

The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict

Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969

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Executive Summary

On 2 March 1969, Chinese troops ambushed and killed a group of Soviet border guards on Zhenbao Island, one of the many disputed islands on the Ussuri River. As Sino-Soviet tensions heightened in the 1960s, ownership of these tiny, uninhabited, and strategically meaningless river islands along the Ussuri, which was designated as a boundary line between China and the Soviet Union by the 1860 Treaty of Peking, became an issue of contention. According to Beijing, ownership of the river islands were emblematic of broader Russian efforts, dating back hundreds of years, to expand its territory by forcing a weak China to sign “unequal” treaties that bequeathed large segments of Chinese territory to tsarist Russia. The Soviet Union, however, argued that China had no legal claim to the river islands. According to Moscow, the Treaty of Peking clearly identified the boundary line between China and the Soviet Union in this area as running along the Chinese riverbank.

For China, the attack on Zhenbao was designed to deter future Soviet provocations. The sharp downturn in Sino-Soviet relations, a significant Soviet military buildup in the border region, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and subsequent announcement of the Brezhnev Doctrine all convinced Mao of the need to forcibly demonstrate China’s courage, resolve, and strength in the face of what was perceived to be a looming Soviet threat. By initiating a limited attack, flexing some muscle, and killing a few Soviets, China sought to forcibly demonstrate that it could not be bullied, and that a future Soviet attack would be fiercely resisted. Mao, according to this view, wanted to teach Moscow a “bitter lesson.”

The Soviets, however, received a very different message from the attack. Whereas Mao intended to deter future Soviet aggression, Moscow interpreted China’s actions as aggressive and emblematic of an increasingly revisionist and antagonistic regime in Beijing. On 15 March, China and the Soviet Union fought again on Zhenbao, this time with much larger forces and firepower. Although the archival evidence remains incomplete, it appears that Russia initiated this conflict in retaliation for the Chinese assault two weeks earlier. In the following months, Moscow and Beijing fought several more battles along the border, resulting in a still-unknown number of casualties.

Following the conflicts on Zhenbao, Moscow adopted a coercive diplomacy strategy toward Beijing. This strategy combined repeated proposals for negotiations with Beijing to reach a peaceful settlement to the border dispute with increasingly provocative threats – including nuclear threats – if Chinese recalcitrance continued. Several times in the months following the bloodshed on Zhenbao, the Soviet Union deliberately hinted that it might use nuclear weapons, especially in a surgical strike on China’s nascent nuclear facilities.

Whereas China dismissed Moscow’s initial nuclear threats and did not respond to early proposals for negotiations, Beijing’s perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats changed dramatically in the summer of 1969. On 27 August, CIA Director Richard Helms told the press that Moscow had been approaching foreign governments to inquire about their reactions to a potential Soviet preemptive strike

on China. For Beijing, the knowledge that Moscow had approached other countries greatly increased the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats. If the United States took Soviet probes seriously enough to make them public, Beijing likely reasoned, then there must be a real and immediate possibility of an attack. When Moscow again proposed negotiations a few weeks later, Beijing agreed. As such, this case stands out as a rare case of successful nuclear compellence: the Soviets used nuclear threats to effectively compel China to the negotiating table.

Beijing's eventual perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats had unintended consequences that greatly increased the possibility of accidental or inadvertent nuclear escalation. Emotions, stress, and suspicion of Soviet intentions took hold in China, particularly for Mao Zedong and Lin Biao. The Chinese leadership began to worry, albeit based on little reliable evidence, that Moscow would use the border negotiations as a "smokescreen" for a nuclear "sneak attack." By mid-October 1969, China had become so concerned about a Soviet nuclear strike that the central leadership, including Mao Zedong, fled Beijing, and on 18 October China placed its rudimentary nuclear forces on full alert – the first and only time this order has been issued.

Lessons and Implications for Future Nuclear Challenges

While insights from the U.S.-Soviet nuclear relationship during the Cold War remains useful and relevant for thinking about some modern nuclear challenges, this should not be the only empirical foundation upon which U.S. nuclear policies are built. Many future nuclear relationships are unlikely to approximate the kind of strategic balance that contributed to nuclear stability in the Cold War. In these cases, the experiences of minor nuclear powers, and the interactions between major and minor nuclear states, will likely be more instructive for designing and implementing effective policies for current and emerging nuclear challenges. From this perspective, the Sino-Soviet conflict is particularly important because it was a confrontation between states with vastly asymmetric nuclear (and conventional) capabilities; a wide gap in experience as nuclear powers (in 1969, the Soviet Union had been a nuclear state for 20 years, compared to only 5 for China); and different strategic cultures and views on deterrence.

It is important to emphasize that the value of re-examining Cold War nuclear crises and drawing out lessons is not to make specific predictions about how states will necessarily think or behave in future nuclear contingencies. This study does not claim that because China and the Soviet Union took certain actions in 1969, a future crisis between the United States and Iran, or between India and Pakistan, will necessarily follow a similar path. Rather, the value of insights and lessons from nuclear history is to add to the empirical databank that is used to craft U.S. nuclear policy and to provide new perspectives on the many concepts, theories, and general beliefs about deterrence and crisis behavior. Consequently, the objective of this line of research is to provide empirical evidence that can be used to refine – and perhaps challenge – some of the existing views about deterrence and nuclear behavior that inform U.S. nuclear policies and crisis management.

The evidence from the Sino-Soviet border conflict suggests several important insights, lessons, and issues to consider for future nuclear challenges.

Conflicts between Nuclear-Armed States are Not Always Related to or Dominated by the Nuclear Balance

A central argument in much of the deterrence literature is that nuclear weapons induce great caution in international behavior and significantly reduce the likelihood of any level of direct conflict between nuclear-armed states. Nuclear weapons, according to this view, cast a “long shadow” over international relations, bounding the range of acceptable policies and behaviors and significantly limiting military options.

In the Sino-Soviet border conflict, however, nuclear weapons had little apparent influence on China’s decision to attack the Soviets on 2 March. China was neither emboldened nor more cautious because of its rudimentary nuclear capability. Thus, in contrast to the long-held view that nuclear weapons and the possibility of escalation must factor into almost all calculations between nuclear-armed states, the evidence from this case indicates that there can be conflicts and other aggressive actions that, for the initiator, have nothing to do with the nuclear balance. This raises the possibility of misinterpretation and miscalculation in future contingencies with a nuclear-armed opponent. If there is a widespread view that nuclear considerations are always factored into decisions, there is a danger that the United States could misinterpret an opponent’s actions and turn a non-nuclear crisis or conflict into a nuclear one in the mistaken belief that the adversary must have been emboldened by its nuclear arsenal.

A Nuclear “Learning Period”

The Sino-Soviet border conflict suggests that there can be a “learning period” for new nuclear states. During this period, a new nuclear state may be unsure of its nuclear capabilities, how much deterrence or coercive power it provides, and consequently how to behave as a nuclear power. Whereas some analysts contend that the acquisition of even a small and unsophisticated nuclear capability immediately provides a robust deterrent, this case suggests that an immature arsenal coupled with a leadership inexperienced in nuclear matters may not provide the same level of deterrence as a mature arsenal possessed by an experienced power.

This learning period might also give the United States greater relative freedom of action as well as the ability to shape the strategic relationship in favorable ways. From this perspective, the United States might be able to “teach” a nuclear state about how to behave as a nuclear power, carefully communicating information about the limits of nuclear possession for coercive purposes; their limited utility as warfighting instruments; the importance of command and control; and adequate security against theft or diversion.

Asymmetric Strategies for Nuclear Deterrence

In the history and theory of nuclear deterrence, it is axiomatic that a primary purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks. It is equally well known that nuclear weapons can be used by weaker powers to deter conventional aggression by militarily superior adversaries. In the Sino-Soviet conflict, China employed a different kind of asymmetric strategy to deter what it believed was an imminent Soviet nuclear strike. Whereas nuclear weapons have been used to deter nuclear strikes, and nuclear weapons have been used to deter conventional attacks, in this case China used conventional forces to deter a nuclear threat. Lacking confidence in the deterrent power of its rudimentary nuclear capability, China relied on its major strengths – its superiority in manpower and a military doctrine that emphasized protracted non-nuclear conflict – as its primary deterrent.

This case indicates that there can be a much closer relationship between nuclear and non-nuclear forces in deterrence strategies than previously recognized. There is a common view that in a nuclear world, conventional forces are subservient to, and subsumed by, the nuclear balance. However, the Sino-Soviet conflict suggests that conventional forces can remain relevant in nuclear contexts, and that it might be possible for conventional threats and war-fighting strategies to contribute to deterring nuclear attacks.

The Role of Strategic Culture and Differing Views of Deterrence

The Sino-Soviet border conflict highlights the central importance of studying and understanding different strategic cultures. In initiating the conflict on 2 March, Beijing viewed its actions as inherently defensive and designed to deter future Soviet aggression. Moscow, however, viewed China's actions as aggressive and emblematic of intense and prolonged hostility. This difference in interpretation was one of the most important factors in the longevity and intensity of the conflict.

While policymakers and analysts have often warned of the dangers of “mirror-imaging” regarding what kinds of threats will effectively deter a specific adversary, it is equally problematic to assume that current and future adversaries will have similar views and definitions of the entire concept of deterrence. For example, China's traditional word for deterrence, *weishe*, means “to intimidate militarily” and to use threats for coercive purposes. In contrast to more classical views of deterrence, where the concept is defensive and status quo-oriented, China has traditionally viewed deterrence as offensive and aggressive – more akin to the Western concept of compellence. With more nuclear powers in the international arena and more complex and multifaceted strategic relationships, it is more likely than ever that a country might misinterpret an opponent's intentions or actions due to an inadequate understanding of that state's strategic culture.

Fear, Paranoia, and Suspicion Affect Crisis Decision-Making

Much of the existing literature on nuclear deterrence, signaling, and crisis behavior is predicated on the assumption that leaders will behave rationally in the heat of an intense nuclear crisis. Yet, in this case, as Beijing became more concerned about the possibility of a Soviet nuclear strike, Chinese leaders' suspicions and fears led them to concoct outlandish scenarios for a nuclear "sneak attack" under the cover of negotiations. While the Soviets certainly wanted to convince Beijing that their threats were credible, the extent of China's reaction almost certainly exceeded Moscow's intentions and expectations.

Chinese behavior in September and October 1969 should temper beliefs that nuclear crises can be carefully managed, and that subtle and finely tuned nuclear signals will be intercepted and interpreted as desired. Stress, fear, and paranoia can cloud judgment and have unintended consequences in the midst of an intense crisis. In addition, these issues also highlight an important dilemma in deterrence: for deterrence to be effective, an opponent must fear the consequences of its actions; however, too much fear is potentially dangerous, as it can lead to paranoia and dangerous behaviors. Consequently, a detailed and nuanced understanding of an opponent's decision calculus, strategic culture, psychology, and actions in past crises could be very useful in future scenarios, since this kind of expertise can help U.S. decision-makers better predict how an opponent might react in specific situations and to specific threats.

