

## Cooperation and conflict in the early Sino-Soviet relations

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### ABSTRACT

This research seeks to historically contextualize contemporary China-Russia relations, which in 2013 witnessed important developments in the post-Cold War period. The study highlights that focus of the current improvement of ties between the two countries is different from that of the past. Whereas in the 1950s it was the economic aid and ideological conflict, today economy and security dominate the Sino-Russian linkage.

### INTRODUCTION

Sino-Russian ties experienced between March 2013 and February 2014 eight high-level visits and meetings between the top leaders, bilaterally and multilaterally. In March 2013 the newly appointed President of China, Xi Jinping, paid a state visit to Russia where he met with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin. The two leaders shortly met again in Durban, South Africa, on the sidelines of the BRICS summit. The third encounter happened during the G20 meeting in St. Petersburg, Russia, in early September. A week later, it was in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek where they met on the scope of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO, congregating China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) heads of state annual summit. Xi and Putin met again in October in Bali, Indonesia, where the annual meeting of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) took place. The last rendezvous between the two Presidents took place this early February (2014) in Sochi, Russian, where Xi attended the inauguration of the Winter Olympic Games. The Chinese Prime-Minister Li Keqiang and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev met twice in 2013, in Beijing in October and in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, during the SCO Prime Ministers Meeting in November (XINHUANET, 2014; YU, 2014; NJAL, 2013).

Bilaterally, the two countries vowed to increase ties at the political, economic, security, military and culturally

levels, they also agreed to and closely cooperate on multilateral issues. For example, economically, in 2012 bilateral trade totaled US\$ 88 billion it is expected to reach US\$ 100 billion in 2015 and US\$ 200 billion in 2020. In terms of security and military, both countries often lead other SCO members to carry out regional war games as those that took place in 2013. The contestation of the Western stance on issues of democracy and human rights in other countries and opposition to sanctions and invasion of Syria and Iran are such an example (YU, 2014, NJAL, 2014).

Nonetheless, important differences still permeate the relationship between the two "allies". Moscow is worried about the intensification of Chinese ties with its former republics in Central Asia; similarly, Beijing is not pleased to see its southern neighbors of India and Vietnam to continue to receive military hardware from the Russians (YU, 2014).

On the hand, China's rise is generally not well viewed in Russia. The ascendance of China to a global power is somehow at the expense of Russia whose influence has been declining since the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet empire in 1991.

This article seeks to outline the main developments of the early ties between the two countries. Methodologically, the research puts China in focus than the Soviet Union, this option helps to understand the

main drivers of Chinese policy in the first three decades of the PRC.

Theoretically, this work is grounded in the neorealist alliance theory which posits that states are the central political actors and their actions are based by perceptions of sovereignty, national interest and security. Therefore, the main concern of the state is its protection and survival. Thus, under the premise of a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states, an alliance will be formed (DWIVEDI, 2012: 224-225).

### THE SINO-SOVIET "HONEYMOON" (UP TO LATE 1950s)

The foreign policy of the People's Republic of China (the PRC) in the 1950s was based on three important deliberations which Zhou Enlai, who was at the same time the Prime-Minister (1949-1976) and Minister of Foreign Affairs (1949-1958), sarcastically laid them as "making a fresh start", "cleaning the house before entertaining guests", and "leaning to one side" (CHEN, 2001: 50).

In reality, few months before the proclamation of the establishment of the new China in October 1949, the CCP chairman, Mao Zedong, said that the post-World War II order would be led by two superpowers, namely the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (the USSR/Soviet Union) and the United States (the US), therefore, the new country should attach itself to the "international progressive forces" historically headed by the Soviet Union (CHEN, 1994: 64-65). In other words, this means that the Chinese leadership was acknowledging the role played by what it termed to be the "advanced forces in the rest of the world" in defeating the Japanese imperial forces during the second Sino-Japanese war and the pro-Western forces of *Kuomintang/Guomingdang* (or the Nationalist Party) in the civil war (IDCPC, 2007).

