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The Sino-Soviet Split: A Domestic Ideology Analysis

Caleb Ringger

Introduction

In December 1960, the *Peking Review*, China's only English national news magazine, celebrated the "Eternal, Unbreakable Sino-Soviet Friendship" on its front page (*Peking Review* 1960). The alliance between the world's largest communist nations certainly seemed ironclad, at least from an outside perspective. But over the next decade, relations between the two allies completely deteriorated, ultimately resulting in bloody confrontation on the Sino-Soviet border, where dozens were killed in violent clashes in March 1969. What accounts for the rapid deterioration in relations between China and the Soviet Union? How could two seemingly close allies turn into enemies so quickly?

Answering this question has important implications for understanding the foreign relations of revolutionary states and the wider study of why interstate conflict occurs. Mao's China and the USSR were the two most prominent revolutionary states of the twentieth century, products of two of the few true social revolutions. Many theorists of revolutionary foreign policy predict that revolutionary states will come into conflict with non-revolutionary or reactionary powers (Kissinger 1999; Halliday 1999; Terhalle 2009; Colgan 2013), but few predict how or if revolutionary states will come into conflict with one another, as happened between the Soviet Union and China. Therefore, the Sino-Soviet conflict is particularly interesting.

Numerous theorists and historians have noted a range of reasons why relations between China and the USSR deteriorated in the late 1950s and 1960s. However, I propose an explanation for the Sino-Soviet split that is primarily ideological in nature. Simply put, relations between the Soviet Union and China deteriorated because of growing ideological differences between their leaders, which created animosity that manifested in personal attacks, refusal to coordinate policy, and eventually violence.

More specifically, I place the blame for the split primarily on Mao Zedong, who intentionally adopted more extreme ideological positions and demonized moderates to gain power over his domestic rivals. Examples of these extreme ideological moves include conducting political purges of his ideological enemies, such as the Anti-Rightist Campaign, provoking international crises, such as the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis, and forcibly implementing extreme and ultimately disastrous socialist economic policies during the Great Leap Forward.

I will argue that these extreme positions, which were the direct result of Mao's doctrine of "continuous revolution," demanded perpetual ideological radicalization and rejection of moderates and conservatives. As I will demonstrate, this radical ideology led Mao to associate his domestic enemies with the more ideologically conservative Soviet Union. Mao then explicitly associated the Soviets with his domestic ideological enemies and viewed them as essentially the same threat. He then began treating the Soviets like he treated his domestic enemies, which provoked conflict and eventually led to the total breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations.

My dependent variable, i.e. the Sino-Soviet split, takes a variety of forms. In its early stages, starting around 1956, the split manifested mostly as private disagreement between Soviet and Chinese leaders. However, starting around 1960, the conflict manifested more publicly with openly hostile public statements at international conferences and the withdrawal of all Soviet specialists from China. The conflict escalated through the rest of the 1960s decade, ultimately culminating in deadly military clashes at the Sino-Soviet border in 1969 and Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on the Sino-Soviet split falls into two broad categories: ideological explanations and realist explanations. Ideological explanations are not all identical, but agree on the assertion that the difference in ideology between China and the Soviet Union created tension that caused the split. Realist explanations argue that geopolitical factors, such as balance of power, territorial disputes, and ethnic or nationalist tensions, led to the split. Realists do not argue that China and the Soviet Union were not ideologically different, but they do argue that ideology was not the primary reason for the split.

Ideological Explanations

Ideological distance explanations predict that interstate conflict is likely to occur when two states grow more ideologically distant. Haas (2005, 6–14), for example, argues that ideological distance leads to a breakdown in communication, fear of demonstration effects, and a tribalistic in-group–out-group worldview, thus leading to conflict. With respect to the Sino-Soviet split, Haas argues that Mao Zedong's ideological radicalization, best demonstrated by the Great Leap Forward, brought him into conflict with the more conservative Khrushchev (146–175). As Mao and Khrushchev grew apart ideologically, they clashed on issues of both domestic and foreign policy.

As I will explain, my argument agrees with Haas's ideological distance theory insofar as it argues that ideological concerns played a primary role in the Sino-Soviet split. However, I disagree that simple ideological distance was the primary reason for the split. China and the USSR did not engage in armed conflict with every state they had ideological differences with, and both states softened relations with the United States, which they were obviously more ideologically distant from, in the years before and after the Sino-Soviet split. Additionally, this theory fails to apply to many states outside of the Sino-Soviet context. Alliances between ideologically distant states are not uncommon, particularly when common strategic interests align, as Haas himself has noted (2021).

Lorenz Lüthi (2008), one of the leading voices in the ideological camp, argues that disagreements over how to implement socialism at home and direct the international socialist bloc caused the split. He identifies Mao's radical economic policies, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization process, and Soviet policies of peaceful coexistence with the West as the three main points of tension that contributed to the breakdown of the alliance (2). He also argues that Mao actively encouraged the Sino-Soviet split as a way to legitimize his domestic policies and demonize his moderate domestic opponents. Lüthi, like most ideological authors, acknowledges non-ideological factors that contributed to the collapse of the alliance, but argues that they were results, not causes, of the split.