The Credibility of Threats

Credibility, according to Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, is the "magic ingredient" of deterrence. In order to make a threat credible, an opponent must believe that the state has both the military capabilities and political resolve to take action if its demands are not met. Of all the concepts and theories associated with nuclear weapons, the issue of communicating credibility has received the most attention. A key insight of this literature is that making threats public can increase credibility. A public threat engages a state's reputation, thereby increasing credibility by raising the political costs of backing down and gaining a reputation for bluffing.

One of the central puzzles of the Sino-Soviet border conflict is why China dismissed Moscow's public nuclear threats in March but took them seriously beginning in August. As this study has shown, Beijing's perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats changed when Chinese leaders learned that Moscow had been approaching foreign governments. This shift suggests that diplomatic overtures, as well as more traditional military posturing, can affect an opponent's perception of threat credibility. Overtures to foreign governments appear to add a new dimension of credibility, since an adversary is likely to reason that a state would not raise such issues with others if it were not committed to carrying out its threats.

Background and Introduction to the Project

In 2009, the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA/ASCO) asked CNA to conduct a series of case studies on Cold War crises involving nuclear weapons. The objective is to analyze past cases in which nuclear weapons played a role in order to better understand whether, when, and how nuclear weapons affect political and military decision-making and crisis outcomes, and to glean new lessons for current and future nuclear challenges. Given the limited amount of data on nuclear interactions, and given the methodological challenges of “proving” deterrence, fresh analysis of the historical record provides an important empirical foundation for designing and implementing effective U.S. nuclear policies.

A key element of this research is the emphasis on historical cases that have not been well examined in the existing policy and academic literature. In addition, we focus on cases in which new primary and secondary source materials are available that can shed new light on the role of nuclear weapons in decision-making. By selecting previously under-developed cases and relying on new source materials, this project seeks to advance our understanding of nuclear interactions and add new empirical evidence to the bank of knowledge that is used to inform U.S. nuclear policy decisions in peacetime and especially in crises.

The 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, the first case we examine in this series, serves as a crucial “test case” for this line of research. Although several scholars have studied the border conflict, the gaps in the available source materials have always limited our understanding of this critical case, particularly the nuclear dimensions of the crisis. Recently, however, newly available archival documents and secondary source materials – especially memoirs by participants in the conflict and academic studies by Chinese and Russian scholars with special access to the archives – have provided scholars with important new opportunities to deepen our understanding of this case. CNA’s China and Russia experts identified, collected, and translated the relevant materials for this project.¹ It is important to note, however, that while there are now many sources available that significantly contribute to our understanding of the nuclear dimensions of the Sino-Soviet border conflict, the available archival record is incomplete. The central archives in China and Russia remain difficult to access, and consequently there will inevitably be some “holes” in the story that we cannot fill with empirical evidence. Nevertheless, the available materials offer a richer and more sophisticated understanding of Chinese and Russian decisions and strategies, and give new and substantial insights into the role of nuclear weapons in the conflict.

This study constructs an interpretive, chronological narrative of the decisions and events surrounding the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict. Although the main fighting between Chinese and Russian forces occurred in March 1969, the nuclear dimensions of the conflict took shape in the following months. After developing the narrative, the study extrapolates key insights and lessons from this case that can be useful for current and future nuclear challenges. The goal is not to develop and promulgate

¹ In particular, I thank Dmitry Gorenburg, Greg Zalasky, Heidi Holz, and Peter Mackenzie.

concrete and universal propositions about future nuclear interactions; rather, we use the empirical record to raise a number of possibilities, issues, and considerations that should be taken into account when developing and implementing U.S. strategies for future nuclear contingencies. Since much of today's thinking about nuclear deterrence and nuclear crisis management is based on untested theories and general guiding principles, the examination of this and other case studies can refine – and perhaps challenge – long-held views and assumptions about nuclear deterrence and crisis behavior.

Introduction to the 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict

On the morning of 2 March 1969, Soviet border guards noticed a Chinese patrol marching across the frozen Ussuri River, which forms a boundary line between China and the Soviet Union in the east, toward a disputed river island called Zhenbao (Damansky in Russian). From the Soviet border outpost located on the bank of the Ussuri, a group of border guards, led by outpost commander Senior Lieutenant Ivan Strelnikov, was dispatched to the island to meet the advancing Chinese contingent. At the time, such episodes were common: Soviet or Chinese border guards would patrol one of the many disputed islands, and guards from the other country would meet them on the island, claim that they were trespassing on their sovereign territory, and demand they leave. Up to this point, these confrontations had typically involved little more than shouting, fistfights, and the occasional use of clubs, sticks, and fire hoses. On this morning, however, when Soviet border guards were within range, the Chinese opened fire with automatic weapons, killing Senior Lieutenant Strelnikov and six others at the outset.² After nearly two hours of fighting, there were 31 Soviet border guards dead and 14 wounded, and a still-unknown number of Chinese casualties.³

The 2 March firefight on Zhenbao Island ignited a new and dangerous round of Sino-Soviet hostilities. Thirteen days later, Chinese and Soviet forces would again fight on Zhenbao, this time with much larger forces and firepower, and in the following months they would fight several more battles along the border. The transition from a conflict that in previous years had been carried out primarily through rhetoric and occasional fistfights to one that involved several direct conventional engagements between nuclear-armed states raised the prospect that hostilities might escalate to a nuclear confrontation. While China was still in its nuclear infancy, having only tested its first nuclear device in October 1964, the Soviets by 1969 had built up a large and diverse nuclear arsenal and achieved rough numerical parity in delivery vehicles with the United States. Following the conflicts on Zhenbao, Moscow adopted a coercive diplomacy strategy designed to reach a peaceful settlement with Beijing that combined increasingly provocative threats – including nuclear threats – with repeated proposals for negotiations. Several times in the months following the bloodshed on Zhenbao, the Soviet Union deliberately hinted that it might use nuclear weapons, especially in a surgical attack on China's nascent nuclear facilities.

Whereas China dismissed Moscow's initial nuclear threats and did not respond to early proposals for negotiations, Beijing's perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats changed dramatically in the summer of 1969. On 27 August, CIA Director Richard Helms told the press that Moscow had been approaching foreign governments to inquire about their reactions to a potential Soviet preemptive strike

² This description of the 2 March conflict is based on Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," *American Political Science Review* (December 1972), pp. 1187-1189.

³ The Soviet figures are from "Statement to the Press by the Soviet Foreign Ministry," 7 March 1969, text reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (July/October 1969), p. 152.

on China. For Beijing, the knowledge that Moscow had approached other countries greatly increased the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats. China, however, did not believe that its rudimentary nuclear capability was a sufficient deterrent, and consequently adopted an asymmetric deterrence strategy that threatened a large-scale conventional “People’s War” in response to a Soviet counterforce first-strike. When Moscow again proposed negotiations in this context, Beijing agreed. As such, this case stands out as a rare case of successful nuclear compellence: the Soviets used nuclear threats to effectively compel China to the negotiating table. But Beijing’s eventual perception of the credibility of Soviet threats had unintended consequences that greatly increased the possibility of accidental or inadvertent nuclear escalation. Emotions, stress, and suspicion of Soviet intentions took hold in China, particularly for Mao Zedong and Lin Biao. The Chinese leadership began to worry, albeit based on little reliable evidence, that Moscow would use border negotiations as a “smokescreen” for a nuclear “sneak attack.” By mid-October 1969, China had become so concerned about a Soviet nuclear strike that the central leadership, including Mao Zedong, fled Beijing, and on 18 October China placed its rudimentary nuclear forces on full alert – the first and only time this order has been issued.⁴

The Sino-Soviet border conflict provides important empirical evidence for re-examining theories of nuclear deterrence and crisis behavior developed during the Cold War, and offers new insights and lessons for current and future nuclear challenges. The vast majority of what we know – or at least what we think we know – about nuclear deterrence is based largely on the U.S.-Soviet experience during the Cold War. While this rich history remains important and relevant for some current and future nuclear situations, it should not serve as the only empirical foundation for crafting U.S. policies. Given the range of current and emerging nuclear threats, the past experiences and behaviors of minor nuclear powers, and the interactions between major and minor nuclear states, are likely to be especially useful and instructive for U.S. decision-makers in designing and implementing credible and effective nuclear policies.⁵

In this context, the Sino-Soviet border dispute sheds new light on the behavior of new nuclear powers; the behavior of major nuclear powers toward new nuclear states; the dynamics of crises in vastly asymmetric nuclear relationships; and the role of strategic culture in deterrence and crisis behavior. In addition, the border conflict is the first instance – and one of only two cases – of nuclear-armed states engaging in direct conventional conflict.⁶ As such, this case is an important test of the “stability-instability paradox,” which considers whether mutual nuclear possession might encourage, or at

⁴ See John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 65.

⁵ On the general point about the importance and relevance of studying minor nuclear powers, see Avery Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century: China, Britain, France, and the Enduring Legacy of the Nuclear Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁶ The other case of direct conventional conflict between nuclear-armed states is the Kargil conflict in 1999 between India and Pakistan.

least permit, aggression below the nuclear threshold in the belief that neither side would escalate.⁷

More broadly, this case speaks to a long-running debate among international relations scholars about the impact of nuclear proliferation on international security and stability. On one side of this “optimism-pessimism debate,” as it is called, are those who argue that the further spread of nuclear weapons will enhance security and decrease the likelihood of war (both nuclear and conventional) by significantly raising the risks and potential costs of any form of conflict between nuclear-armed states. On the other side are those who contend that more proliferation would be dangerous and destabilizing because it would increase the likelihood of nuclear use by accident, miscalculation, or deliberate choice.⁸ Consequently, an examination of the Sino-Soviet border conflict using available Chinese and Russian sources will provide new insights and lessons that can be used to inform U.S. nuclear policies and deterrence strategies, as well as bring new evidence to bear on broader theoretical debates.

⁷ Glenn Snyder coined the phrase “stability-instability paradox.” See Glenn H. Snyder, “The Balance of Power and the Balance of Terror,” in Paul Seabury, ed., *The Balance of Power* (Scranton: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 185-201. This issue has been particularly well examined in the context of India and Pakistan. See, for example, Michael Krepon, “The Stability-Instability Paradox, Misperception and Escalation Control in South Asia,” in Michael Krepon, Rodney W. Jones, and Zaid Haider, eds., *Escalation Control and the Nuclear Option in South Asia* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2004); S. Paul Kapur, *Dangerous Deterrent: Nuclear Weapons Proliferation and Conflict in South Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); S. Paul Kapur and Sumit Ganguly, *India, Pakistan, and the Bomb: Debating Nuclear Stability in South Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

⁸ The classic work on the subject is Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1995). For additional work on the optimism-pessimism debate, see, for example, Peter R. Lavoy, “The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation: A Review Essay,” *Security Studies* (Summer 1995), pp. 695-753; Peter D. Feaver, “Optimists, Pessimists, and Theories of Nuclear Proliferation Management,” *Security Studies* (Summer 1995), pp. 754-772; David J. Karl, “Proliferation Pessimism and Emerging Nuclear Powers,” *International Security* (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 87-119; Jordan Seng, “Less is More: Command and Control Advantages of Minor Nuclear States,” *Security Studies* (Summer 1997), pp. 50-92; and Jeffrey W. Knopf, “Recasting the Proliferation Optimism-Pessimism Debate,” *Security Studies* (Autumn 2002), pp. 41-96.