A number of reasons compelled the Chinese leaders to choose to side with Moscow than with the West or Washington in particular. Firstly, the new nation came into existence in 1949 facing a world battling with the emergence of the Cold War, which in the following five decades ideologically divided it into two diametrically camps, the East (adept of communism) and the West (pro-capitalism), respectively headed by the Soviet Union and the US. Secondly, to avoid international isolation principally after the Western world, especially the US, did

not hide their intentions of preventing China to establish ties with other countries, in part due to ideological issues, also, for militarily aiding the North in the 1950-1953 Korean war (TSAI, 2000: 45). Thirdly, the reconstruction of the country after the war against the Japanese invasion (1937-1945) and the internal conflict (1927-1937, 1946-1949) between the guerrillas of the Chinese Communist Party and the troops of the Nationalist Party supported by the US from 1946 (ZHU, 2001: 6-8). Fourthly, the long-standing relationship between the Soviet Union and its ruling Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the CCP since the early 1920s and more importantly, the moral and material support that the former rendered to the later. Fifthly, security issues in the face of the perception of the Western threat, mainly the American one (CHEN, 2001: 50). Lastly, the CCP's imperative in promoting the Chinese Communist Revolution at home and abroad (CHEN, 1994: 65-66).

In deciding to put in march the three decisions the CCP leadership envisaged to demonstrate to the world and to the Chinese people that they aimed to get rid of China's "old" foreign policy. Also, they aimed to show domestically and to the intellectuals in particular that there was no utility for China to ally with the Western capitalist countries but with the USSR, which was after all, the first socialist country in the world that had successfully built a socialist state and society, thus, the importance of its experience (CHEN, 2001: 51-52).

In short, by this time the USSR was already militarily and economically powerful state and China was economically and socially affected by the long years of war.

The milestone of the "leaning to one side" policy is the signing of the 30-year *Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance* in February 1950 in Moscow by the Chinese and Soviet top leaders, respectively Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin, but only after intense courses of negotiation. Under this agreement, the Soviets vowed to make an increase of military and other material support, including providing air-defence installations in the eastern part of China.

Economically, the Soviets promised a loan of US\$ 300 million to be repaid by 1963. By the end of that decade China had benefited of more than US\$ 1.3 billion Soviet aid, between 1952 and 1957 about 166 complete

industrial plants, and they committed to build more 125 plants from 1958 to 1962. Also, in that decade China welcomed around 10,800 Soviet and 1,500 East European technicians to help in different fields of the economy of the country, and during the same period about 8,000 Chinese workers and engineers and 7,000 students were sent to the Soviet Union for further training (ZHU, 2001: 8).

The benefits for the Soviets included: a military base at Port Arthur (in Liaoning province), exclusive economic presence in the western province of Xinjiang and Manchuria (Northeast China, locally known as *Dongbei*) and run joint-stock companies in the Northeast part of the country. These concessions did not in any way please the Chinese whose minds, even today, are still fresh of the occupation of their territory by Western powers including Russia and Japan since the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century, it reminded the CCP leaders of the “century of humiliation” and the “unequal treaties”. On the other hand, it was under this treaty that the USSR sided with China in the Korean War. In fact, the material and air support proved to be valuable during certain moments of that international conflict which China committed extensive military support and manpower (RADCHENKO, 2005: 12-13; CHEN, 2001: 52).

From the accounts of Chen (1993), we understand that Sino-Soviet alliance indeed tasked China with the role of supporting communist revolutionaries in East Asia, while the USSR was to do the same in East Europe. It is under such arrangements that China rendered military support to the Vietnamese nationalists during the first war against French colonial army in Vietnam (1950-1954).

It is worth mentioning that although China had accepted the task of promoting socialism and communism in Asia the decision to aid Ho Chi Minh’s guerrillas and Kim Il-sung’s army in the inter-Korean conflict is purely dictated by security concerns than ideological ones. In fact, regarding the Korean war, some authors defend that Beijing’s ultimate aim in directly engaging in the conflict opposing North Korea to the South supported by the United Nations troops led by the US was to prevent the Soviet Union to land its army in Northeast China in the event the US took-over North Korea. At that time *Dongbei* was the largest industrial area of the country and the

presence of the foreign soldiers would compromise not only national sovereignty but economic development, too (ZHU, 2001: 7-8; WESTAD, 1992: 459-460). Evidently, the Chinese were worried about another foreign-led invasion at a time that they were still coming into terms with the yet fresh presence of alien powers in their territory.

#### CRISIS AND SPLIT

After the death of Stalin in 1953 Sino-Russian ties experienced difficulties that ultimately led to the break-up of ties in the early 1960s, thus turning the “brotherly allies” into the worst of enemies. Specifically, the fallout began in 1956. On that year, during the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the new leader, Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964), in his secret speech outlined his new domestic and foreign policies.