I generally find Lüthi's argument to be the most convincing explanation for the split. His theory explains the available evidence, including recently declassified archival evidence from both China and the Soviet Union (1). It also accounts for the timing of the split better than realist explanations, which sometimes ignore early signs of the split and focus on its manifestations (Radchenko 2009; Shen and Xia 2017). Lüthi's actor-driven explanation demonstrates how specific decisions by individuals like Mao and Khrushchev led to an unexpected outcome that surprised most outside observers.

Mingjiang Li is another important voice in the ideological camp. In his 2012 book *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split: Ideological Dilemma*, Li applies the concept of an ideological dilemma to Sino-Soviet relations. The ideological dilemma is similar to the security dilemma: any regime's attempt to strengthen ideological legitimacy in their country is interpreted as a threat to the ideological legitimacy of a neighboring country with a distant ideology. Li argues that Mao's foreign and domestic ideological struggles were intimately linked, and that he provoked the split to gain domestic power (5). This in turn created an ideological dilemma that led to conflict with the Soviet regime.

Li's argument is strong, and it is similar to Lüthi's in its conclusions. The main difference is that Li goes into more depth with the exact mechanism of the split, applying the concept of two-level game theory to Sino-Soviet relations. While I agree with Li's assertion that Chinese domestic and foreign policy were intimately linked, I find Li's framework to be overly rigid at times, leading him to ignore elements of human agency, such as the personalities of Mao and Khrushchev, in favor of his structural theoretical framework.

Robert Snyder's (1999) theory of externalization, though it deals primarily with the United States, is applicable to the Sino-Soviet split. Snyder argues that Third World

revolutionary states grow hostile to the United States as the radical faction of the revolutionary party tries to assert dominance over moderate domestic rivals by associating them with the United States, a non-revolutionary enemy. In the Sino-Soviet case, Snyder's theory would predict that China came into conflict with the USSR as Mao Zedong asserted his dominance over moderates within China by associating them with the Soviet Union, a more moderate foreign power.

Snyder's theory is valuable to understand the basic concept of how Mao externalized his conflict with moderate domestic rivals to conflict with the Soviet Union. However, the exact details of Snyder's mechanism are not applicable to the Sino-Soviet case. For example, Snyder's theory predicts that the breakdown in relations will occur while the revolutionary state is still in the process of revolution, as revolutionaries fight against the bourgeois elites who have links with the status quo power (270–71). In the Sino-Soviet case, conflict did not occur until after the revolutionary movement had long since succeeded, and it occurred as a newly moderate faction emerged, not in response to traditional bourgeois elites.

Realist Explanations

Realist explanations fall into three broad categories: national interest theories, structural theories, and strategic triangle theories. National interest theories emphasize how China and the Soviet Union had fundamentally different national interests that made cooperation on foreign policy impossible. Robinson (1967, 135–147), for example, identifies a number of conflicting national interests between the two nations that he claims inevitably led to conflict, including economic influence in Xinjiang and Korea, and political influence in Korea and Vietnam.

The national interest explanation has three main problems. First, many of the conflicting interests Robinson identifies could easily be considered ideological conflicts. For example, Robinson lists “keeping Stalin's ideological authority high,” “imposition of Chinese ideological primacy,” and “war or peace as alternative environments for transition to socialism” as primary issues of Chinese national interest (153–56). Each of these interests are largely ideological in nature.

Secondly, many national interest concerns did not become relevant in the conflict until after the conflict had already begun over ideological concerns. Robinson identifies conflict over intervention in Vietnam and recovery of lost territory as key Chinese national interests, though China did not begin to actively pursue either of these policies until after conflict over ideology had begun (Goldstein 2001, 985). Border clashes, like those over Zhenbao Island and Xinjiang, did not occur until 1969—nearly a decade after earlier ideological disagreements had caused diplomatic relations to deteriorate (985). Though these clashes were undoubtedly part of the split, they are more properly seen as results of the split rather than causes of it.

Finally, even the basic idea that Mao Zedong was acting in the Chinese national interest by breaking with the Soviet Union is doubtful. Mao's China was mired in abject poverty and isolated from the rest of the world with no powerful consistent allies

outside of the Soviet Union. Breaking with its most powerful ally, especially during the early Cold War when the United States was at its most militantly anti-communist, cannot be considered as acting in the country's geopolitical national interest. A national interest-prioritizing leader would have stayed as close to the Soviet Union as possible, accepting all its economic, technological, and military aid in order to protect its survival in a hostile geopolitical environment.

Strategic triangle explanations emphasize the supposed tripolar nature of Cold War-era international relations. Rather than a bipolar rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, strategic triangle theory sees the Cold War as a shifting balance of power between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. The Sino-Soviet split, and the subsequent softening in relations between the United States and China, was thus a strategic choice to counterbalance the rising power of the Soviet Union in the late 1960s (Thornton 1987, 48–49).