The Evolution of Sino-Soviet Relations

The tensions on the border that eventually led to the conflicts in 1969 were firmly rooted in the broader ideological and political tensions that brought about the Sino-Soviet split.⁹ China and the Soviet Union had initially enjoyed good relations in the aftermath of the Chinese civil war. On 14 February 1950, China and the Soviet Union signed the 30-year Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which obligated each state to provide “military and other assistance” to the other if either were attacked by their common enemy, Japan, or a state allied with Japan. In addition, the treaty committed both states to “consult together on all important international questions” involving their common interests, and to “develop and strengthen the economic and cultural ties between the Soviet Union and China...[and] render each other all possible economic assistance and to effect the necessary economic cooperation.”¹⁰

Over the next few years, the two states engaged in deep military and economic cooperation. Thousands of Soviet military personnel went to China, and fifteen hundred members of China’s military went to the Soviet Union for training. In addition, the Soviet Union transferred essential military technologies and industrial capacity to China, including missiles and modern aircraft. Bilateral economic relations were also close. The Soviet Union gave China a U.S. \$300 million loan with a 1 percent interest rate, and mutual trade increased significantly between 1950 and 1956. The Soviets also benefited from this relationship, as Stalin used the economic and military assistance to gain the lease of Dalian Harbor and the Lushan naval base, and to ensure access to some of China’s natural resources.¹¹ Following China’s decision to embark on a nuclear weapons program, Soviet assistance also extended into the nuclear arena. On 15 October 1957, Moscow and Beijing signed the New Defense Technical Accord, which committed Moscow to provide China with a prototype atomic bomb. The Soviets also agreed to sell China equipment for uranium enrichment and provide an initial batch of uranium hexafluoride.¹²

Despite several years of coordination and cooperation, disagreements and tensions were brewing. As early as 1950, Stalin’s unwillingness to commit Soviet air forces to the Korean War gave Mao a sense of moral superiority, since he was willing to help

⁹ On the particular importance of ideology in the Sino-Soviet split, see Lorenz M. Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). See also Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001). Another important recent work on the split, which pays particular attention to the Soviet side, is Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009).

¹⁰ The treaty text is available online at http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/6/27/00011314.pdf.

¹¹ These examples of military and economic cooperation are from Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, pp. 35-37.

¹² John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 62.

North Korea while Stalin was not.¹³ Cooperation nevertheless flourished in the early 1950s, and on the surface Sino-Soviet relations appeared strong. Mao, however, was always offended at the way Stalin treated him, believing that Stalin considered their relationship to resemble one between father and son instead of one between brothers.¹⁴ Mao later told the Soviet Ambassador to Beijing, Pavel Yudin, “You [Russians] have never had faith in the Chinese people, and Stalin was among the worst.”¹⁵

Mao’s relationship with Stalin was certainly strained, but it was under Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, that Sino-Soviet relations really plummeted. Mao disliked Khrushchev, and eventually came to believe that he, not Khrushchev or any Soviet official, was best qualified to lead the international Communist movement.¹⁶ This view was not lost on Khrushchev, who believed that Mao was envious of Soviet leadership in the Communist world and sought to weaken him.¹⁷ In 1954, upon returning from a trip to Beijing, Khrushchev declared, “Conflict with China is inevitable.”¹⁸ Tensions grew stronger in 1956 after Khrushchev’s secret speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, in which he denounced Stalin’s many “crimes” and initiated a process of de-Stalinization. Despite his difficulties with Stalin, Mao defended the former Soviet leader against Khrushchev’s charges, largely because these criticisms threatened to weaken his own domestic legitimacy and authority. Mao said that Stalin “had been correct in 70% [of his policies]; that means his principal mistakes made up 30%, but these were less important.”¹⁹ Shortly thereafter, Mao took an even harder line against de-Stalinization, arguing that “[Stalinism is] just Marxism...with shortcomings,” and therefore “the so-called de-Stalinization is thus simply de-Marxification, it is revisionism.”²⁰ This statement reflected a view that would become a common theme in Chinese rhetoric in the following years – the Soviet Union had become an advanced industrial society that had strayed from its Marxist-Leninist roots.²¹ Mao accused

¹³ Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, pp. 53-61.

¹⁴ In a September 1956 meeting with the Yugoslavian Communist Union Delegation, Mao said, “Is [our relationship with Moscow] a father-and-son relationship or one between brothers? It was between father and son in the past; now it more or less resembles a brotherly relationship, but the shadow of the father-and-son relationship is not completely removed. This is understandable, because changes can never be completed in one day.” See “Minutes, Mao’s Conversation with a Yugoslavian Communist Delegation,” September 1956, reprinted in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6-7, Winter 1995-1996, p. 151.

¹⁵ “Minutes, Conversation between Mao Zedong and Ambassador Yudin,” 22 July 1958, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6-7, Winter 1995-1996, pp. 155.

¹⁶ Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, pp. 67-71.

¹⁷ Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, p. 20.

¹⁸ M.S. Kapitsa, *Na Raznykh Parallelyakh: Zapiski Diplomata* [On Different Parallels: Notes of a Diplomat], (Moscow: Kniga I Biznes, 1996), p. 70.

¹⁹ Quoted in Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 50.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 63.

²¹ See Thomas W. Robinson, “China Confronts the Soviet Union: Warfare and Diplomacy on China’s Inner Asian Frontiers,” in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, eds., *The Cambridge History of China – The People’s Republic, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution, 1966-1982*, Vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 221; and Kenneth

Moscow of violating the “fundamental theories of Marxism-Leninism,” and in May 1964 he said the Soviet Union was “a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, a dictatorship of big capitalists, a Hitler-type Fascist dictatorship, they are all hooligans, they are worse than de Gaulle.”²² Following the outbreak of violence in March 1969, China accused Moscow of enacting policies designed to bring about “all-around capitalist restoration.”²³

Another flare-up occurred in 1958 when the Soviets proposed a jointly owned submarine flotilla instead of favorably responding to China’s request for Soviet assistance in building an independent submarine force.²⁴ In Mao’s view, the Soviet response to the submarine request, as well as Soviet proposals a few months earlier to jointly build a long-wave radio transmission center and radio receiving station in China, were a threat to Chinese sovereignty and represented Moscow’s desire to control China. Several years later, Mao recalled, “The overturning of [our relations with] the Soviet Union occurred in 1958; that was because they wanted to control China militarily.”²⁵

The sharp downturn in Sino-Soviet relations was further aggravated by Moscow’s decision in 1959 to renege on its commitment to assist China with building an atomic bomb.²⁶ The Soviet Union had recently started negotiations with the United States on a nuclear test ban treaty, and on 20 June Moscow informed Beijing that continued assistance in the nuclear arena would endanger U.S.-Soviet efforts to limit nuclear arms. In justifying its decision to end the nuclear assistance, Moscow argued that nuclear weapons were too expensive for China, and that in any case Soviet nuclear weapons would adequately protect the socialist states.²⁷ Beijing interpreted this and the subsequent signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963 as Soviet collaboration with its enemies to restrain China, and as yet another indication that Moscow placed more importance on its relationship with the West than on its relationship with Beijing.²⁸ Not only did nuclear assistance come to an end, but one year later, on 18

Lieberthal, *Mao Tse-Tung’s Perception of the Soviet Union as Communicated in the Mao Tse-Tung Ssu-Hsiang Wan Sui!* (Santa Monica: Rand Corp., 1976), pp. 5-6.

²² See “Letter of Central Committee of the CPC [Communist Party of China] of 7 May, 1964, to the Central Committee of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union], 7 May 1964, in *Peking Review*, 8 May 1964, p. 8; and Lieberthal, *Mao Tse-Tung’s Perception of the Soviet Union*,” p. 11.

²³ Hung Hsien, “New Economic Systems Brings Catastrophe to Soviet People,” *People’s daily*, 19 March 1969, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service [hereafter cited as *FBIS*] *Communist China*, 20 March 1969, p. A4.

²⁴ On Mao’s response to the Soviet proposal on the submarine force, see “Minutes, Conversation between Mao Zedong and Ambassador Yudin,” pp. 155-159.

²⁵ See Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, pp. 73-75.

²⁶ Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China* (Santa Monica: Rand Corp., 1982), p.8.

²⁷ Kapitsa, *Na Raznikh Parallelyakh*, p. 63.

²⁸ Niu Jun, “1969 nian ZhongGuo bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng” [The 1969 Chinese-Soviet Border Conflict and the Restructuring of China’s Diplomatic Strategy], *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* [Studies on Contemporary Chinese History], No. 1 (1999), p. 69. See also Lewis and Xue, *China Builds the Bomb*, pp. 64-65.

July 1960, the Soviet Union, without warning, informed Beijing that it would withdraw all of its personnel from China. According to Moscow, Soviet advisors in China “no longer have the trust of the Chinese side they need in order to fulfill the tasks put before them, not to mention the respect these experts have earned by providing assistance to the Chinese people for [China’s] economic and cultural development and military build-up.”²⁹ By the end of August, all Soviet civilian and military specialists had left China.³⁰

²⁹ “Note: The Soviet Embassy in Beijing to the Foreign Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China,” 18 July 1960, reprinted in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 8/9, Winter 1996, p. 250.

³⁰ Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 174.

The Border Dispute

As political relations worsened, tensions along the vast Sino-Soviet border intensified.³¹ The delineation of the border had always been a point of contention for Beijing, but when bilateral relations were good the Chinese did not raise the issue. But as political relations soured, disputes over the border became a useful tool for both sides to express their contempt. From this perspective, the conflicts that erupted on the border in March 1969 were not about territory per se, but rather served as a physical manifestation of broader political and ideological hostilities.³² Conflicts on the border provided a useful mechanism for Sino-Soviet animosities to play out. Zhenbao Island, after all, is a small, uninhabited, strategically meaningless island that is often submerged at high-water. At best, the island is useful for logging and for fisherman to dry their nets.³³ As one commentator observed shortly after the conflict on 2 March, Zhenbao has “no value whatsoever to either country except one of prestige,” thus “it is not this tiny piece of land but a question of principle which is involved, a potential danger of which this little island is a symbol.”³⁴

The specific dispute over the border centered on differing interpretations of the 1860 Treaty of Peking, which identified the Amur and Ussuri rivers as forming a part of the eastern boundary between China and Russia. There were two main points of contention. First, China repeatedly claimed that the Treaty of Peking was an “unequal” treaty forced upon a weak China by czarist Russia. China, according to this view, was forced to make concessions to a more powerful neighbor that “forcibly incorporated” 400,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory into Russia.³⁵

Second, Moscow and Beijing disagreed on the exact location of the boundary line. While both agreed that the treaty listed the Amur and Ussuri rivers as the border, there was a sharp divergence in interpretation as to what this meant regarding ownership of the hundreds of river islands. China contended that the actual border

³¹ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute,” pp. 1176-1177.

³² See Richard Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics: A Study of Political Change and Communication* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 38; M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 203; and Christian F. Ostermann, “East German Documents on the Border Conflict, 1969,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6/7, Winter 1995, p. 186.

³³ See Neville Maxwell, “The Chinese Account of the 1969 Fighting at Chenpao,” *China Quarterly* (October-December 1973), p. 731; and Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute,” p. 1187.

³⁴ Stanislav Budin, “The Conflict on the Ussuri,” *The Reporter* (Prague), 4 March 1969, reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (July/October 1969), pp. 230-231.

