THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT AND AMERICAN SECURITY CONCERNS

Jonathan D. Pollack
and
Richard H. Solomon

January 1979
The Rand Paper Series

Papers are issued by The Rand Corporation as a service to its professional staff. Their purpose is to facilitate the exchange of ideas among those who share the author’s research interests; Papers are not reports prepared in fulfillment of Rand’s contracts or grants. Views expressed in a Paper are the author’s own, and are not necessarily shared by Rand or its research sponsors.

The Rand Corporation
Santa Monica, California 90406
THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT AND AMERICAN SECURITY CONCERNS*

Jonathan D. Pollack
and
Richard H. Solomon
The Rand Corporation

The Sino-Soviet conflict has been a major factor shaping international relations for nearly two decades. What began in the late 1950s as an ideological and personal dispute between Soviet and Chinese leaders seems today a virtual fixture in the global political and military environment, with major consequences for American foreign policy and defense planning.

The origins of the Sino-Soviet conflict, though highly complicated and still imperfectly understood, are based on factors almost completely beyond American planning or control. During the early 1950s, leaders in both Moscow and Peking generally shared a view of the United States as their principal political and military adversary. This shared perspective began to break down as the USSR gained a growing interest in ameliorating the Soviet-American "Cold War," and as Moscow's policy of seeking accommodation with the West adversely affected China's national security and domestic political objectives. Perhaps the most profound event breaking the Sino-Soviet alliance was Moscow's unwillingness to back China's initiative in precipitating the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1958. At the same time, Chinese sensitivities about Soviet interference in their internal politics became increasingly acute.

Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Tse-tung, in particular, saw dangers for the People's Republic of China (PRC) in maintaining an unduly close alignment with the USSR. More than any other leader, Mao raised the sensitive issues of Chinese political autonomy and national security,

at first privately but by the late 1950s with increasing bluntness and public visibility. As the political feud deepened, neither Peking nor Moscow proved able or willing to reconcile their differences. Events which seemingly should have drawn the Communist world together, such as America's involvement in the Vietnam war, had the opposite effect of exacerbating Soviet and Chinese differences. The Russians engaged in a vain attempt to excommunicate China from the fractionated International Communist Movement, while Peking sought to denigrate Moscow's standing in the movement and establish an alternative center of "revolutionary" leadership.

By the mid-1960s, what initially had been a political dispute over foreign policy strategy and the appropriate path to building a socialist economy degenerated into a military confrontation over disputed national borders and competition for influence among the states of the developing world. During the latter half of the decade, military dispositions were progressively strengthened on both sides of the Sino-Soviet frontier, with serious armed clashes occurring in the winter and spring of 1969.

While the circumstances surrounding these border clashes remain unclear to Western observers, their galvanizing effect on Sino-Soviet tensions was undeniable. Although Moscow's intimations of a full-scale war with China never materialized, the clashes precipitated profound military and political reorientations by the PRC and USSR. Dramatic increases occurred in the number and strength of conventional and nuclear forces deployed along the border by both countries. This military confrontation continues unabated to the present day, and exerts a major influence on the defense planning and foreign policies of both states.

The political transformation wrought by the threat of a Sino-Soviet war played a major part in the radical transformation of international relationships during the 1970s. No situation was more decisive in convincing leaders in both Peking and Moscow that they had far more to fear from each other than they did from the United States. The irony in these altered circumstances remains substantial. For a full decade, the United States had confronted a seemingly united Communist
world and had borne the burdens of a two-front confrontation with Soviet and Chinese power at each extreme of the Eurasian land mass. Even as the two major Communist powers increasingly diverged in the 1960s, American defense planning continued to be based on the assumption of adversarial relations with both the USSR and PRC. Then, with dramatic suddenness in 1971, both Moscow and Peking sought improved relations with Washington in order to enhance their security and political strength vis-à-vis one another.

It is this latter development which has best characterized the complex interactions between American, China, and Russia in the last decade. Regardless of the periodic fluctuations in both Soviet-American and Chinese-American relations, neither Communist power has been willing to wholly jeopardize its relationship with the United States, as such a development would incalculably strengthen the hand of its major adversary. Thus, Moscow's continuing fear of a possible anti-Soviet coalition among the U.S., Western Europe, Japan, and China sustains the USSR's pursuit of détente and arms control agreements with the United States. At the same time, Chinese fears of Soviet political-military encirclement and possible attack have led Peking into an increasing range of cooperative ventures with the major Western powers and Japan, culminating in the recent normalization of Sino-American relations. The fact that normalization has taken place without any near-term prospect of resolving the Taiwan issue merely underscores this conclusion.

It is evident, therefore, that neither the Soviet Union nor China wishes to see its ties with the United States degenerate to the point of political rupture or open military conflict. This situation places the U.S. in a highly advantageous position relative to the two major Communist powers. It would be foolish not to recognize the benefits accruing to American foreign policy and security interests from the deep and seemingly irreconcilable divisions in the Communist world, even as one must also affirm that the Sino-Soviet conflict was neither the result of purposeful American actions nor is it readily subject to manipulation from Washington. While the unlikely event of a reconciliation between Peking and Moscow would not serve American interests, neither would a Sino-Soviet war. The U.S. is best served by a situation
in which it has better relations with Moscow and Peking than they have with each other, and by steadily improving relations with both the USSR and PRC.