Strategic triangle theories have three main problems. First, the theory predicts that the United States and China would form a new alliance, or at least soften relations, to counterbalance Soviet power. While the US and China did in fact soften relations, at least partially in order to counterbalance the Soviets, this rapprochement did not happen until the late 1960s and early 1970s, around a decade after the Sino-Soviet split had begun (Panda 1997, 46). Second, the theory takes for granted that China was a great power at the time, which the evidence does not support. China could hardly be considered an economic or military power even in the region, much less the world (Morrison 2019, 2–3). Third, it is unclear why a developing nation like China in the 1960s would provoke a conflict with its most powerful neighbor and seek an alliance with a faraway ideological enemy rather than simply stay on good terms with its neighbor and avoid conflict.

Structural realist explanations emphasize the fundamentally imbalanced nature of the Sino-Soviet alliance of 1950. Sergey Radchenko's *Two Suns in the Heavens* (2009) is perhaps the most important modern work to use the structural realist framework. Radchenko (2009) argues that the Sino-Soviet alliance was structurally favorable to the Soviets over the Chinese, thus creating an imbalance of power that was intolerable to Mao, who demanded Chinese superiority. He sees China as bidding for superiority within the communist movement, but frames it more as a power struggle than an ideological one (36).

The structural realist hypothesis is the most convincing alternative hypothesis, though, as I will show, it still does not explain the bulk of the evidence. The hypothesis is attractive because, as theorists like Radchenko point out, the Sino-Soviet split included more than just ideological bickering. In my view, three major points raised by realists do not stand up to scrutiny.

First, realists claim that the split could not have been ideologically motivated, because shortly after the split occurred, China softened relations with the United States (Khoo 2005, 529–531). Realists argue that if Mao split with the Soviets over Soviet ideological softening, he would not then proceed to meet with Nixon and Kissinger. This accusation is weakened by the fact that this rapprochement with the US did not

happen until almost fifteen years after the split began and in a completely new geopolitical context. By the early 1970s, Sino-Soviet relations had already deteriorated so thoroughly that China seriously feared an all-out war with the USSR (Lüthi 2012, 394). Faced with such a prospect, Mao was understandably unable to fully commit to constantly antagonizing the United States. Rapprochement with the United States was part of a strategic calculation by the Chinese in an effort to avoid a two-front war with the world's two largest superpowers (Segal 1980, 500). Certainly, it did not represent a sudden ideological about-face, as evidenced by the quick stagnation of the Sino-American rapprochement (Yang and Xia 2010).

Second, realists claim that the roots of the conflict lay in the fundamentally imbalanced nature of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950, which put China in a position of inferiority that it refused to tolerate. While the treaty was certainly imbalanced, the evidence does not suggest that this dynamic was the main reason for the split. Mao's complaints about Khrushchev and the Soviet Union were consistently ideological in nature. Mao constantly called the Soviets "revisionists," accused them of forsaking Marxism, and defended Stalinism, Khrushchev's main ideological enemy (Nottingham Communist Group 1980; *People's Daily* 1964). This suggests that ideology took precedence over realist concerns. Stalin was, after all, one of the authors of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950 (Heinzig 1998; 328). If Mao's principal concern was with the structure of the treaty, it seems unlikely that he would routinely defend the man who authored it and, in some ways, strong-armed China into accepting its unequal terms.

Third, realists point to border clashes over disputed territories between the two nations as evidence that the split was more about material concerns than ideology. However, I, along with other ideological scholars like Lüthi, argue that these border clashes were manifestations of the ideological split, not causes of it. The timing bears this out. China and the USSR had unresolved border questions for their entire existence, but the first active border disputes did not occur until 1960, after relations between the two countries had already deteriorated significantly (Radchenko 2009, 110). The most famous border clash, the battle at Zhenbao Island, did not occur until 1969, over a decade after relations had already broken down. Prior to the ideological rift between Khrushchev and Mao that emerged around 1958, the disputed border regions were relatively peaceful, suggesting that border clashes happened as a result of the split, not as a cause of it.

For these reasons, and more that I will detail below, I argue that the primary reason for the Sino-Soviet split was the ideological divide between Mao Zedong and the post-Stalin Soviet Union. My paper will proceed in two parts. First, I will demonstrate how and when the ideological split occurred from 1956 to 1960. This will show that the independent variable, ideological divide, did in fact occur immediately prior to the split. Second, I will detail how exactly this ideological divide translated into a breakdown in relations between the two nations after 1960.

The Ideological Split: Roots of the Conflict

The Sino-Soviet split was a long and relatively gradual process. Therefore, I will not focus on the entire decade-and-a-half long process of the breakdown. I will focus primarily on the early stages, which allows me to determine what events caused the split rather than simply resulted from it or worsened it. Specifically, I will focus on the period between 1956 and 1962. I chose 1956 because I see Khrushchev's Secret Speech, which inaugurated the Soviet Union's process of de-Stalinization, as laying the foundation of the ideological divide. I chose 1962 as an end date because the evidence suggests that the split was complete by that point, though there is no scholarly consensus on an exact date.

Historical Context

The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance, Friendship, and Mutual Cooperation was signed in February 1950 by Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin. It came shortly after Mao and his Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emerged victorious from the Chinese Civil War in 1949. The alliance proceeded relatively smoothly for the next several years as the Soviet Union gave significant economic aid and sent hundreds of specialists to develop the Chinese economy (Zhang 1998, 197–198). China, which had endured a decade of devastation at the hands of the Japanese and the civil war, relied heavily on this Soviet aid for reconstruction efforts (197–198). While Mao and Stalin butted heads on a few issues, notably over Soviet involvement in the Korean War, these disagreements never translated into open conflict.

