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‘Father-and-Son’ or Communist ‘Brothers’? The Significance of ‘Socialist Solidarity’ in the Sino-Soviet Split

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The split between Communism’s most powerful exponents, the USSR and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), shocked socialists and non-socialists alike when it became public in the early 1960s. Enjoying vastly greater access to relevant documents, many historians today lend credence to a domestic politics interpretation of the split, with strong emphasis on the role of ideology in shaping Soviet and Chinese decision-making. This ideology-informed approach, however, should extend beyond domestic politics to encompass alliance relations, as well. Surprisingly little attention has been dedicated to the differing ways in which Beijing understood its alliance relationship, as a mediating variable between the domestic and international realms. This article examines how Chinese perceptions of the alliance shifted over time, with particular emphasis on the period between 1960 and 1962, an interregnum that is not particularly well explained in the existing literature. Throughout the life of the alliance, there was a fundamental misunderstanding between the two sides over obligations of international socialist solidarity; such misperceptions would ultimately prove fatal as the Chinese came to question not simply the policies of the Soviets, but the very legitimacy of Soviet Union as a socialist state.

When the Sino-Soviet split first came to widespread international attention in April 1960, it did so in the form of a polemic. Marking Lenin’s birthday, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) published “Long Live Leninism!,” an article that did not attack the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) by name,

but which clearly took aim at its policies.¹ Despite this ideational tenor, however, scholars and analysts in the West tended to downplay the role of ideology in favor of more “objective” factors. Thus, realists argued that Chinese decision makers were responding to an altered international security environment, pointing to the alleged primacy of fixed “national interests.” In contrast, those with greater knowledge of Chinese domestic politics pointed to the importance of factional jockeying within the CCP between the “left” and “right.”²

With the partial opening of Russian and Chinese archives, however, historians can now draw a much more detailed picture of the Sino-Soviet split, one which opens a window into the “subjective” element of foreign policy construction. To be sure, the realist paradigm has not been abandoned.³ Still, most scholars who have studied the conflict in detail with newly available documents have convincingly shown that ideology played a central role in the origins and the evolution of the conflict, although in ways that were often more subtle and complex than the official polemics emanating from the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai would attest.⁴ Such an ideology-informed approach does not deny that nationalism strongly influenced Soviet and Chinese policies; rather, it seeks to fill in the *content* of this nationalism, with reference not only to Marxist-Leninist official ideology, but also to the historically-specific revolutionary experience that shaped the overall worldview—and, therefore, the perceptions—of the CCP and CPSU leaderships.⁵ It is not surprising, then, that scholars like Jian Chen focus much more than the realists upon the importance of domestic factors in shaping the Sino-Soviet split.⁶

Chen’s “domestic-politics-centered” interpretation—although a welcome antidote to sterile realism—often goes too far in privileging domestic over international factors. Just as realists are apt to see Chinese maneuvering as necessarily guided by internationally derived security concerns, Chen often views such maneuvering as simply the product of domestically-derived political interests. Given the documentary evidence that has been made available thus far, however, a strong case can be made that the Chinese, and even Mao, valued their alliance relationship with the Soviet Union even in the early 1960s. Indeed, international and domestic factors interacted most strongly in the context of these alliances. Both the Soviet Union and the PRC sought to translate their differing ideological expectations and aspirations into a code of conduct that would be applicable to their partners; in other words, both the Soviets and the Chinese had contending notions of what international socialist solidarity entailed. During international crises, when the necessity of unity within the alliance was strongest, the incompatibility of these conflicting expectations proved most acute. However, although these periods engendered tremendous frustration and even rage, the Chinese did not walk away from the alliance or merely seek to use it as a blunt instrument for their own narrow goals.⁷ It is only by taking seriously the notion that international socialist solidarity was an important factor in the calculations of the Chinese leadership that the tortured course of the alliance, and the final reason for the split, can be fully appreciated.

When a new Sino-Soviet treaty was signed in February 1950, the CPSU and CCP were parties that were at once strikingly similar and startlingly at odds. Both parties bore the stamp of nationalism, uneasily melding the internationalist tradition of socialism with the more nativist traditions of their respective nationalisms. It was in this context, however, that significant differences also existed. The nationalism of the CPSU had not been present from birth, but was gradually adopted during the period of Stalin's leadership in direct opposition to radical notions of world revolution (i.e., the Stalin-Trotsky debate).⁸ The triumph of nationalism over world revolution within the CPSU was, therefore, a political counterrevolution of sorts, allowing for the resurgence of imperial (or "Great Russian") chauvinism, both within the USSR itself and between the USSR and other, smaller nations.

