary, and their counterpart dismissed it as unworthy of discussion.

As the bilateral relations began to worsen in the late 1950s and early 1960s, both parties came to realize that it was time to start serious negotiations. By the summer of 1964, the delegations reached an agreement on the Eastern part of the border, although a few gaps still remained unresolved. The original tactics of the Soviets was to sign a partial agreement, and leave controversial sections for further discussion. Yet infamous remarks made by Mao during his conversation with representatives of the Japanese socialist party pushed Khrushchev over the edge, and he demanded no concessions be made, insisting on an immediate solution of all divisive questions.

In the light of deteriorating relations, the two countries found themselves entangled in a series of border skirmishes, and in March 1969 they were caught up in violent clashes involving multiple casualties. Both sides finally realized that they were on the brink of nuclear war. The meeting in September 1969 at the Beijing airport saw two parties with disproportional expectations of each other. The Chinese only wanted to prevent the outbreak of war, while Kosygin nourished hopes to improve overall relations. He, therefore, did not come fully prepared to hold border negotiations.

Consequently, Kosygin used the term "contested territories", despite the fact that in Moscow's traditional perspective the two countries had



already agreed in writing on the border issue, leaving only the exact geographical location of the borderline in question. Some sources claim that back home Kosygin was severely reprimanded for this mistake. For the next several decades the Soviets denied he ever accepted this term as an operational one.

After the airport meeting, the two parties managed to conduct negotiations for another four years without ever really discussing the border. In fact, the Soviets were not inclined to even refer to these negotiations as border talks, as they mostly revolved around a Non-Aggression Treaty, a Status-Quo Agreement and similar measures of mutual reassurance. As the diplomatic meetings grew less and less productive, the delegations minimized the length and number of sessions, using these talks exclusively as a channel of communication.

By the mid-1980s, with both countries undergoing a series of reforms, the Soviet and Chinese leadership understood that it was mutually beneficial to improve bilateral relations. And this initiative was inextricably linked to resolving the complicated border issue. By 1989, the Eastern part of the border with few exceptions was pretty much agreed on. Yet under the pressure from the unfolding separatist movement, Gorbachev changed his negotiation tactics. The Soviet delegation was instructed to make no concessions and resolve the issue of the Eastern border section in its entirety. The Chinese, in response, threatened to suspend the talks.



Four months later, when Gorbachev was elected President of the USSR and thus consolidated his power, he revived the talks by promising a more flexible stance. On May 16, 1991, the two sides signed the Sino-Soviet Border Agreement on the Eastern part of the bilateral frontier. Certain sections were left for further discussion. Unfortunately, the demise of the Soviet Union shifted the power balance completely, making separatist and nationalist tendencies even stronger within the post-Soviet states.

In the 1990s and in light of Russia's internal turmoil, new demands were raised to renegotiate the border issue with the Chinese. The Governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also had to fight a strong opposition at home to reach border agreements with the Chinese, Kazakhstan being the only state which passed related resolutions rather smoothly.

There are some important observations that cannot escape a researcher dealing with this topic. First, the Sino-Soviet border dispute always depended on the state of bilateral relations and was constantly used as a cover for other issues. Second, leaders in both countries often miscalculated their counterpart's reaction and intentions, as did Mao in 1964, when he tried to exert pressure on Khrushchev and ended up blocking the negotiations, or Kosygin, when he entered the airport negotiations utterly unprepared. Third, the border issue was and remains a source of discontent between the top leadership and local authorities in all the countries involved. Fourth, despite being resolved officially, the border still remains a controversial topic, as in the general public of all



countries the process is often seen as somehow reversible. This further complicates the relationship between China and its post-Soviet neighbors.

There are multiple dimensions in which research on the history of the Sino-Soviet border can be undertaken. It can be looked at as an example of a peaceful resolution of complicated disputes from which all parties involved can benefit. This is especially true now that China, Russia and the Central Asian Republics all have unresolved border issues with their neighbors. Another perspective would be to study the history of the Sino-Soviet frontier through the prism of nationalism and separatism. Finally, it presents an interesting case study of economic history, especially in light of disproportionate developments separating both sides and the ecological dimension of Chinese industrial growth.

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