Immediately after Stalin's death in 1953, the alliance continued to progress positively. Li (2012, 22) notes that when Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev first visited Beijing in 1954, there was "a possibly unprecedented friendly atmosphere between the two sides." As Li (2012) reports, the number of Soviet advisors in China reached a peak of five thousand, and the Soviets collaborated with Beijing on a number of Chinese development projects.

Secret Speech and its Repercussions

This cooperation began to change in 1956, when Khrushchev made a monumental speech entitled "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," also known popularly as the "Secret Speech." This speech, given at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, railed against the policies and personality of Stalin and shocked the communist world. While the speech did not immediately lead to a breakdown in relations between China and the Soviet Union, it clearly laid the foundation for future conflict and signaled the first point of serious ideological distance between Mao and Khrushchev (Lüthi 2008, 48; Chen 2001, 67; Sheng, Zhai, and Kaple 2012, 106).

Khrushchev's (1956) speech focused its criticism on the cult of personality Stalin had built around himself and the violent purges he enacted against his political enemies. Khrushchev harshly criticized Stalin's "absolutely insufferable character," "brutal

violence,” and “abuse of power.” While Mao had not yet developed what would later become his own fanatical personality cult, the similarities between Khrushchev’s criticisms of Stalin and his later criticisms of Mao are striking.

More than simply criticizing ideas that Mao would later adopt, the speech also threatened to undermine Mao’s ideological legitimacy by shaking confidence in communist leaders worldwide. The speech sparked heated protests, both from Stalinists furious at the Soviet government’s criticisms of their ideological leader and from anti-Stalinists furious that the Soviet government had concealed and enabled his abuses for so long (Jones 2013, 43). Riots in Georgia and North Korea threatened to undermine the support of communist leaders that ruled similarly to Stalin. Mao, who called the speech a “surprise attack” (Luthi 2008, 50) that “made a mess,” (Chen 2001, 64) was understandably disturbed by the international reaction to the speech and took measures to shore up domestic support in response.

Mao commissioned a lengthy article to be written in the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, defending Stalin as the official position of the CCP (MacFarquhar 1973; 618). The article acknowledged Stalin’s “serious mistakes,” but identified these mistakes mostly as Stalin’s policies towards China rather than the domestic terror Khrushchev had criticized. The article also praised Stalin and defended him as a “great Marxist-Leninist.” Mao developed what he called the “seventy-thirty principle” with regards to Stalin: that Stalin’s actions had been 70% correct and 30% mistaken (Chen 2001, 65).

It is relatively remarkable that Mao would go out of his way to defend Stalin, considering that Mao and Stalin’s relationship had frequently been strained. Stalin had insulted and embarrassed Mao on multiple occasions, and, as previously mentioned, they had disagreed over how to handle the Korean War (Radchenko 2009, 3–4). But Mao still chose to defend Stalin, primarily for his own ideological protection. Mao’s economic and political model, some of which he had already implemented and some of which was still in planning stages, greatly resembled Stalin’s early revolutionary model. As Khrushchev and the Soviets were moving away from a highly centralized planned economy and repressive political regime centered in the personality of an all-powerful leader, Mao felt that his own model of governance was being directly challenged by his closest ally (Radchenko 2009, 10). This is in line with Li’s (2012) model of an ideological dilemma: Mao perceived Khrushchev’s attempt to gain ideological dominance within the Soviet Union as a threat to his own divergent model.

To be clear, there is no evidence that Mao reacted with fury or unapologetic condemnation to Khrushchev’s speech (2012, 21). Public and private statements were nuanced. On one hand, Mao concurred with Khrushchev’s criticisms of Stalin and even voiced explicit criticism of the cult of the individual (MacFarquhar 1973; 618). On the other hand, Mao also noted sharply the damage the speech had done to the communist movement and ultimately argued that Stalin should still be seen as an example of a Marxist hero (Chen 2001, 65). This is to say that the Secret Speech did not immediately seriously damage the Sino-Soviet alliance. It did, however, lay the foundations

for ideological conflict in the future by illustrating how the Soviet Union's rightward-shifting ideology created tension with Mao's revolutionary ideology.

Mao's Leftward Turn

On its own, the Chinese response to the Secret Speech was certainly not enough to destroy the alliance. Following the speech, China and the Soviet Union continued to cooperate on important issues and diplomatic relations continued smoothly.

However, the Secret Speech occurred just months before Mao Zedong's domestic policy took a sharp leftward turn. This leftward turn was caused by perceived challenges to Mao's domestic legitimacy and had three manifestations in the years between 1957 and 1960, each of which I will discuss in detail. First, Mao launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign, a persecution campaign aimed at political enemies. Second, he orchestrated a military strike on Taiwanese-owned islands in an attempt to mobilize support for his radical reforms. Third, he launched the Great Leap Forward, a dramatic and ultimately disastrous attempt to forcibly establish communism instead of implementing the more moderate Soviet development model. Each of these pivotal events will be discussed in detail below.