In contrast, the nationalism of the CCP had been present since the party's origins in the intellectual ferment of the May 4th Movement, or the mass anti-imperialist protests that emerged in reaction to the terms of the Versailles Treaty, especially with respect to its measures that favored Japan. The revolutionary socialism of the Russian Bolsheviks attracted many young Chinese radicals (including Mao himself) not simply because it promised a radical transformation of the existing social order, but also because it heralded a new international order in which the genuine equality of nations would prevail.⁹ In this context, it was especially painful for CCP leaders to witness the revival of Russian imperial-era claims (repudiated by the Bolsheviks in 1919 and 1920) in the Sino-Soviet treaty of 1945; it was all the more painful when they themselves were forced, because of a recalcitrant Stalin, to maintain some of those privileges in the new treaty of 1950.¹⁰ It became abruptly clear to the CCP that its vision of international socialist solidarity, involving substantive equality between China and Russia, was not to come to fruition under Stalin's leadership. After Nikita Khrushchev announced de-Stalinization in 1956, Mao made frequent reference to these humiliations and inequities.¹¹ Yet, in the early 1950s, the Chinese leadership had to endure Stalin's demands, in order to guarantee security and aid. As Mao later stated, "I did so for the sake of socialism."¹²

Stalin's death in 1953 and the rise of Khrushchev profoundly altered the relationship between Moscow and Beijing, creating an opportunity for the CCP to revive the concept of socialist internationalism that it originally envisaged. Khrushchev was sensitive to China's tremendous geopolitical importance in the post-war period, and he was aware of the CCP's resentment. Beginning in 1954, therefore, Khrushchev made a number of significant concessions to the Chinese, reversing the onerous provisions of the 1950 treaty and extending considerable aid. As Khrushchev acknowledged, the terms of the treaty "contradicted basic communist principles."¹³ Hence, for the Chinese, the early years of the Khrushchev leadership indicated a revival of socialist fraternal norms, if not a complete transition to international socialist solidarity. This perception is exemplified by Mao's statement to the Yugoslavs in 1956, in which he explained,

“[The Sino-Soviet relationship] more or less resembles a brotherly relationship, but the shadow of the father-and-son relationship has not completely removed.”¹⁴

Current scholarship recognizes that Khrushchev’s criticism of Stalin during the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which took place from 14 to 25 February 1956, engendered conflict. During a session for the Soviet delegates that took place at the end of the Congress, Khrushchev delivered an unscheduled speech, during which he made criticisms of Stalin that were unprecedentedly severe. While Mao was likely irritated about not having been informed of the speech in advance, on the whole, he and the CCP leadership welcomed Khrushchev’s comments and their tarnishing effect on the dictator’s legacy.¹⁵ By distancing itself from its Stalinist past, the CPSU acknowledged its fallibility and historical errors, thereby erasing the basis for the “father-and-son” (or even “cat-and-mouse”) relationship that previously characterized Sino-Soviet “cooperation.”¹⁶ Although the 1956 uprising against Communist rule in Hungary gave some pause to the CCP’s enthusiasm for public de-Stalinization, even that cloud had a substantial silver lining: Mao, by providing timely advice to Khrushchev and convincing him of the necessity of formally changing Moscow’s relationship with “fraternal” socialist states, solidified his claim to equality, and even leadership, within the socialist bloc.¹⁷ Hence, by 1957, Mao could feel assured that, despite the lingering stench of “big-power chauvinism,” the Sino-Soviet relationship had been qualitatively transformed.¹⁸

It is in this context, then, that the events of 1958–1959 must be considered. Mao’s visceral reaction to Soviet Ambassador Pavel Yudin’s proposal of a joint submarine fleet, and his strong opposition to Soviet suggestions for a jointly constructed and managed radio receiving station, must be understood from the viewpoint of China’s altered alliance relations. Although realist interpretations—which argue that Mao was “fearful” of Soviet encirclement and military hegemony—have some merit, the transcripts of Mao’s conversation with Yudin make it clear that the issue assumed a highly symbolic importance that transcended issues of security.¹⁹ For Mao, the Soviets’ apparent refusal to grant the Chinese their own submarines indicated that the Soviets followed the mantras, “[N]ever trust the Chinese!” and “[O]nly trust the Russians!” The proposal for a radio receiving station, moreover, reminded Mao of the “cooperative” projects on which Stalin had insisted, which Khrushchev himself brought to an end.²⁰ The other Sino-Soviet “crisis” of 1958, prompted by Beijing’s unilateral decision to shell the Taiwanese-claimed islands of Matsu and Quemoy, was less disruptive to Sino-Soviet relations than often thought. Despite the fact that the Soviets were not given explicit and advanced warning of the attack, declassified documents have revealed that they were generally aware of a plan to “bring Taiwan back under China’s jurisdiction,” and that they provided political and military backing for that plan.²¹ Further, when the Chinese launched the attack, the Soviets proved even more zealous than the Chinese in insisting upon full adherence to their treaty obligations of providing nuclear defense to the PRC.²²

A crisis in Sino-Soviet relations was actually avoided because the Soviets resolutely upheld alliance expectations.