The tasks confronting American policymakers as they seek to deal with Moscow and Peking in the post-normalization period are made no easier by these general perspectives. Beyond a shared interest in stable, peaceful relations with both states, American policies towards the USSR and PRC necessarily differ. Soviet power and foreign policy objectives, now and in the future, will be far greater and more threatening to American interests than those of China. The USSR constitutes a global political and military competitor of the United States; and this can only serve to emphasize the singular importance of Soviet-American relations. Regardless of any differences or tensions of the moment between Washington and Moscow, the strategic arms rivalry and the need to control it assumes an unavoidably central place on the agenda of American foreign policy.

In contrast, China's relationship with the United States is still very much emergent. Peking's power is simply far less than that of the U.S. and USSR, and is certain to remain so for decades to come. Unlike American dealings with Moscow, however, we clearly share a set of security concerns with Peking. At the same time, as was evident in Sino-Soviet policy differences in the late 1950s, Peking holds a very different perspective on how to deal with its major security problem, as is evident in continuing Chinese criticism of détente and the SALT process.

These differing circumstances necessarily affect our relations with both Communist powers as well as our perceptions of their dealings with one another. American policy must seek to avoid actions that are likely to provoke either state into action against the other, or draw them together. To the extent that U.S. policy toward either the USSR or PRC should give undue emphasis to the anxieties and rivalry which divide the two states, we could rapidly undermine the American goal of stable relations with both. Thus, U.S. actions consciously designed to exploit differences between Russia and China would not represent
a prudent approach to policy. It would be certain to dissipate a singularity valuable American political resource: the continued positioning of the United States at a point where it can seek to develop positive relations with both major Communist powers.

It is our belief, therefore, that the most appropriate American policy is one of distance if not detachment from the Sino-Soviet rivalry. While we cannot remain blind to the effects of the dispute, the differences between Moscow and Peking appear sufficiently profound to endure irrespective of American actions. Indeed, purposeful efforts to play on Sino-Soviet differences are only likely to alienate us from constructive relations with either country. Two decades of bitter political conflict, now sustained by a tense military confrontation, will not readily dissipate. The most likely future of Sino-Soviet relations is one of neither war nor peace, but of further rivalry and mutual antagonism.

In important respects the Sino-Soviet conflict seems to have become institutionalized: in competition for the allegiance of less-developed countries, the Communist states and parties, and now for positive relations with the West. At present there does not appear to be a coalition of leaders in either Peking or Moscow sufficiently persuaded that lesser tensions would better serve Chinese or Soviet interests. This conclusion holds significance for continuation of the present military confrontation between the USSR and PRC. Leaders in Peking are now giving heightened priority to China's military modernization in order to diminish their country's vulnerabilities to Soviet political pressure or outright attack. Of late, Peking has shown particular interest in the purchase of arms from Western Europe to reduce the weaknesses in Chinese defenses. Thus, the circumstances prevailing in the 1950s which created some incentives in Peking for an active, meaningful Sino-Soviet security alliance are most unlikely to be recreated in the future. Conflicts between these two states has

taken on proportions and a significance that goes well beyond the personal suspicions and antagonisms that divided Mao and Khrushchev. Current Sino-Soviet tensions over Indochina seem but the most immediate source of potential conflict between the two states.

Although we anticipate continuing rivalry if not conflict between Moscow and Peking, the past history of Sino-Soviet relations has been sufficiently complex and changeable to warrant a strong dose of caution and humility in any projections about its future. At various junctures, Western observers have failed to anticipate the twists and turns of the foreign policies of the USSR and PRC. Comparable surprises could well occur again. A diminution of Sino-Soviet hostility is most likely to occur in the context of major generational changes in leadership now under way in both countries. The eventual emergence of new leaders in China and Soviet Union who are far less wedded to the policies and perceptions of the past seems likely, although at present we have little idea who such leaders might be, much less their attitudes on foreign policy and defense issues. Hence, considerable circumspection is called for in any predictions or policy recommendations that one might make based upon anticipated future trends. But an eventual diminution of Sino-Soviet hostility should not be ruled out of future projections.

If our view of the future is clouded by uncertainty, then a prudent American policy seems called for in dealings with both Moscow and Peking. Even though American interests and foreign policy goals have converged with certain policies currently supported in both Communist capitals, this has not—at the same time—eliminated major U.S. differences with the two powers. In the best of circumstances, American relations with Moscow, as well as with Peking, will remain in a competitive range somewhere between confrontation and full rapprochement. Our ties with each state should be based on their own merits, not on any effort to gain support in one capital at the expense of our ties to the other.

Thus, however alluring might seem the prospect of actively manipulating Sino-Soviet differences, such a policy is most likely to be both unwise and ineffective, and could prove dangerously counterproductive.
The future of Sino-Soviet relations will be determined far more by leaders and political circumstances in Moscow and Peking than by those in Washington. While the United States cannot be disinterested in anticipating and influencing this future, our capacity to meaningfully affect Sino-Soviet relations without seriously undermining other key objectives of U.S. foreign policy remains limited. Recognizing such limits remains essential to formalizing sound policies toward the Soviet Union and China, now and in the future.