As I will demonstrate below, Mao's leftward turn brought him into conflict with domestic moderates, who challenged his legitimacy, and the Soviet Union, which had previously overseen China's economic development. In response, Mao doubled down on his radicalism and portrayed the moderates and the Soviets as part of a wider conspiracy of "revisionists" who were trying to influence China's revolution for their own gain. In short, Mao and the Soviets disagreed fundamentally about how to implement revolution both at home and in foreign policy, leading to outright conflict by 1961.

Anti-Rightist Campaign

The Anti-Rightist Campaign was a political purge of moderates and conservatives in Chinese society. The campaign was started in response to challenges of legitimacy Mao perceived both at home and abroad. It demonstrates two important parts of the theory: first, that Mao's ideological radicalization came as a response to ideological challenges both within China and abroad, and second, that Mao's radicalization brought him into conflict with the Soviets over the proper method of implementing socialism.

By 1957, two major events had occurred that challenged Mao Zedong's legitimacy and influenced him to adopt more radical policies. First, anti-communist protests in Hungary appeared to seriously threaten the stability of communist regimes worldwide (Békés, Byrne, and Rainer 2002; xiii–xiv). To the Chinese, these were not anti-Soviet protests, but anti-communist protests, and thus a serious threat to worldwide communism (Chen 2001, 157). The Chinese urged Moscow not to withdraw troops from Budapest and advocated strongly to put down the protests, which they characterized as "reactionary" (Chen 2001, 155).

The second major event that pushed Mao leftward was the failure of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. The campaign had started in 1956 as an attempt to cultivate diversity of thought in China, ostensibly reasoning that as more ideas were proposed,

more good ideas would be proposed. The campaign was sanctioned and encouraged by Mao himself, but it quickly backfired on him (Rádványi 1970, 127–128). Political dissent spread among the now emboldened intellectual elite, and Mao quickly responded with violence and censorship. This poses a puzzle for historians, as it seems obvious in retrospect that this would happen. Some have proposed that the Hundred Flowers Campaign was an intentionally laid trap, intended to lure out intellectual dissenters into the open so Mao could easily identify and silence them (Chung 2011, 397; Chen 2001, 161). In light of his many seemingly earnest statements about encouraging intellectual innovation, I find it likely that Mao misperceived his own popularity and did not anticipate the level of dissent that would arise during the campaign (Tsai 1999, 31; Chen 2001; 161). Regardless of his motivations, the campaign ultimately resulted in increased political repression and forced revolutionary policies.

The Anti-Rightist Campaign was initiated in response to both of these events (Chen 2001, 339). Critics of Mao's regime were labeled "rightists" and persecuted in order to silence dissent and consolidate state power (Tsai 1999, 32). Low estimates claim that three hundred thousand people were persecuted, ranging from censorship to arrest to execution (Chung 2011, 410). This campaign consolidated state power, intimidated the population, and enshrined Mao's position as the ultimate authority on acceptable political views (391).

During the Anti-Rightist Campaign, Mao's attitude towards Khrushchev became noticeably more hostile. He ordered a new article to be written in the *People's Daily*, titled "Another Discussion of the Historical Lessons of the Proletarian Dictatorship," which took a more hostile tone towards de-Stalinization by pointing out how it had led to the uprising in Hungary (Chen 2001, 159). The article reiterated China's position towards Stalin—that he had made some mistakes, but was nonetheless a great leader. When giving instructions to the article's authors, Mao reportedly stated, "Khrushchev abandoned Stalin, and the others used it to attack him, causing him to be besieged from all directions" (160). This demonstrates how Mao saw Khrushchev's de-Stalinization as a challenge to his authority and pushed back in order to maintain legitimacy.

Two lessons can be learned from the Anti-Rightist Campaign. First, Mao was becoming increasingly radical and hostile to moderate Soviet political ideology in response to challenges to domestic authority. Second, Mao was becoming more like Stalin, giving further reason why he would see Soviet de-Stalinization as a threat. These two lessons make it clear that the process of ideological divide was well underway by 1957, when the Anti-Rightist Campaign was ongoing.

Second Taiwan Strait Crisis

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis was a period of several weeks of tension between China and the United States over the island of Taiwan that nearly resulted in nuclear war. It seriously damaged Sino-Soviet relations by dragging the Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war over an issue they considered relatively unimportant. While the geopolitical implications of the crisis are obvious, I argue based on evidence below that the crisis was primarily the product of Mao's ideological radicalization. Therefore, it

illustrates another important example of how the ideological rift between the two nations created conflict.

The Taiwan Straits Crisis occurred when China began heavy artillery shelling of the Taiwanese-owned Kinmen Island in August 1958. China did so without informing Khrushchev, which was in direct violation of Article IV of the 1950 treaty, which stipulated that both nations would consult with each other over all important international issues. Following the shelling, the White House released a threatening press release hinting at the possibility of using nuclear weapons against the Chinese (Lüthi 2008, 101). The cavalier way Mao treated the American nuclear threat disturbed and alienated the Soviets, who felt they were being dragged into a potential nuclear conflict by their non-nuclear ally over a relatively unimportant issue (Chen 2001, 190; Li 1996, 262).