The two contentious issues of 1959—Indian border clashes and nuclear technology transfer—also confirm the importance that Chinese perceptions of “international socialist solidarity” had upon the Sino-Soviet split. Mao’s vehement opposition to what he characterized as Soviet “neutrality” in the August Sino-Indian border clashes had no discernible connection to Chinese domestic political imperatives, and only a very weak link to strategic concerns. What flummoxed Beijing was the fact that Moscow refused to take a side in the conflict between a bourgeois-nationalist regime and socialist state; hence, the Chinese saw the Soviets as having crossed the class line.²³ The Chinese leadership did not consider this perceived betrayal to be an isolated act, but rather a link in a chain of incidents in which the Soviet Union effectively renounced its alliance obligations to the PRC in pursuit of improved relations with bourgeois states. Just weeks earlier, the Soviets announced that they would not fulfill the nuclear agreement originally made with the PRC in 1957, ostensibly to seek an accommodation with the Eisenhower administration.

According to the “domestic-politics-centered” account of the split, a fairly linear progression explained the rancorous events of 1959: the July 1960 Soviet withdrawal of technical experts, and then the unmitigated bitterness that began in mid-1962. Indeed, in Chen’s account, the entire period from mid-1960 to mid-1962 in passed in silence.²⁴ However, this interregnum contained a number of events that did not accord well with Chen’s domestic politics approach, thus suggesting that these years require scholarly examination. First, as Niu Jun has shown, the January meeting of the CCP Central Committee’s Standing Committee, presided over by Mao, concluded that “new initiatives should be adopted vigorously in order to create a new situation in diplomacy.” One of these initiatives encompassed a number of measures toward many states, but toward the USSR it urged “unity with him [Khrushchev] and [to] not split shamelessly.”²⁵ It must be noted, then, that the successes of Sino-Soviet relations that followed during the interregnum period under Liu Shaoqi—including the December 1960 Moscow Conference, Soviet military technology transfers, food aid, and economic agreements—resulted from an effort that began under Mao’s initiative.

Second, Chen’s suggestion that Mao may have welcomed Khrushchev’s pullout of Soviet experts and sharp curtailment of aid does not withstand close scrutiny. The most fundamental discrepancy involves timing. Chen pointed out that Mao, anticipating a domestic backlash because of the failure of his Great Leap Forward (GLF), saw an opportunity to make the Soviets a scapegoat for his own failures. Yet, as Thomas Bernstein has shown, Mao did not have serious doubts about the GLF until October 1960—considerably after Khrushchev made his decision to alter aid relations. Once Khrushchev did make his move, moreover, the Chinese leadership scrambled to smooth tensions and to restore aid from the Soviet Union (as Chen himself acknowledges). An additional complication

is the curious case of the December 1960 meeting between Mao and Soviet Ambassador Stepan Chervonenko, during which Mao repeatedly stressed the inexperience of the Chinese leadership in an “exceptionally cordial, friendly atmosphere.”²⁶

Such developments make little sense unless one takes seriously the notion that Mao, even after the bitter episodes and strains, still valued the Sino-Soviet relationship and believed in the continued potential of international socialist solidarity. However, why did Mao initiate a polemical battle with the Soviets (beginning in April 1960) if, indeed, he was sincere in attempting to strengthen the alliance? An answer can be found in a speech delivered by Mao on 27 January 1957, in which he argues, “At present there exist some controversies between China and the Soviet Union. . . . Therefore, we must try to persuade them. Persuasion is what I have always advocated as a way of dealing with our own comrades. . . . As much as they intend to influence us, we want to influence them too. However, we do not need to unveil everything this time, because we must save some magic weapons [in reserve].”²⁷ Mao attempted to employ persuasion from 1957 onward, but received few positive results. The use of polemics beginning in 1962 was a “magic weapon,” intended not only to “influence” the Soviets but also the various states in the socialist bloc, with the ultimate aim of restoring the Chinese visions of international socialist solidarity.