³⁵ See, for example, “The Chinese Government Lodges Strongest Protest with the Soviet Government,” *Peking Review*, 7 March 1969, p. 5; “Chenpao Island Has Always Been Chinese Territory,” *Peking Review*, 14 March 1969, p. 14; Lin Biao, “Report to the Ninth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” delivered on 1 April 1969, *Peking Review*, 30 April 1969, p. 33; and “Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China,” 24 May 1969, in *Peking Review*, 30 May 1969, p. 4.

was drawn at the “thalweg,” defined as the central line of the main river channel.³⁶ “According to established patterns of international law,” China claimed, “in the case of navigable boundary rivers, the central line of the main channel should form the boundary line which determines the ownership of islands.” Since Zhenbao is clearly on the Chinese side of the main channel, Beijing argued that it is an “indisputable, iron-clad fact that [Zhenbao] is Chinese territory.”³⁷ The Soviet Union, however, argued that there was no international legal norm that “automatically” established the boundary at the thalweg. According to Moscow, the boundary ran “directly along the Chinese bank,” thereby giving the Soviets ownership of all the river islands.³⁸ Moscow rested its claim on a map of the border exchanged between Russian and Chinese officials in 1861. The map, Moscow argued, proved that the boundary lay along the Chinese bank. Beijing countered that the scale of the map was smaller than 1:1,000,000, and therefore it “does not, and cannot possibly, show the precise location of the boundary line in the rivers; still less is it intended to determine the ownership of islands.”³⁹

Tensions on the border began as early as 1959 and progressed steadily in frequency and intensity.⁴⁰ Although it is unclear which side initiated many of the early skirmishes along the border, Beijing was certainly the primary antagonist in the broader Sino-Soviet split,⁴¹ and led the charge in rhetorical lashings. In 1963, China publicly raised the issue of the many past “unequal treaties” that it was “compelled” to sign after Khrushchev brought up China’s restraint in resolving the status of Hong Kong and Macao. In responding to Khrushchev’s comment about Hong Kong and Macao, which in itself was a reaction to Beijing’s earlier claim of Soviet “capitulationism” in the Cuban Missile Crisis,⁴² China asked rhetorically, “You are not unaware that such

³⁶ Neville Maxwell, “A Note on the Amur/Ussuri Sector of the Sino-Soviet Boundaries,” *Modern China* (January 1975), pp. 116-117.

³⁷ See text of article in *Hsinhua* published on 14 March 1969, and “Down with the New Tsars!” both reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* (July/October 1969), pp. 154, 162.

³⁸ See “Note of the USSR Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the CPR Ministry of Foreign Affairs,” *Pravda*, 12 June 1969, in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* [hereafter cited as *CDSP*], 9 July 1969, p. 9; and “USSR Statement to CPR,” 30 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 1 April 1969, p. A2.

³⁹ “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China,” 24 May 1969, p. 3.

⁴⁰ See Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes,” p. 1177; and Arthur A. Cohen, “The Sino-Soviet Border Crisis of 1969,” in Alexander L. George, ed., *Avoiding War: Problems of Crisis Management* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 271.

⁴¹ On this point, see Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 12; and Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, p. 17.

⁴² China criticized the Soviet Union in 1962-63, and continued to bring up the issue. A January 12, 1968 article said, “During the Caribbean crisis of 1962, Khrushchev tried his luck by sending missiles to Cuba as a means of furthering his nuclear blackmail. Yet, when the U.S. imperialists met his blackmail with their own blackmail, he was scared out of his wits: overnight he took a dive from the castle in the air of adventurism into the quagmire of capitulationism, and begged for mercy from John F. Kennedy in a most humiliating manner.” See “*Jen-min Jih-pao* Exposes ‘Flexibility’ of Moscow’s Diplomacy,” in *Survey of China Mainland Press*, No. 4100, p. 27.

questions as those of Hong Kong and Macao relate to the category of unequal treaties left over by history, treaties which the imperialists imposed on China. It may be asked: In raising questions of this kind, do you intend to raise all the questions of unequal treaties and have a general settlement? Has it ever entered your heads what the consequences will be? Can you seriously believe that this will do you any good?”⁴³

After bringing the border dispute into the open, Beijing sent a diplomatic note to Moscow proposing negotiations on outstanding border issues. Moscow responded favorably to this inquiry, agreeing to discuss a specific set of issues dealing with the border.⁴⁴ Since China had recently concluded agreements with other states in the region, including North Korea and Pakistan, there was at least some reason for the Soviets to believe that these talks might generate a peaceful settlement. At this point Moscow had no interest in a protracted confrontation – rhetorical or otherwise – with China, and Khrushchev was eager to find a political solution. In August, an article in *Izvestia*, the official national newspaper of the Soviet government, warned of the possibility that conflicts over borders could “push the world into the abyss of thermonuclear war” – one of the earliest Soviet references to the possibility of a nuclear conflict with China – and argued that the “peaceful resolution of border disputes has the most important significance for assuring peace and peaceful coexistence.”⁴⁵ In December, Khrushchev carried this sentiment even further in a letter sent to all heads of state, which proclaimed that the Soviet Union was against the “military method” of settling territorial issues and proposed an international agreement or treaty “on the renunciation by states of the use of force for the solution of territorial disputes or questions of frontiers.”⁴⁶

In late February 1964, a Soviet delegation flew to Beijing for the start of border negotiations. At the outset, both sides appeared willing to reach a settlement. In a letter to Moscow, Beijing said that it believed a peaceful solution could be reached; that until such time the status quo on the border should be maintained; and, that even though the Treaty of Peking was “unequal,” it should be used as the basis for a “reasonable settlement” of the border.⁴⁷ For its part, Moscow initially indicated a willingness to sign a new treaty that would abrogate the existing agreements that

⁴³ “A Comment on the Statement of the Communist Party of the USA,” *Renmin Ribao*, 8 March 1963, reprinted in *Peking Review*, 15 March 1963, p. 61. China’s statement was in response to a speech Khrushchev gave to the Supreme Soviet in December 1962. See “Khrushchev Speech to the Supreme Soviet,” 12 December 1962, reprinted in Dennis J. Doolin, *Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict: Documents and Analysis* (Stanford: Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, 1965), p. 28.

⁴⁴ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 121.

⁴⁵ G. Tunkin, “Granitsy gosudarstv I mirnoe sosushchestvovanie” [State Boundaries and Peaceful Coexistence], *Izvestiia*, 26 August 1963.

⁴⁶ See text of Khrushchev letter to heads of state reprinted in Doolin, *Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict*, pp. 33-36.

⁴⁷ “Letter from the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party of 29 February 1964, to the Central Committee of the Community Party of the Soviet Union,” reprinted in Doolin, *Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict*, and pp. 37-38.

China considered unequal.⁴⁸ Friction and disagreements, however, quickly arose. A key sticking point was China's insistence that Moscow admit that the existing treaty was unequal before a new treaty was negotiated and signed. The Soviets refused, largely out of concern that China might not fulfill its end of the bargain. If Moscow declared the inequality of the existing treaty before a new one was signed, they would risk undercutting their legal claim if a new agreement broke down.⁴⁹ For Moscow, acknowledging the inequality of the Treaty of Peking at the outset of negotiations was "completely untenable."⁵⁰ Despite this initial stalemate, Soviet and Chinese negotiators did make progress. Most important, the Soviets agreed that the thalweg would form the boundary in the Amur and Ussuri rivers, thereby ceding 400 river islands, including Zhenbao, to China.⁵¹ The negotiators drew up a draft treaty for the eastern boundary, but Moscow refused to sign it until other outstanding issues were resolved, particularly the dispute over the islands near the Soviet city of Khabarovsk.⁵²

Despite the apparent progress in reaching a peaceful resolution to the border dispute, negotiations came to an abrupt halt in July 1964. In a 10 July meeting with a visiting delegation from the Japanese Socialist Party, Mao remarked, "About a hundred years ago, the area to the east of [Lake] Baikal become Russian territory, and since then Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Kamchatka, and other areas have been Soviet territory. We have not yet presented our account for this list."⁵³ In response to these statements, the Soviet Union withdrew its delegation from the border negotiations. A 2 September article in *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, interpreted Mao's accusations as a sign of China's continued "expansionist" aspirations and its ongoing polemical "cold war" against the Soviet Union. Moscow was now facing "an openly expansionist program with far-reaching pretensions."⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," p. 1179.

⁴⁹ George Ginsburgs, *The Damansky/Chenpao Island Incidents: A Case Study of Syntactic Patterns in Crisis Diplomacy* (Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), p. 23. See also Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes," p. 1180.

⁵⁰ "Document No. 1: Soviet Report to GDR [German Democratic Republic] Leadership on 2 March 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Clashes," 8 March 1969, reprinted in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6/7, Winter 1995, p. 190.

⁵¹ See G.V. Kireev, *Rossiiia-Kitai. Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov* [Russia-China. Unknown Pages of Border Negotiations] (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006), p. 92; A.A. Brezhnev, *Kitai: Ternisty put k dobrososedstvu* [China: Difficult Path to Good Neighborliness] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1998), p. 178; G. Kireyev [Kireev], "Demarcation of the Border with China," *International Affairs: A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy, and International Relations*, No. 2 (1999), p. 104; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 122; and Cohen, "The Sino-Soviet Border Crisis of 1969," p. 272.

⁵² Kireyev, "The Demarcation of the Border with China," p. 100.

⁵³ "Chairman Mao Tse-tung tells the Delegation of the Japanese Socialist Party that the Kuriles Must Be Returned to Japan," *Sekai Shuho* (Tokyo), reprinted in Doolin, *Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict*, p. 44.

⁵⁴ "Po povodu besedy Mao Tse-duna s gruppoi iaponskikh sotsialistov" [On Mao's Conversation with a Group of Japanese Socialists], *Pravda*, 2 September 1964. See also Doolin, *Territorial Claims in the Sino-Soviet Conflict*, pp. 47.

Khrushchev personally shot back, telling a visiting Japanese delegation on 15 September that Mao promulgated “hatred and conflict,” and that Mao’s arguments were similar to Hitler’s *lebensraum* theories. Khrushchev also made yet another early reference to the possibility of nuclear conflict. He told the Japanese that if war was forced on the Soviet Union, “we will fight with all our strength using all our means. We have sufficiently powerful means for waging war, even unlimited I would say.” If an aggressor starts a war, “they will die in it.” Khrushchev concluded, “We well know the destructive force of this horrible weaponry and would not want to ever use it.”⁵⁵

Mao later told officials from North Korea and Albania that his comments on 10 July were designed to “make [the Soviet Union] nervous” in order to “achieve a relatively rational border treaty.” He was deliberately “saying a few empty words, firing a few blank shots” to “take the offensive” in the negotiations. According to Mao, Khrushchev “does not feel good if you don’t fire a few blank shots at him.” In actuality, Mao claimed, he did not intend to demand the return of all the lands he mentioned in his comments to the Japanese on 10 July, which totaled 1.5 million square kilometers. In responding to Khrushchev’s reference to nuclear weapons, he told the Albanian Defense Minister, “Since we fired a blank round, he responded with a round of his own.”⁵⁶

Mao’s *ex post* explanation for his comments on 10 July is suspect, since the Chairman had a history of attempting to later re-frame unwise decisions as deliberate and strategic.⁵⁷ If Mao’s comments to the Japanese delegation were intended to help conclude a favorable border treaty, he badly miscalculated. Rather than strengthening China’s bargaining position, his comments ended the talks, and Khrushchev fell from power before negotiations could resume. More likely, however, Mao spoke without any strategic intent, and the subsequent collapse of the border talks helped to ensure the continued provocations on the border that would ultimately lead to wider conflicts in 1969. Mao’s characterization of Khrushchev’s reference to Soviet nuclear capabilities as a “[blank] round” must also be treated carefully. Already by July 1964 Mao was firmly convinced of the growing Soviet threat to China.⁵⁸ At a meeting of the

⁵⁵ "Beseda tovarishcha N.S. Khrushcheva s parlamentskoi delegatsiei Iaponii 15 sentiabria 1964 goda" [Comrade N.S. Khrushchev's Discussion with the Japanese Parliamentary Delegation on 15 September 1964], *Pravda*, 20 September 1964.