While many analyses of the event emphasize China's desire to test American resolve to defend Taiwan (Brands 1988; George and Smoke 1974), evidence suggests that Mao used the event primarily as a way to mobilize his population and shore up domestic support for his planned economic reforms. Mao explicitly stated as much on multiple occasions. A week before the shelling began, Mao stated that "tension [is] to our competitive advantage" and "tension can help gain membership for Communist parties" (Chen 2001, 180). During the crisis, he stated that "Crisis situations allow us to mobilize forces, mobilize backward people, and mobilize people in the middle, and can therefore promote the Great Leap Forward in economic construction" (Chen 2001, 175; Lüthi 2008, 105). These quotations give strong evidence that Mao intentionally provoked the crisis in order to shore up his domestic ideological legitimacy and prepare his population for the Great Leap Forward.

The immediate geopolitical implications of the Taiwan Strait Crisis are less important than what the situation demonstrates about Mao's ideological evolution and changing attitude towards the Soviet Union. Mao's radicalism had prompted him to start an international crisis and bring the world to the brink of nuclear war in order to mobilize his population for communist economic reform. Relations with the Soviet Union had been deeply strained as their ally had nearly drawn them into nuclear war with an act of aggression they had not been informed of (Lüthi 2008, 103). Visible cracks had started to form in the alliance, cracks that would only be worsened by the Great Leap Forward in the coming years.

Great Leap Forward

If the Anti-Rightist Campaign was the political manifestation of Mao's leftward turn, the Great Leap Forward was the economic manifestation. Mao intended to jump-start the Chinese economy by forcibly implementing communism and pushing agricultural and industrial production past their limits. The Great Leap Forward resulted in unimaginable catastrophe, with estimates ranging from twenty to thirty million people dying in the resulting famine (Joseph 1986, 420). The Great Leap Forward was primarily ideologically motivated, and it led to radicalization that seriously damaged Sino-Soviet relations.

Mao's decision to launch the Great Leap Forward appears to have been mostly ideological (Lüthi 2008, 112). While the particulars of the program obviously concerned themselves with material capabilities, there is no evidence that Mao intended to use the Great Leap Forward to gain a material advantage over the Soviets. He did, however, announce plans to economically compete with Great Britain by the end of the Great Leap Forward (Chen 2001, 73). To me, this reads as an ideological motivation rather than a realist one. It seems unlikely that China would specifically single out the United Kingdom, a country across the world and largely irrelevant in southeast Asia, to achieve some geopolitical relative power gain. Rather, I speculate that China targeted the United Kingdom because of the UK's status as the second most powerful capitalist nation after the United States, and a desire to demonstrate communism's superiority over capitalism.

A diversity of thought existed within communist circles about how best to transition to socialism. The Soviet model, which focused on the urban working class, had proven ineffective in China, which was dominated by an enormous rural peasant class. The Great Leap Forward, which created rural communes and focused on the peasant class, represented a major break with the Soviet-inspired policies which had influenced early CCP economic practices. Mao admitted that one of the purposes of the Great Leap Forward was to achieve full transition to communism before the Soviet Union did. He distinguished between what he called "Bureaucratic Stalinism," or the more moderate policies the Soviet Union was pursuing, with "Revolutionary Stalinism," the preferred Chinese path. In 1958, Mao announced that "we take a road opposite to that of the Soviet Union" with regards to economic development (Lüthi 2008, 88).

The response to the disaster of the Great Leap Forward was confused and sporadic, since the Chinese government did so much to repress the facts. However, as information about the catastrophe spread, domestic criticism of Mao reached unprecedented levels. Mao was forced to eventually come to terms with the abject disaster that the Great Leap Forward had been among his population. This reckoning came to a head at the Lushan work conference in August 1959. At this conference, Mao's policies were explicitly criticized, especially by Peng Dehuai, who wrote a famous letter to Mao detailing explicitly the failures of the Great Leap Forward's planning and execution (Lüthi 2008, 127).

This conference was a critical point in Mao's ideological evolution. Mao could have chosen to carefully analyze his actions, implement reforms, and listen to experts. Instead, he decided to double down. Mao heavily leaned into his supposed ideological superiority, banished Peng from politics for life, and ramped up his cult of personality (Leese 2011, 73–74). This is evidence of how Mao was growing more like Stalin, and that he responded to domestic political threats with ideological extremism. Additionally, Mao was beginning to explicitly identify his domestic ideological enemies with the Soviet Union. He called Peng Dehuai a "Soviet agent," insinuating that the Soviets were somehow to blame for the Great Leap Forward's failure (Chen 2001, 79).

The ideological radicalization of China, propelled by the Great Leap Forward and the suppression of political dissent, was the foundational and necessary precondition to the Sino-Soviet split. In 1959, Mao made a comment that succinctly summarized

exactly how far his opinion of the Soviets had fallen over the preceding half-decade: “Khrushchev ha[s] already betrayed the Marxist, proletarian undertakings; he ha[s] changed into a revisionist” (Lüthi 2008, 151). In response, Khrushchev gave an equally telling statement about Mao: “This reminds us of the atmosphere that existed in our country during I.V. Stalin’s last years of life” (154). The ideological foundation of the conflict had been fully laid.