He primarily denounced his predecessor’s ruling style and put in forth the process of de-Stalinisation. The second important policy announced by Khrushchev was the need to promote *peaceful coexistence* with the capitalist world, particularly with the US, as he believed that socialism could be attained through parliamentary elections, not by violent means, until then such was the conventional wisdom within the socialist camp. These moves in many ways outraged Mao Zedong. The speech occurred at a time he was still in the process of consolidating power within the CCP, therefore, criticizing former Stalin indirectly challenged his own power at home, especially if one considers the fact that Mao was himself an adept of the cult of personality, a practice that the new leader in Moscow was now criticizing. In Mao Zedong’s understanding, Stalin had led the first communist country in the world relying on his own vision as there was no other country to follow, thus, he is a great leader and the world should remember him as such. That’s why, for this historical reason, calling for the abandonment of the Stalinist political system was incorrect. Therefore, Khrushchev’s speech “exposed the problems” of the Stalin administration and it also “made mess” (CHEN, 2001: 64-65; ZHU, 1991: 43-44).

Of course, Mao objected the idea of rapprochement with the West, least with the US, which by the mid-1950s was already the main enemy of the PRC especially for hindering the Mainland from taking over the rebellious

island of Taiwan. He perceived it as a capitulation of Moscow which was also showing its first signs of “counter-revolutionary revisionism”. Moscow’s neutrality and criticism of China over Taiwan, when it attacked it in 1954-1955 and 1958, which led Washington to deploy its naval forces in the Straits of Taiwan and to threaten to use nuclear weapons, infuriated Beijing. Again, the USSR did not come to the aid of China in 1959 on the Indian border clashes. In the 1962 China-India war things were even worse because the Soviet Union had supplied India with modern military aid. For the CCP leaders the last example proved them right about Moscow’s revisionism for arming and providing important economic assistance to a non-Communist state, even Taiwan supported the Mainland over this issue of the border around Tibet. If fact, Beijing was alarmed because it was incomprehensible that the Khrushchev regime would support an Indian Prime-Minister (Jawaharlal Nehru) whom Stalin had once catalogued as “a bourgeois nationalist” yielding to his former “colonial masters” (TSAI, 2005: 52-53; CHEN, 2001: 81-82; COHEN, 1993: 82; ZHU, 1991: 106-108)

Additionally, in 1958 China vehemently disagreed with the terms of proposals by the Soviets to build a long-wave radio transmission centre and a long-wave radio receiving station for long-distance communication, both to be commanded by the Soviet’s naval fleet in the Pacific, besides demanding permanent stationing of the Soviet troops in *Dongbei*. In the view of Beijing these represented “unreasonable demands” and threatened the country’s independence (ZHU, 2001: 8).

The Sino-Soviet competition for influence in the developing world (then commonly known as the Third World) also exacerbated the enmity between the two neighbouring countries. Indeed, with Stalin gone Mao believed that time had come for him to lead the way for other colonised and exploited nations to liberate themselves from colonialism and imperialism. According to Snow (1994), the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung (Indonesia) held in 1955 was a perfect place for China to convince the delegates from nearly three dozen countries, including members of some of Africa’s liberation movements, that it aimed to unite with them to fight the common enemy: the capitalist world.

The Chinese delegates did not hide their pretension to lead the group and help other countries and territories under colonial rule to achieve independence and to fight against imperialism, racism and neo-colonialism. For them, it was morally correct for China to join hand with other exploited nations and colonies as their own country had been subjected to colonialism, imperialism and racism by the same Western powers. Furthermore, in China it was widely believed that the experience of the Chinese Revolution was more prone to be replicated in the Third World than the Russian one, mainly due to the similarities of the environment and social conditions of the peoples in China and of those regions. While the Russian Revolution in 1917 was mainly carried out by the proletariat in the urban areas, the CCP relied mostly on the poor and rural people to defeat the Nationalist army in 1949. The supposed Moscow’s revisionist approach towards the West was another reason for China to claim the lead of the world revolution. So, after the fallout of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the early 1960s China entitled itself as the centre of the revolutionary struggle. After militarily defeating India in 1962, the Chinese leadership believed that all doubts had been eliminated on which country should lead the Third World in the struggle against colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism (CHEN, 2013: 91; 1993: 89; SNOW, 1994).