What, then, caused the final rupture in Sino-Soviet relations? The domestic-politics-centered approach highlights mid-1962 as the point of no return, in which Mao’s domestic resurgence fuelled a spiral of Sino-Soviet recriminations, from which the alliance could not recover. While this analysis is certainly correct, we must delve deeper to discover how and why Mao’s very conception of the alliance was irrevocably altered. Niu Jun has described how, at the August 1962 CCP CC meeting in Beidaihe, Mao linked domestic “revisionism” with “revisionism” on the international plane.²⁸ In doing so, Mao may have also drawn an equation (in class terms) between the two types of revisionism. During the GLF and afterward, Mao had urged “class struggle” against those in the CCP who were “revisionist” enemies; such comrades, by advocating “revisionism,” had clearly positioned themselves out of the domestic Communist movement. Perhaps Mao, having connected domestic and international “revisionism,” was now willing to draw the same conclusion about the Soviet Union—that it had become a class enemy by virtue of its “revisionism” and, therefore, clearly stood outside the international Communist movement. Soviet advocacy of nuclear non-proliferation in 1963 only confirmed Mao’s thinking. By 1964, the CCP officially declared that the USSR was no longer a socialist state, and there was thus no longer a state with which to be in solidarity.²⁹

When the Sino-Soviet split burst onto the world stage in the early 1960s, scholars had an understandably difficult job of explaining the event. Not only did the mutual recriminations starkly contrast with the many years of (apparent) socialist solidarity, but also there was exceedingly limited access to useful source

materials. Historians can now benefit from a highly useful array of documents, leading to a much greater appreciation of the role that ideology—particularly as it was manifested in domestic politics—played in the split. The “domestic-politics-centered” approach has its limitations, however, as it downplays the extent to which international factors (specifically, alliance relations, understood in terms of international socialist solidarity) shaped Beijing’s decision-making. This article offers an alliance-centered approach, not necessarily as a competitor to the domestic politics approach, but certainly as a necessary adjunct. Indeed, an analysis of pertinent events—in particular, the relatively neglected interregnum period between 1960 and 1962—shows that the CCP leadership, and Mao himself, strove to maintain the alliance even into 1961. What finally destroyed the alliance was Mao’s conclusion that the Soviet Union could not be salvaged as socialist state, thus forever destroying the prospects for international socialist solidarity.

Notes

¹ “Long Live Leninism” is a statement that originally appeared in the 16 April 1960 issue of *Hongqi*. It is reproduced in G.F. Hudson, Richard Lowenthal and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds., *The Sino-Soviet Dispute* (London: China Quarterly, 1961), 82–112.

² For further background and explanation of these scholarly debates, see the introduction of Lorenz M. Luthi’s book, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

³ Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 396.

⁴ See Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brothers in Arms* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 30–31; Jian Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 9.

⁵ Westad, *Brothers in Arms*, 31.

⁶ Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 82.

⁷ Zhang Shu Guang, *Economic Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 274.

⁸ Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China*, 385.

⁹ Niu Jun, “The Birth of the People’s Republic of China and the Road to the Korean War,” in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *Cambridge History of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 221–243.

¹⁰ Westad, “Fighting for Friendship: Mao, Stalin, and the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8/9 (Winter 1996): 225.

¹¹ See Zhang Shu Guang and Jian Chen, “The Emerging Disputes Between Beijing and Moscow,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (Winter 1995): 148–163; Westad, “Mao on Sino-Soviet Relations: Conversations with the Soviet Ambassador,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (Winter 1995): 157, 164–169.

¹² Mark Kramer, “The USSR Foreign Ministry’s Appraisal of Sino-Soviet Relations in the Eve of the Split,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (Winter 1995): 172.

¹³ Vladislav Zubok, “The Mao-Khrushchev Conversations, 31 July–3 August 1958 and 2 October 1959,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 12/13 (2001): 251.

¹⁴ Guang and Chen, “The Emerging Disputes Between Beijing and Moscow,” 151.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Niu Jun, “1962: The Eve of the Left Turn in China’s Foreign Policy,” *Cold War International History Project Working Paper* No. 48 (October 2005), 5.

¹⁷ Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 69.

- ¹⁸ Guang and Chen, "The Emerging Disputes Between Beijing and Moscow," 152.
- ¹⁹ Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 207–211.
- ²⁰ Guang and Chen, "The Emerging Disputes Between Beijing and Moscow," 158.
- ²¹ Kramer, "The USSR Foreign Ministry's Appraisal of Sino-Soviet Relations," 174.
- ²² Zubok, "Khrushchev's Nuclear Promise to Beijing During the 1958 Crisis," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (Winter 1995): 218, 225–226.
- ²³ Chen, "The Tibetan Rebellion of 1959 and China's Changing Relations with India and the Soviet Union," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 93–94.
- ²⁴ Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 82–83.
- ²⁵ Niu Jun, "1962," 9–10.
- ²⁶ See "Document II: Mao's Conversation with Chervnenko, 26 December 1960," in Westad, "Mao on Sino-Soviet Relations: Conversations with the Soviet Ambassador," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6/7 (Winter 1995): 169.
- ²⁷ Guang and Chen, "The Emerging Disputes Between Beijing and Moscow," 152–153.
- ²⁸ See Niu Jun, "1962."
- ²⁹ Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China*, 396.