Manifestations of Conflict

The preceding evidence demonstrates convincingly that the Soviet Union and China became ideologically distant during the five years between 1956 and 1960. Minor conflicts between the two countries ensued, though they were limited to insulting comments and a failure to coordinate on international crises. The following evidence will demonstrate how exactly that ideological rift led to outright conflict, ultimately ending in armed confrontation. In short, deep disagreements about how to implement socialism within China and oppose capitalism abroad led to the breakdown of the alliance from 1960 onward. This breakdown manifested in polemics on the international stage, the withdrawal of Soviet economic aid, and the first Sino-Soviet border clash since before the Chinese Civil War.

Visible Conflict in 1960

After the events of 1959 demonstrated just how far the two countries had drifted in their domestic ideologies, the 1960 Warsaw Pact summit, which met in Moscow, offered the first opportunity for the two sides to clash on the international stage. The atmosphere of the Warsaw Pact meeting was defined by Khrushchev’s recent decision to attend the upcoming Paris summit with leaders of the US, Great Britain, and France. The Chinese delegation in Moscow opposed Khrushchev’s peaceful coexistence policy and publicly reprimanded Khrushchev for cooperating with the capitalist enemy, sparking an ugly fight that defined the conference. After the conference ended, Mao ordered the publication of “Long Live Leninism,” a newspaper article that ostensibly celebrated Lenin’s ninetieth birthday but in reality railed against the USSR’s peaceful coexistence policy and defended the Great Leap Forward. The Soviets replied by re-publishing an article, written by Lenin, entitled “Leftism in Communism—An Infantile Disorder,” which sharply criticized those who refused peaceful coexistence (Li and Xia 2008; 563).

The planned Paris Summit never happened after the Soviets shot down a US U-2 spy plane that had been illegally surveying Soviet land. Mao responded gleefully, feeling vindicated in his position that the US could not be trusted and was a fundamental enemy of all Marxist regimes (Lüthi 2008, 165). The CCP churned out propaganda against the United States and Khrushchev alike, stoking anti-Khrushchev sentiment in the Chinese public (166).

The breakdown in relations continued rapidly throughout 1960 as the two sides clashed on domestic and foreign policy for ideological reasons. The Romanian Party Congress in Bucharest was attended by Soviet and Chinese delegates, and quickly

devolved into a public ideological boxing match. Khrushchev personally berated the Chinese delegation, criticizing both Chinese domestic policy, such as the Hundred Flowers campaign and the Great Leap Forward, and Chinese aggression internationally, such as the Sino-Indian border conflict of 1958. This conference was remarkably hostile, even by Sino-Soviet standards—the Soviet delegation distributed a sixty-eight page condemnation of Chinese domestic and foreign policy to all delegations except the Chinese party (170). At the end of the conference, China was one of just two dissenting votes (along with Albania) on a proposed set of policies favoring the Soviet point of view. After the conference, Mao and Zhou Enlai delivered a speech accusing the USSR of working against China since the very beginning—the USSR, according to them, had tried to derail the Chinese Revolution and work against the development of true socialism (173).

This speech appears to have been the final straw for Khrushchev. Following Mao and Zhou's speech, the Soviet Union suddenly and dramatically severed a number of ties with China. First, nuclear research collaboration between the two nations ceased immediately (Shen and Xia 2012, 114). Second, the Soviets stopped publishing their *Friendship* journal which they had published jointly with the Chinese (Lüthi 2008, 173). Third, and much more consequently, the Soviet Union immediately and without warning recalled all 1,400 Soviet experts which had been living in China and assisting with its economic development (McWilliams and Piotrowski 2014, 2000). It is telling that this severance did not occur during a border conflict, over trade disputes, or even over relations with the United States. It directly followed hostile verbal and written statements attacking Soviet ideology.

The withdrawal of the Soviet specialists in summer 1960 was probably the point of no return for Sino-Soviet relations. From this point forward, Mao had a convenient scapegoat to pin his domestic failings on. He immediately painted the withdrawal of specialists as a betrayal of not only China as a nation, but his personal Marxist ideology. Because many of these specialists had been assisting with the Great Leap Forward, Mao was able to blame the Soviets for whatever failures he was forced to publicly acknowledge.

Sino-Soviet relations collapsed following the withdrawal of the specialists. Trade between the two nations shrank by about twenty percent in 1960, and Mao suspended existing deliveries of Chinese goods (Lüthi 2008, 179). It was at this point, in November 1960, that the first border conflict began, over cattle-grazing rights in the region of Buz Aigyr. The Chinese border official accused the Soviets of staging border incidents to incite conflict as part of a "general plan" to undermine the Chinese state (181). Despite attempts in late 1960 to find common ground, Sino-Soviet relations had suffered a blow from which they would not recover for decades (183–191).

Mao's Withdrawal and Return, 1961–62

The next phase of Sino-Soviet relations, starting in early 1961, was defined by a critical change: Mao's temporary withdrawal from political life after extensive criticism of his Great Leap Forward policies (Chen 2001, 82). This period provides a strong test

of my theory, since the independent variable, Mao Zedong and his radical ideology, is not present. Thus, if Sino-Soviet relations significantly improved during this period, my theory would be supported. Accordingly, my theory also predicts that Sino-Soviet relations would begin to decline again in late 1962 after Mao returned to political life.