Moreover, the Soviet leader recalled all the Soviet experts working in China and reduced economic and military aid by mid-1960, in a time that Beijing was still struggling with the unsuccessful *Great Leap Forward* (1958-1961). Disagreement about ideology was openly expressed by the two leaders from 1959, but the Soviet retreat following the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, Soviet open support of New Delhi in the Sino-Indian war and the signing of the partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the US in 1963 led to the collapse of ties in 1964 (RADCHENKO, 2005: 34-47; CHEN, 2001: 64-65, 78-79, 81-84).

The rest of the 1960s and the entire 1970s witnessed the intensification of the Sino-Soviet accusations which culminated in the border clashes in 1969 and competition for influence in the developing world, mainly in Africa.

In part of China this was translated by increasing diplomatic, military and economic assistance to both newly independent states and to political movements in

those territories still under colonial rule. Even during the Cultural Revolution the Chinese authorities pledged in 1967 to carry out the construction of the 1860 Km Tanzania-Zambia railway, which even today it continues to be the flagship of the Chinese development commitment to Africa. Also, China sought to rival mainly with the USSR, through its declaratory and behavioural support to the movements for liberation in territories such as Mozambique, Angola, Guinea Bissau, South Africa, South Rhodesia, Namibia, etc. Beijing theoretically justified its foreign policy in the developing world was by Beijing by advancing the “Intermediate Zone Theory”<sup>1</sup> and the “Three Words Theory”<sup>2</sup> (TAYLOR, 2006; CHEN, 2001; JACKSON, 1995; ZHU, 1991).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Chen (2001), this theory was advanced by Mao Zedong in the 1940s during the civil war. In Mao’s view in the world there were two poles with the US and the USSR in each side and in the middle there were the “oppressed” countries, including China. For him, this really explained why Asia was the central focus of the Cold War at the time, because, in fact, before the US could attack the Soviet Union it had to “deal” first with the “intermediate zone”, i.e., Asia. After the creation of the PRC the same language included the rest of the developing world thus the claim of the Chinese leaders to present their country as the leader of the “oppressed peoples” in the “intermediate zone” in the anti-imperialism and anti-colonialist movement.

<sup>2</sup> Zhu (1991) says that this theory assumes that there are three worlds. The first is formed by the two superpowers, or the US and USSR; the superpowers’ allies, in other words, the Western countries and Japan, composed “the second world”; and “the third world” represents all the nonaligned countries (including China), or, the anti-imperialist camp. Therefore, “the third world” should join forces with the superpowers’ allies so that effectively it could fight the dominating “first world”, especially the Soviet “hegemonism”. The “Three Worlds Theory” was particularly evoked to combat the Soviet growing influence in Central and South Asia in the second half of the 1970s.

## FINAL REMARKS

After China adopted the reform and opening-up policies in the late 1970s, ties between the two rivals were restored in 1989 and border disputes were later solved. Thus, the post-Cold War period has witnessed improvements of the Beijing-Moscow relationship, especially after the creation of Shanghai Five (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan) 1996 later renamed Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 after the inclusion of Uzbekistan. In the same year the Sino-Russian *Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation* was signed (GARVER, 1989, BURAKOV, 2014, NJAL, 2014).

Since then the Presidents of the two countries have been meeting annually. But recent high level visits and meetings, especially in the last 12 months prove that ties between China and Russia are deepening and experiencing the highest momentum since the end of Cold War, this is symbolically worthwhile if we consider that the two countries celebrate in 2014 the anniversary of 65 years of the establishment of diplomatic ties.

It is worth mentioning that Beijing’s apparent support to Moscow following Russia’s military presence in Ukraine’s Crimea from late February 2014 is in accordance with the improvement of ties between the two old allies.

However, the two countries leaderships need more wisdom to overcome their own mistrust, which includes competition for influence in Central and Southeast Asia and Chinese historical claims, though not yet publicly announced, over parts of Russia’s Siberia and Far East, as imprinted in the country’s schools textbooks and maps. Then they would be able to capitalize on their assumed common rivalry against the Western world, particularly the United States. In effect, Barak Obama’s “pivot to Asia/Pacific” policy since late 2011 somehow undermines the interests of the two countries, so that they can jointly challenge the *status quo*, like they did six decades ago under the banner of the socialist movement (DE HAAS, 2013).

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