⁵⁶ Quotes are from Sergei Goncharov and Li Danhui, “On ‘Territorial Claims’ and ‘Inequitable Treaties’ in Russian-Chinese Relations: Myth and Reality,” *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 3 (2004), p. 102.

⁵⁷ For example, after Mao's 1956-57 "Hundred Flowers" campaign of intellectual liberalization backfired and produced unexpectedly serious intellectual criticism of the Party, Mao and his defenders would later claim that his intent all along had been to "lure the snakes out of their holes" so that the Party could attack them. There are several versions of this story in the Chinese politics literature. See, for example, Phillip Pan, *Out of Mao's Shadow: The Struggle for the Soul of a New China* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2008), pp. 45-46. I thank M. Scot Tanner for this point.

⁵⁸ See David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military* (Carlisle, Pa: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007), p. 93.

Political Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee, Mao said, "We cannot only concern ourselves with imperialism, while disregarding revisionism, we need to prepare for war on two fronts."⁵⁹ Moreover, in discussing Khrushchev's comments to the Japanese, Mao asked the visiting North Korean and Albanian officials if they thought the Soviets might actually start a war with China.⁶⁰ At this point, however, the Soviet Union had limited conventional forces on the border and had not yet deployed tactical nuclear weapons to the Far East. Consequently, while Khrushchev's statements were certainly cause for concern, the lack of a concerted Chinese response (war preparations, etc.) to Khrushchev's comments about nuclear conflict – especially compared to the reactions to similar hints in the summer of 1969 – suggests that at this time Mao did not take them as particularly serious or credible.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Quoted in Li Danhui, "On Some Aspects of Sino-Soviet Relations in the 1960s," *Far Eastern Affairs*, No. 2 (2005), p. 82.

⁶⁰ Ibid.; Goncharov and Li, "On 'Territorial Claims' and 'Inequitable Treaties' in Russian-Chinese Relations: Myth and Reality," p. 101; and Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History* (August 2000), p. 24.

⁶¹ *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], Directorate of Intelligence, 28 April 1970, p. 15.

The Shifting Balance of Power on the Border

The ouster of Nikita Khrushchev on 14 October 1964 initially raised hopes in Moscow that Sino-Soviet relations might improve. Soviet leaders were aware that political relations with China in the preceding years were animated by Mao's personal contempt for Khrushchev, so there was some reason to believe – or at least hope – that tensions might ease. But when interstate tensions continued under the new Soviet leader, Leonid Brezhnev, it became clear that they were locked in an increasingly adversarial relationship with China.⁶²

As a result, beginning in 1965 the Soviet Union initiated a major military buildup along the Sino-Soviet border. In 1965 the Soviets had 14 combat divisions along the border, only 2 of which were combat-ready; by 1969, Soviet forces had increased to between 27 and 34 divisions in the border areas (about half of which were combat-ready), totaling 270,000-290,000 men.⁶³ In January 1966, the Soviets signed a mutual defense treaty with Mongolia, which allowed Soviet troops and equipment to be stationed there. The Chinese threat was a key reason for the new alliance, and *Pravda* announced that Soviet and Mongolian forces would “jointly” defend their respective territories.⁶⁴ In addition to the buildup in conventional forces, Moscow also deployed nuclear weapons to the border. Beginning in 1967, the Soviets deployed the Scaleboard (SS-12) tactical nuclear system, a single-stage, liquid-fueled, road-mobile missile with a 500-mile range and a 500-kiloton warhead, to the border.⁶⁵ China was certainly aware of these activities, and used the Soviet buildup in propaganda as further evidence of Moscow's aggressive and “revisionist” intentions. In January 1967, Mao mentioned that Soviet forces were “on the move,” and China would later claim that the Soviets had “again and again” increased their forces along the Sino-Soviet border. A September 1967 article in *People's Daily* noted, “Tens of thousands of Soviet troops have been stationed in Mongolia,” and a later article argued that the Soviets were “intensifying arms expansions and war preparations in Mongolia in an attempt to

⁶² Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 16.

⁶³ While all CIA reports indicate that the Soviets had 14 divisions in 1965, there is some disagreement among the reports about the number of divisions in 1969. See *Intelligence Memorandum: Recent Soviet Military Activity on the Sino-Soviet Border*, CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, April 1970, p. 3, 15; *Intelligence Memorandum: Military Forces Along the Sino-Soviet Border*, CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, January 1970, p.1; and *National Intelligence Estimate [NIE]: The USSR and China*, CIA, NIE No. 11/13-69, 12 August 1969, p. 5.

⁶⁴ Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” p. 24; and Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 19.

⁶⁵ *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 24; *Intelligence Memorandum: Military Forces Along the Sino-Soviet Border*, p. 2; and *Special Memorandum: The Soviet Military Buildup Along the Chinese Border*, CIA, Board of National Estimates, 25 March 1968, p. 12. Technical characteristics of the Scaleboard system are available at <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/theater/tr-1.htm>.

make the country a link in an ‘anti-China ring of encirclement.’”⁶⁶ As hostilities intensified in 1969, China repeatedly referenced Soviet nuclear forces stationed in the region. Beijing proclaimed that the Soviets “built air force bases and missile sites along the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders,” and explicitly mentioned Soviet nuclear ballistic missile units near lower Lake Baykal and along the Sino-Mongolian border.⁶⁷

The Soviet buildup greatly concerned China, as the influx of Soviet forces diminished China’s position in the local balance of power.⁶⁸ In terms of sheer numbers of forces, China enjoyed superiority, with approximately 59 divisions along the border.⁶⁹ These forces, however, were lightly armed and not motorized. Soviet forces, by contrast, were motorized, and possessed superior artillery as well as large numbers of tanks, armored personnel carriers (APCs), airplanes, and helicopters. Thus, China’s superiority in troop numbers was balanced by Soviet superiority in equipment and weapons.⁷⁰

Despite the buildup, Chinese leaders continued to assert publicly that they had the military advantage. Since 1949, Chinese military strategy as articulated by Mao continually emphasized the superiority of “man over weapons.”⁷¹ While weapons were certainly an important component of warfare, Mao argued that they were “not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive. The contest of strength is not only a contest of military and economic power, but also a contest of human power and morale.”⁷² In Mao’s view, non-material qualities, including subjectivity, creativity,

⁶⁶ On Chinese claims about the Soviet troop buildup, see, for example, “Dream of ‘World Hegemony,’” 15 June 1969, in *FBIS China*, 16 June 1969, p. A11; “Soviet Revisionists Intensify Colonial Rule and Feverishly Carry Out Arms Expansion and War Preparations in Mongolia,” *Peking Review*, 18 July 1969, p. 22; Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 213; Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), p. 237; and Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 206.

⁶⁷ “USSR Nuclear Blackmail Policy Doomed to Fail,” 2 June 1969, in *FBIS China*, 3 June 1969, p. A3.

⁶⁸ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 204, 206.

⁶⁹ *National Intelligence Estimate: The USSR and China*, p. 5.

⁷⁰ On the local balance of power along the border, see, for example, Thomas W. Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts on 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later,” in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, eds., *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Armonk: M.E. Sharp, 2003), p. 211; Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,” in Stephen S. Kaplan, ed., *Diplomacy of Power: Soviet Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1981), p. 270; and Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 205.

⁷¹ Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 184. The CIA also believed this view continued to influence Chinese military doctrine in the 1960s. See *Special Report: Chinese Communist Military Doctrine*, CIA, Office of Current Intelligence, National Security File, Country File, Asia and the Pacific – Cambodia and China, box 237, pp. 2-3, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library [hereafter cited as LBJL].

⁷² Mao Zedong, *On Protracted War*, reprinted in *The Art of War by Mao Tse-Tung* (El Paso: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), pp. 211, 271.

flexibility, and high morale, were critical determinants in warfare.⁷³ Chinese statements in the 1960s continued these themes. In 1966, the *Liberation Army News* declared that China “cannot rely purely on weapons, equipment, and techniques” in its military strategy. “The most important factor,” the article contended, “is man’s courage, consciousness, spirit of sacrifice, and ability to withstand tough tests.” Such attributes create a “moral atom bomb” that can be used to “defeat strong enemies at home and abroad.”⁷⁴ Similarly, in a 28 April 1969 speech to the First Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, Mao played down the importance of an opponent’s advantages in military materiel. “As far as such things like planes, tanks, and armored vehicles are concerned,” Mao argued, “experiences everywhere prove that they are easy for us to deal with.”⁷⁵ While it might be tempting to dismiss these statements as mere propaganda and morale-boosting (and they were at least partly intended for those purposes), these themes played a key role in China’s military strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. As will be shown below, the emphasis on manpower – especially China’s superiority in sheer numbers of troops – was the cornerstone of Beijing’s strategy to deter a Soviet nuclear attack.

⁷³ Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao’s Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 10-11.

⁷⁴ “The Most Important and Fundamental War Preparation,” *Chieh-fang-chun Pao* [Liberation Army News], 14 February 1966, in *Survey of China Mainland Press*, No. 3641.

⁷⁵ “Document No. 8: Mao Zedong’s Speech at the First Plenary of the CCP’s Ninth Central Committee, 28 April 1969,” reprinted in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11, Winter 1998, p. 164.

The Road to Conflict

By the mid-1960s, skirmishes on the border were occurring with increasing frequency. China accused the Soviets of “intruding” 16 times on Zhenbao Island between 23 January 1967 and 2 March 1969, and 18 times on Qiliqin Island north of Zhenbao between November 1967 and 5 January 1968.⁷⁶ In all, China claimed the Soviets “provoked” 4,189 border incidents between 15 October 1964 and 15 March 1969.⁷⁷ The Soviets accused China of 488 “deliberate violation[s] of the USSR state border,” between June and August 1969, and a later source claims that there were as many as 8,690 border incidents involving 35,000 Chinese, including 3,000 soldiers, between 1965 and 1968.⁷⁸

While tensions were already high by the middle of the decade, three events in 1968 pushed the Sino-Soviet conflict toward the outright military clash that would occur on Zhenbao the following year. First, on 5 January 1968, a skirmish on Qiliqin Island claimed four Chinese lives, marking the first battle deaths in the long series of altercations.⁷⁹ In response, China’s Central Military Commission (CMC) ordered the Beijing and Shenyang Military Regions (MRs) to prepare for a counter-attack. The MRs were instructed to “select a politically advantageous time, place, and situation, make preparations in advance, create an action plan that accounted for multiple possibilities, and conduct a focused, planned attack against Soviet provocateurs.” The CMC emphasized that border patrols were to follow strictly the principal of proportionality – a “tit-for-tat” strategy – in engagements with Soviet forces, and emphasized that military operations should complement the broader diplomatic struggle. In accordance with these instructions, the Shenyang MR dispatched a small group of select troops to Qiliqin to begin preparations for an attack.⁸⁰ Chinese forces,

⁷⁶ “Soviet Revisionist Renegade Clique Directs Soviet Frontier Guards to Flagrantly Intrude Into China’s Territory,” *Peking Review*, 7 March 1969, p. 12.