Indeed, that is exactly what the evidence shows. Lüthi calls this period from 1961–1962 an “ambiguous truce” in which Sino-Soviet relations proceed “on a relaxed note” (Lüthi 2008, 197). As China reeled from economic devastation, it turned to the Soviet Union for both advice and aid. Dealing primarily with Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping rather than Mao, Khrushchev demonstrated increased generosity, offering over one million tons of sugar and grain as a loan in February 1961 (200). The CCP explicitly called for a stop in anti-Soviet rhetoric and to relax tensions in early 1961 (Li 2012, 81). The two nations cooperated on negotiating Chinese debt repayment, defense cooperation, and radio communication (83). Some Soviet specialists even returned to China for a time, demonstrating a relaxation in previous tensions. When tensions did arise, this time over Mao’s growing relationship with Albania, a Soviet enemy, Zhou Enlai and Foreign Minister Chen Yi did their best to calm the Soviets’ fears. Chen released a detailed report to the Foreign Ministry that explicitly advocated for better relations with the Soviets and international communist unity (85).

This truce corresponded with a brief period of liberalization within China under the leadership of Zhou, Deng, and other moderate leaders. Private farming was allowed, communes were dissolved, and the Chinese ambassador to the USSR advocated for reconciliation (Radchenko 2009, 28). Mao’s domestic power weakened as prominent party members openly criticized his Great Leap Forward policies and encouraged liberalization.

This period of liberalization did not last long, however. While Mao had been willing to take a step back temporarily following the failure of the Great Leap Forward, he returned to political life in late 1962. Once Mao saw private farming and dissolving communes, he aggressively took back power at the Beidaihe Conference in August 1962 (Li 2012, 88). He railed against the liberalization policies and presented the conference with two choices: move forward with socialism or regress back to the capitalist past. By framing the issue as an existential conflict between true communists and revisionists, Mao associated his domestic moderate enemies with the Soviet revisionists. Shortly after this conference, Mao introduced a new slogan: *fanxiu fangxiu*, which translates roughly to “oppose revisionism abroad, prevent revisionism at home” (Lüthi 2008, 223). This concept explicitly linked domestic and foreign policy, demonstrating how Mao saw his domestic ideological enemies and the Soviets as essentially the same enemy.

The return of Mao and his radical ideology, the independent variable, had the predicted effect on the dependent variable: Sino-Soviet relations quickly deteriorated from late 1962 onward and would not improve until after Mao’s death. This renewal in tension manifested most immediately in October, following the Soviet handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. After Khrushchev ultimately gave in to US demands to remove missiles from Cuba, Mao mercilessly attacked Khrushchev’s “capitulationism.”

The Chinese propaganda machine blamed Soviet revisionism for the humiliation and doubled down on accusations that Khrushchev was too peaceful with the West and not supportive enough of Third World revolutions like Cuba (Radchenko 2009, 25). A *Renmin Ribao* article even compared Khrushchev's capitulation to Great Britain's appeasement policies towards Hitler (34).

Over the next few years, relations deteriorated further. Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which took demonization of moderates and revisionists to an unprecedented level. Border clashes began in November 1967 and continued for the next two years before reaching the nadir of Sino-Soviet relations, the Battle of Zhenbao Island. At this clash, dozens of deaths occurred on both sides. Following this incident, the USSR threatened a nuclear attack on China, though it is unclear to what extent they seriously considered it as an option (Lüthi 2008, 342). In 1972, Mao Zedong hosted Richard Nixon in a momentous act of rapprochement. While many realist scholars argue that this is an example of national security interests trumping ideology, there is actually ample evidence that rapprochement fit into Mao's early 1970s radical communist ideology. The Chinese regime had stated that, because of its "social-imperialism," the Soviet Union had overtaken the United States as the most dangerous threat to worldwide socialist revolution (Chen 2001, 243).

The period between 1961 and 1962 provides a strong test of my theory. The evidence shows exactly what the theory predicts—that relations were poor before Mao stepped away from power, that they improved when he was away, and that they rapidly deteriorated when he returned. That return in 1962 ultimately resulted in the climax of Sino-Soviet tensions in the late 1960s. Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that Mao, and the radical ideology he brought to politics, were the major driving forces behind the Sino-Soviet split.

Conclusion

The Sino-Soviet split was a gradual but total disintegration of the Sino-Soviet alliance between the years 1956 and 1962. The preceding evidence has demonstrated convincingly that the split was primarily caused by Mao Zedong, who opposed revisionist Soviet policies and imposed his ideological vision of communist revolution at home and abroad.

The evidence in the Sino-Soviet case suggests that ideology plays an important role in revolutionary foreign policy. Not only should ideology be considered a driving force behind revolutionary states' conflicts with status quo powers, but ideology should also be considered an important factor in relations between revolutionary states. Further research should explore how ideological differences can cause revolutionary states to come into conflict with one another just as much as with status quo powers. In doing so, the international community can better prepare itself to predict and address ideological conflicts between ideologically motivated revolutionary world leaders in the coming decades.

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