⁷⁷ “The Soviet Government has Violated the Status Quo of the Boundary and Provoked Border Conflicts,” *Peking Review*, 30 May 1969, p. 6. See also Li Danhui, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongSu bianjie guanxi” [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], *Shehui Kexue* [Journal of Social Science], Vol. 2 (2007), p. 157; and Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua Da Geming zhong de Renmin Jiefangjun* [The People’s Liberation Army During the “Great Cultural Revolution”] (Beijing: Dangshi Ziliao Chubanshe, 1989), p. 317. According to one source, this figure is an exaggeration. See Niu, “1969 nian ZhongSu bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng” [The 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Conflict and the Restructuring of China’s Diplomatic Strategy], p. 71.

⁷⁸ See “Documents on the Armed Provocations of the Chinese Authorities on the Soviet-Chinese Border,” 11 September 1969, in *CDSP*, 8 October 1969, p. 8; and Kireev, *Rossia-Kitai. Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranichnykh peregovorov* [Russia-China. Unknown Pages of Border Negotiations], p. 92.

⁷⁹ Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Feelings of Gratitude and Resentment Between Mao Zedong and Moscow] (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1999), p. 499.

⁸⁰ This section is based on *ibid.*, p. 503; Academy of Military Science Military History Research Institute, *Zhongguo renmin gongheguo junshi shiyao* [The Outline of the Military History of the People’s Republic of China] (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, 2001), p. 473; Li Danhui, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongSu bianjie guanxi” [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], p. 158; Li and Hao, *Wenhua Da*

however, never got the chance to strike. In the following months the frequency of Soviet border patrols dwindled, thereby diminishing the opportunities for China to initiate the pre-planned “counterattack.”

The second aggravating event was the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. On 20 August 1968, Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces (including troops from Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and the German Democratic Republic) invaded Czechoslovakia to quell the political liberalization that was occurring in the so-called Prague Spring. Although the specific circumstances that led to the Soviet action had nothing to do with China, the invasion and the subsequent announcement of the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” which declared the right of the Soviet Union to intervene in Socialist countries, was a cause of significant concern in Beijing.⁸¹ Beijing feared that the Brezhnev Doctrine might open the door for increased Soviet military pressure on China, and perhaps even provide justification for a future military incursion. With the Czech precedent established, China was concerned that it might be next.⁸² Beijing also worried that the Brezhnev Doctrine might be used to justify further interference in Eastern Europe, particularly in Albania and Romania, which were the only states in the region with which China had good relations.⁸³

China strongly condemned the Soviet “crime of aggression” against Czechoslovakia, and declared that it represented “the most barefaced and most typical specimen of fascist power politics played by the Soviet revisionist clique of renegades.” Moreover, according to Beijing, the invasion was carried out with the “tacit understanding of U.S. imperialism” as part of a U.S.-Soviet plan to “redivide the world.”⁸⁴ As evidence of Moscow’s increasing assertiveness and the threat it posed to China, in September Beijing protested that Soviet military aircraft had violated Chinese airspace on 29 occasions in August for the purposes of “reconnaissance, harassment, and

Geming zhong de Renmin Jiefangjun [The People’s Liberation Army During the “Great Cultural Revolution”], p. 318; and Niu, “1969 nian ZhongGuo bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng” [The 1969 Chinese-Soviet Border Conflict and the Restructuring of China’s Diplomatic Strategy], p. 70. See also Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” pp. 27-28; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 211; and Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 340.

⁸¹ Li, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongGuo bianjie guanxi” [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], p. 157.

⁸² See, for example, Robinson, “China Confronts the Soviet Union,” p. 250; Segal, *Defending China*, p. 179; Gelman, *The Soviet Military Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 28; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 207; Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 49;

⁸³ In the aftermath of the Czech invasion, Zhou Enlai told an audience at the Romanian Embassy in Beijing that they were now in danger of Soviet intervention, and flatly declared Chinese support. On Chinese concerns about the application of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Eastern Europe, see Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics*, pp. 5, 57; Elizabeth Wishnick, *Mending Fences: The Evolution of Moscow’s China Policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 32; and Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1994), p. 228.

⁸⁴ “Chinese Government and People Strongly Condemn Soviet Revisionist Clique’s Armed Occupation of Czechoslovakia,” *Peking Review*, 28 August 1968 (supplement), p. IV.

provocation.” Beijing explicitly noted that the air intrusions had occurred around the time of the Czech invasion, and argued that the timing was “in no way accidental.”⁸⁵

If the bloodshed in January 1968 on Qiliqin and the Soviet armed invasion of another Socialist country were not enough to plant the seeds for a larger Sino-Soviet conflict, at the end of 1968 Chinese and Soviet forces clashed on Zhenbao. Between 27 December 1968 and 25 February 1969, nine conflicts occurred on or around the island and, for the first time, the Soviets used their weapons to fire warning shots at a Chinese border patrol.⁸⁶ In response to the resurgence of violence, China set in motion another attack plan. At the end of January 1969, China’s Heilongjiang MR, with agreement from the Shenyang MR, proposed the “Zhenbao Island Counter-Interference Struggle Plan,” which was essentially a continuation of the 1968 preparations for an attack at Qiliqin. On 19 February the General Staff and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved the plan, and the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China agreed on Zhenbao as the location.⁸⁷ Zhenbao was the ideal place for an attack because it was clearly on the Chinese side of the thalweg and was essentially allocated to China in the 1964 border talks, so its claim of ownership was strong. In addition, an attack at Zhenbao had important tactical advantages for China: the area along the Chinese bank was elevated, thereby giving troops, artillery, and commanders stationed there superior line-of-sight; the Chinese bank was approximately 100 meters from the island, whereas the Soviet bank was around 400 meters away; and the nearest Chinese border post was much closer than the nearest Soviet post.⁸⁸ The General Staff instructed the relevant military regions to “strive for suddenness of action,” “fight quickly,” and “avoid entanglement.” The forces were ordered to retreat to a safe location after achieving victory, and to obtain “reliable proof,” such as obtaining Soviet weapons and equipment or taking pictures.⁸⁹ Mao

⁸⁵ “Soviet Military Aircraft Intrusion into China’s Air Space Protested,” *Peking Review*, 20 September 1968, p. 41. In actuality, this claim was a stretch, since by China’s own admission many of the alleged intrusions occurred before the Czech invasion. See Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics*, p. 66.

⁸⁶ Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 208-209. The Soviets fired warning shots on 9 February.

⁸⁷ This section is based on Li, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongSu bianjie guanxi” [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], p. 159; Li and Hao, *Wenhua Da Geming zhong de Renmin Jiefangjun* [The People’s Liberation Army During the “Great Cultural Revolution”], p. 319-320; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Personal Feelings Between Mao Zedong and Moscow], p. 504; Academy of Military Science Military History Research Institute, *Zhongguo renmin gongheguo junshi shiyao* [The Outline of the Military History of the People’s Republic of China], pp. 474-475; and Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 28.

⁸⁸ See Neville Maxwell, “How the Sino-Russian Boundary Conflict was Finally Settled: From Nerchinsk 1689 to Vladivostok 2005 via Zhenbao Island 1969,” *Critical Asian Studies* (June 2007), p. 247; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 213; and Cohen, “The Sino-Soviet Border Crisis of 1969,” p. 277.

⁸⁹ See Li, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongSu bianjie guanxi” [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], p. 159; Academy of Military Science Military History Research Institute, *Zhongguo renmin gongheguo junshi shiyao* [The Outline of the Military History of the People’s Republic of China], p. 475; and Li and

approved the plan and authorized Premier Zhou Enlai to oversee the operation, and the CMC took direct control of the attack.⁹⁰

Hao, *Wenhua Da Geming zhong de Renmin Jiefangjun* [The People's Liberation Army During the "Great Cultural Revolution"], p. 319.

⁹⁰ Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai's Last Years] (New York: Mingjing Press, 2003), pp. 402-403; Niu, "1969 nian ZhongSu bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng" [The 1969 Chinese-Soviet Border Conflict and the Restructuring of China's Diplomatic Strategy], p. 71; Li, "Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongSu bianjie guanxi" [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], p. 159; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 49. CIA analysis at the time concluded it was "likely" that the 2 March conflict was authorized by Mao. See *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Border Policy in the Sino-Soviet Dispute*, p. v, 36.

Bloodshed at Zhenbao: Chinese Motivations and Soviet Reactions

By all accounts – except for official Chinese writings and some Chinese scholarship – the conflict on Zhenbao on 2 March 1969 was a Chinese “ambush.”⁹¹ On the evening of 1 March and in the early morning of 2 March, approximately 300 Chinese troops snuck on to Zhenbao, dug foxholes, and laid telephone wire to the command post on the bank. These troops hid on the island, unbeknownst to the Soviets. Around 11 am on 2 March, a group of 20-30 Chinese border guards began visibly marching across the ice toward Zhenbao, shouting Maoist slogans. When Soviet border guards, led by Senior Lieutenant Strelnikov, arrived on the island, those in the Chinese contingent arranged themselves in two rows (one row in front of the other), with the first row appearing to be unarmed. When, as usual, the Soviets approached the Chinese to demand they leave, the first row scattered to reveal the second row, which promptly opened fire on the Soviets. The 300 Chinese in foxholes then sprang up from their hidden positions and opened fire. After nearly two hours of fighting, and with reinforcements from a nearby border outpost, the Soviets forced the Chinese to retreat to their side of the riverbank.⁹²

In the aftermath of the conflict, both sides promptly issued protest notes accusing the other of initiating the violence. The Soviets called the attack an “organized provocation” with the purpose of “aggravating the situation on the Soviet-Chinese border.” China claimed that the violence was “entirely and solely” instigated by the Soviets, and that it was “another grave new crime perpetuated by the Soviet authorities which have long been deliberately encroaching upon China’s territory, carrying out armed provocations and creating ceaseless incidents of bloodshed.”⁹³ Interestingly, both sides also claimed that the attack was pre-meditated, designed to draw domestic attention away from internal political and economic strife, and intended to curry favor with the United States.⁹⁴ In the following days, massive protests broke out in both

⁹¹ See, for example, Lyle J. Goldstein, “Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why it Matters,” *China Quarterly* (December 2001), pp. 985-986; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 201; Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 32; *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 35; Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 340; Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later,” p. 290; Maxwell, “The Chinese Account of the 1969 Fighting at Chenpao,” p. 730; Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 49; and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 231. Soviet statements also used the word “ambush” to describe the attack. See “Statement of the USSR Government,” *Pravda*, 30 March 1969, in *CDSP*, 16 April 1969, p. 12.

⁹² This description is from Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes,” p. 1188-1189.

⁹³ See “Soviet Notes of Protest, March 2,” and “Chinese Note of Protest, 2 March,” both reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, pp. 150-151.

⁹⁴ For Chinese claims, see “Down with the New Tsars,” 4 March 1969, in *FBIS Communist China*, 4 March 1969, p. A1; “Sinkiang Rally Denounces Soviet ‘Provocation,’” 4 March 1969, in *FBIS Communist China*, 5 March 1969, p. H2; and “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China,” 24 May 1969, in *FBIS Communist China*, 26 May 1969, p. A7. For Soviet claims, see “What Does the Maoists’ Provocation Signify?” 3 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 5

China and Russia denouncing the other's aggressive actions on Zhenbao. Protests were particularly large at the Chinese embassy in Moscow and the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, and China even claimed that Soviet protesters assaulted and injured Chinese Embassy personnel.⁹⁵

Why did China attack? Although documentary materials from Chinese archives remain scant, available evidence and scholarship suggests that Mao's primary objective was to deter future Soviet aggression or coercion against China.⁹⁶ The escalating violence on the border (especially at Zhenbao), the ongoing Soviet military buildup, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and subsequent announcement of the Brezhnev Doctrine all convinced Mao of the need to forcibly demonstrate China's courage, resolve, and strength in the face of what was perceived to be a looming Soviet threat. By initiating a limited attack, flexing some muscle, and killing a few Soviets, China sought to deter future provocations by "publicizing the danger in advance and making clear that any attack will be forcefully resisted by a fearless adversary."⁹⁷ Mao, according to this view, wanted to teach Moscow a "bitter lesson."⁹⁸

From this perspective, China's actions on 2 March were a manifestation of its broader strategic concept of "active defense," tortuously defined by Mao as "offensive defense, or defense through decisive engagements." At its core, the concept of active defense envisions offensive actions for inherently defensive purposes. Under this logic, virtually any Chinese aggression would be conceptualized by Beijing as reactive and defensive in nature, since actions were viewed to be a response to some perceived

March 1969, p. A4; Viktor Vasilyev, "A Policy Foreign to Peace and Socialism," 10 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 11 March 1969, p. A8; "Shame to the Peking Rulers," *Literary Gazette*, 12 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 18 March 1969, p. A9; "Statement to the Press by the Soviet Foreign Ministry," 7 March 1969, reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, p. 152; "Provocational Foray by Peking Authorities," *Pravda*, 8 March 1969, in *CDSP*, 26 March 1969, p. 3; "Stern Warning to the Adventurists" *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 9 March 1969, in *CDSP*, 26 March 1969, p. 5; and "The Maoists Support the West German Revanchists," 6 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 7 March 1969, p. A3.

⁹⁵ "Strong Protest Against Soviet Revisionists for Directing Ruffians to Beat Up Chinese Embassy Personnel," *Peking Review*, 21 March 1969, p. 10.

⁹⁶ See, for example, Allen S. Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-96, and Taiwan," *International Security* (Fall 2001), p. 118; William Burr, "Sino-American Relations, 1969: The Sino-Soviet Border War and Steps Toward Rapprochement," *Cold War History* (April 2001), p. 82; Chien-peng Chung, *Domestic Politics, International Bargaining and China's Territorial Disputes* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), p. 68; Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross, *The Great Wall and Empty Fortress: China's Search for Security* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1997), p. 44; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 212; and Gurtov and Hwang, *China Under Threat*, p. 234.

⁹⁷ See "Intelligence Note: Peking's Tactics and Intentions Along the Sino-Soviet Border," Director of Intelligence and Research (INR), U.S. Department of State, 13 June 1969, p. 1.

⁹⁸ See Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," p. 28; and Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Personal Feelings Between Mao Zedong and Moscow], p. 504.

threat.⁹⁹ According to Andrew Scobell, China adheres to a “Cult of the Defense,” which “predisposes Chinese leaders to engage in offensive military operations, while rationalizing these actions as purely defensive and a last resort.”¹⁰⁰ Thus, in Mao’s view, the attack at Zhenbao was a defensive – i.e., deterrent – action intended to signal strength and resolve to prevent future Soviet aggression. The Chinese attack, according to one CIA assessment, was “a distinctly Maoist method of deterrence.”¹⁰¹

The Soviets, however, received a very different message from the attack. By its own admission, Moscow “had not expected the treacherous shots” on Zhenbao.¹⁰² Whereas Mao intended to use the attack as a signal to deter future Soviet aggression, Moscow interpreted China’s actions as aggressive and emblematic of an increasingly revisionist and antagonistic regime in Beijing. In their view, China’s actions had “far-reaching objectives,” including fomenting “anti-Soviet hysteria,” establishing an “anti-Soviet and chauvinist great power course as the general line of Chinese policy,” and creating “distrust in the Soviet Union and the [CPSU] among the fraternal parties.” The attack was part of Mao’s effort to transform China “de facto into a power hostile toward the socialist countries.”¹⁰³ While these statements were almost certainly intended in part as propaganda to increase support for the Soviet Union and turn international opinion against Beijing, Soviet actions in the following weeks underscored the seriousness with which Moscow now took the Chinese threat. The military buildup continued, as Moscow sought to create a “Maginot Line” along the Sino-Soviet border.¹⁰⁴ The Soviets went to great lengths to publicize these reinforcements, including allowing foreign journalists to visit the border and report on the upsurge.¹⁰⁵

On 15 March, another major skirmish broke out on Zhenbao. As before, both sides accused the other of initiating the firefight.¹⁰⁶ Although there is little documentary evidence that sheds light on which side is really to blame, most scholarship, as well as a CIA assessment, points to the Soviet Union. Moscow, according to this view, wanted to teach China a “lesson” of its own, forcefully demonstrating that the Soviets would

⁹⁹ On active defense, see Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 41; and Paul H.B. Godwin, “Change and Continuity in Chinese Military Doctrine, 1949-1999, in Ryan, Finkelstein, and McDevitt, eds., *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁰ See Andrew Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 15.

¹⁰¹ *Intelligence Memorandum: Sino-Soviet Border Talks: Problems and Prospects*, CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, 10 November 1969, p. 10.

¹⁰² Yu. Apenchenko and Yu. Mokeyev, “That’s How It Is On the Border,” *Pravda*, 12 March 1969, in *CDSP*, 2 April 1969, p. 3.

¹⁰³ “Document No.1: Soviet Report to GDR Leadership on 2 March 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Clashes,” p. 189-190; and “Press konferentsiia v MID SSSR” [Press Conference at the Soviet Foreign Ministry], *Krasnaia Zvezda*, 8 March 1969.

¹⁰⁴ The term “Maginot Line” was used in two retrospective articles on the 30th anniversary of the conflict. See “Iz Istorii Velikoi Druzhby” [From the History of the Great Friendship], *Kommersant-Vlast*, 2 March 1999; and Andrei Ivanov and Boris Mikhailov, “Kak Damanskii Stal Kitaiskim” [How Damanskii Became Chinese], *Kommersant*, 3 March 1999.

¹⁰⁵ Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁶ See “Soviet Note of Protest, March 15,” and “Chinese Note of Protest, 15 March,” both reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, pp. 165-167.

not stop patrolling the island and that they, too, were willing to initiate the use of force to protect their interests.¹⁰⁷

Compared to the battle two weeks before, on 15 March both sides used significantly more forces and firepower. In the course of a nine-hour firefight, Chinese forces numbered more than a regiment (approximately 2,000 men), and the Soviets used at least 50 tanks and APCs, fired approximately 10,000 artillery rounds, and flew 36 aircraft sorties.¹⁰⁸ The Soviets employed the top-secret T-62 tanks in the battle and, after a Politburo debate and Brezhnev's approval, used for the first time the BM-21 "Grad" rocket, a truck-mounted system with a 40-tube launcher array.¹⁰⁹ A T-62 tank was disabled in the conflict, and the Soviets suffered a few additional casualties in the following days when troops tried (unsuccessfully) to recover it. China seized the tank and put it on display at the Chinese Military Museum in Beijing, where it still resides.¹¹⁰ In the aftermath of the conflict, Moscow alerted the Strategic Rocket Forces in the Far East for several days, finally terminating the higher alert status on 20 March.¹¹¹ Although it is unclear whether China was aware of the alert, on 15 March Mao told the Central Cultural Revolution group, "We are now confronted with a formidable enemy...Our nuclear bases should be prepared, be prepared for the enemy's air bombardment."¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ On the 15 March conflict, see, for example, *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, pp. 38-39; Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 32; Segal, *Defending China*, p. 180; and Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," p. 214.

¹⁰⁸ See Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict," p. 277; and Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," p. 212. There is significant disparity between the numbers of casualties cited in these publications. In the former, Robinson says the Soviets had 60 and the Chinese 800; in the latter, he estimates the Soviets had 140 and the Chinese 39.

¹⁰⁹ See Sergei Pachganov, "Krovavyi sled na l'du Ussuri" [Bloody Tracks on the Ussuri Ice], *Suvorovskii natisk*, 15 March 2007; Dmitry Shibanov, "Kitai i Rossiia: Damanskiy" [China and Russia: Damansky], *Vostochno-Sibirskaya Pravda*, 7 March 2001; "Bol'shaia Voina Za Malen'kii Ostrov" [Big War for the Small Island], *Obshchaya Gazeta*, 4 March 1999; and Kapitsa, *Na Raznykh Parallelyakh: Zapiski Diplomata* [On Different Parallels: Notes of a Diplomat], p. 80. Information on the Grad rocket is available at <http://www.janes.com/articles/Janes-Ammunition-Handbook/122-mm-BM-21-Grad-series-rockets-Russian-Federation.html>. It should be noted that there is some disagreement among the sources regarding whether Moscow made the decision to use the Grad. Whereas the sources above say the Soviet leadership made the decision, two sources argue that a Soviet commander at the border made the decision to use the rocket without approval from Moscow. See Vasily Kasatkin, "Ostrov nevezheniia" [Unlucky Island], *Krasnoyarsky Rabochii*, 20 March 2004; and Tatiana Vesnina, "Pamiat obshchaia, I gore obshchee" [A Common Memory and Common Sadness], *Tomskii vestnik*, 10 March 2007.

¹¹⁰ D.S. Riabushkin, *Mify Damanskogo* [Myths of Damansky] (Moscow: Tranzitkniga, 2004); and Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts on 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later," pp. 212-213.

¹¹¹ *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 50.

¹¹² "Document No. 4: Mao Zedong's Talk at a Meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group (Excerpt), 15 March 1969," in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11, Winter 1998, p. 162.

The events of March 1969 point to the conclusion that Mao fundamentally miscalculated.¹¹³ The Chinese leadership had no intention of sparking a larger conflict. In their view, the ambush on 2 March was a limited, one-time action with a specific and narrow purpose – deterrence. As Zhou Enlai told Chen Xilian, the military commander of the Shenyang MR, “We already have justification [for our actions]; we must also have restraint. We are fighting a local border war, and for one thing, we do not want to expand it. This demands that we must think strategically!”¹¹⁴ Similarly, after the incident on 15 March Mao reportedly instructed the military, “Do not fight anymore.”¹¹⁵ But for the Soviet leadership, the outright Chinese aggression on 2 March was deeply troubling. If China was willing to attack when the balance of conventional and nuclear power so drastically favored the Soviet Union, there was no telling what Beijing might do in the future. Perhaps, the Soviet leadership worried, China did not believe that they were willing to run the risk of a larger war. This kind of reasoning likely factored in to Moscow’s decision to strike back on 15 March, and to escalate the conflict by using the Grad rockets to graphically demonstrate their superior firepower.¹¹⁶ Consequently, rather than deterring Soviet aggression, China’s actions on 2 March escalated the Sino-Soviet conflict and led to further violence in the following months.

¹¹³ For similar arguments claiming that Mao miscalculated, see Cohen, “The Sino-Soviet Border Crisis of 1969,” p. 269, 288; Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 215; Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 345; and Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” p. 22.

¹¹⁴ Gao, *Wannian Zhou Enlai* [Zhou Enlai’s Last Years], p. 402-403

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Yang, “The Sino Soviet Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” p. 30.

¹¹⁶ Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China*, p. 33-34.

Moscow's Response

While Moscow sought to punish China for its transgressions on Zhenbao and demonstrate Soviet strength and resolve, the Soviet leadership did not want a long-term conflict, much less a major war. Moscow preferred to reach a negotiated settlement, but was keenly aware of the need to avoid appearing weak toward Beijing.¹¹⁷ With these objectives in mind, Moscow adopted a strategy of coercive diplomacy.¹¹⁸ The strategy was two-fold: Moscow would publicly propose negotiations with Beijing to peacefully settle the border issues, and at the same time strengthen its forces on the border and issue more provocative threats – including nuclear threats – in order to deter (or respond to) future aggression and to pressure Beijing to accept the offer for negotiations.

On the diplomatic front, after the clash on 15 March Moscow sought to open the lines of communication and bring Beijing to the negotiating table. On 21 March Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin attempted to call Mao on a direct telephone line that had been set up between the former allies. The Chinese operator, however, refused to connect the call, calling Kosygin a “revisionist element.”¹¹⁹ Kosygin then called the Soviet Embassy in Beijing with instructions to contact China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs to set up a conversation with Mao or Zhou. China promptly rejected the proposal, and informed Moscow that given the state of their relationship, “a direct telephone line was no longer advantageous.” If Moscow wished to communicate with Beijing, it should now do so through traditional “diplomatic channels.”¹²⁰ Despite Beijing’s initial rejection, Moscow tried again. On 29 March the Soviets sent a formal note to Beijing proposing that the two sides resume “in the nearest future the consultations that were started in Peking in 1964.”¹²¹

At the same time, Moscow made increasingly provocative statements about the potential consequences of continued conflict on the border. It was at this point that the nuclear dimensions of the border conflict began to take shape, as Moscow more frequently referenced its nuclear capabilities in statements to Beijing. It is important to note that throughout the crisis Soviet leaders never made direct, verbal nuclear threats; rather, the Soviet leadership used radio broadcasts and articles in official Soviet newspapers to communicate the possibility of nuclear use. As early as 8 March,

¹¹⁷ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes,” pp. 1199-1200.

¹¹⁸ Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,” pp. 277-278. According to a CIA analysis, “Following the second Ussuri clash on 15 March...Moscow implemented its policy of pressing for talks while at the same time displaying its intention to respond in the strongest manner feasible to any provocation.” See *Intelligence Memorandum: Sino-Soviet Border Talks: Problems and Prospects*, p. 9.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split*, p. 342.

¹²⁰ “Document No. 2: Telegram to East German Foreign Ministry from GDR Ambassador to PRC, 2 April 1969,” in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6/7, Winter 1995, p. 191. See also Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” p. 32.

¹²¹ See Soviet statement to China in *FBIS USSR*, 1 April 1969, p. A6.

Krasnaya Zvezda (Red Star), an official newspaper of the Soviet Ministry of Defense, proclaimed, "The formidable weapons entrusted to [the Strategic Rocket Forces] by the motherland for the defense of the Far East are in strong, reliable hands. Let any provocateurs always remember this."¹²² Over time, Soviet nuclear threats grew more provocative and specific. Immediately following the clash on 15 March, Moscow broadcast a radio address to China in Mandarin that warned, "The whole world knows that the main striking force of the Soviet Armed Forces is its rocket units. The destruction range of these rockets is practically unlimited. They are capable of carrying nuclear warheads many times stronger than all the explosives used in past wars put together." The broadcast continued,

Now let us take a look at what Mao Tse-tung can summon to counter the Soviet Armed Forces in case he decides to carry out a military adventure against us. Does he have at his disposal rockets capable of carrying nuclear warheads? As we know, the Chinese Armed Forces have no such weapon. What about aircraft? The Chinese Air Force has only a limited number of fighters and they are very much outmoded. They are the type of planes which the Soviet Air Force discarded several years ago... Thus if Mao Tse-tung and his group were to meet the Soviet Union in a contest of strength they would certainly end up in utter defeat.¹²³

Two days later, another radio address in Mandarin continued these themes, warning Beijing that in the face of the Soviet Union's unstoppable nuclear rockets, China would be capable only of "letting billions of people die undefended."¹²⁴ Western press promptly picked up on these radio broadcasts and reported that Moscow had threatened China with nuclear strikes.¹²⁵ Yet, when Moscow was pressed on the nuclear threats, it categorically denied them as a "provocative false rumor."¹²⁶ As the nuclear dimensions of the conflict unfolded in late 1969, this became a standard pattern in Soviet behavior: Moscow would make nuclear threats and then repeatedly deny that it was even considering the use of nuclear weapons and denounce such claims as Chinese hysteria and war-mongering.

China's initial response to these diplomatic overtures and nuclear threats was muted. Despite Mao's instruction to Zhou on 22 March to "immediately prepare to hold diplomatic negotiations" with Moscow, Beijing did not respond to Moscow's

¹²² Quoted in Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics*, p. 106.

¹²³ "Moscow Radio Peace and Progress in Mandarin to China," 15 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 18 March 1969, p. A6.

¹²⁴ "Moscow Radio Peace and Progress in Mandarin to China," 17 March 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 20 March 1969, p. A7.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Victor Zorza, "Kremlin Holds Nuclear Threat Over Chinese," *Guardian* (UK), 20 March 1969; and "Soviet No Paper Tiger, Moscow Radio Tells China," *New York Times*, 21 March 1969.

¹²⁶ "Moscow Denies Any Atom Threat," *New York Times*, 23 March 1969.

29 March proposal for negotiations.¹²⁷ When Moscow again sent a formal note on 11 April proposing border talks beginning on 15 April in Moscow or at “another time in the near future convenient to the Chinese side,” Beijing replied three days later, “We will give you a reply, please calm down a little and do not get excited.”¹²⁸ When China failed to reply in the following weeks, Moscow tried a different approach. The Soviets apparently reasoned that if Chinese leaders were unwilling to agree to talks on the outstanding border dispute, perhaps they might be willing to discuss other issues at a lower level of importance and diplomatic engagement. Any form of bilateral communication was better than none. To that end, on 26 April the Soviet chairman of the Soviet-Chinese Commission on Borderline Navigation, a joint committee that met regularly to discuss navigation rules along the border rivers, sent a note to his Chinese counterpart proposing resumption of the commission, which had not met since 1967. On 11 May, the chairman of the Chinese delegation replied that China would attend the conference, and hoped that “the Soviet side will be able to adopt a positive attitude with regard to this meeting.”¹²⁹

Although a definitive, archival-based explanation for Beijing’s unresponsiveness to the 29 March and 11 April proposals for border talks is still out of reach, three reasons for China’s failure to respond to the Soviet proposals seem plausible. First, after the Zhenbao conflicts Mao focused his attention on pressing domestic issues, especially the upcoming Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of China, set to run from 1 to 24 April. This Congress, the first held since 1956, was especially important because it was where Mao would begin to re-focus and take greater control of the Cultural Revolution, which had been wreaking havoc and chaos throughout the country since 1966, and where Lin Biao, China’s Defense Minister, would be formally designated as Mao’s successor. Whereas China could afford to engage in a low-level diplomatic dialogue with the Soviet Union over river navigation with little effort or risk, high-level negotiations with Moscow on the border dispute would require considerably more effort and political capital at a time when the Chinese leadership was deeply engaged in important domestic affairs.

Second, heightened tensions with Moscow were useful for domestic political purposes, especially during the Ninth Party Congress. Even if Mao did not initiate the conflict on 2 March primarily for domestic reasons,¹³⁰ the ensuing military and political crisis

¹²⁷ For Mao’s instruction, see “Document No. 5: Zhou Enlai’s Report to Mao Zedong and Mao’s Comments, 22 March 1969, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11, Winter 1998, p. 162.

¹²⁸ For the Soviet note on April 11, see “Soviet Note of April 11 on Resumption of Border Negotiations,” reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, pp. 189-190. China’s response on April 14 is quoted in New China News Agency (NCNA) Note, 24 May 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 26 May 1969, p. A11.

¹²⁹ See “Soviet Proposal for a Meeting of the Sino-Soviet Commission on Borderline Navigation,” 2 May 1969; and “Chinese Note of May 11, Agreeing to a Meeting,” both reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, pp. 189-191.

¹³⁰ Although some scholars have argued that China’s decision to attack on 2 March was motivated by domestic political concerns, particularly a desire to create an external crisis to draw domestic attention away from internal problems, Taylor Fravel convincingly argues that

was useful for rallying the Chinese leadership, military, and population. Lin reportedly told Long Shujin, the commander of the Xinjiang MR, “It is good [for us] to have some border clashes that might raise the prestige of the military and give added weight to several commanders in the mind of the central leadership.”¹³¹ In his opening address to the Congress, Lin said, “On no account must we relax our revolutionary vigilance...or ignore the danger of U.S. imperialism or Soviet revisionism launching a large-scale war of aggression. We must make full preparations, preparations against their launching a big war and against their launching a war at an early date, preparations against their launching a conventional war and against their launching a large-scale nuclear war. In short, we must be prepared.”¹³² Mao echoed similar themes in his address to the First Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee. On 28 April, Mao proclaimed, “The Soviet revisionists now attack us,” and he told the audience, “...we should be prepared for war. We should maintain our preparedness year after year. People may ask, ‘Suppose they don’t come?’ No matter whether they come or not, we should be prepared.”¹³³

Third, at this point China did not believe a major conventional or nuclear war was likely, so Beijing felt little urgency to negotiate. In a 3 April memo to Mao and Lin, Zhou outlined his belief that the Soviets were making “an empty show of strength, a show that was designed for others to watch.”¹³⁴ The Soviets, like the Americans, were a “paper tiger.”¹³⁵ Zhou’s interpretation of Soviet actions and intentions was not entirely unreasonable. By April there had been only two serious military engagements on the border – a Chinese attack on Zhenbao and a Soviet counter-attack – so at this time there was little reason for Beijing to believe that the Soviets would escalate further. Soviet proposals for negotiations probably strengthened this view, thereby giving Beijing additional confidence that it could delay a response until at least the end of the Ninth Party Congress with little risk.

this interpretation is not adequately supported by logic and the available evidence. For example, domestic political turmoil had been occurring in China for years, yet China only escalated the conflict on one occasion. If Mao had been motivated primarily by domestic concerns, it would have been more advantageous for him to initiate a conflict a few years earlier, when the Cultural Revolution was in full swing and Mao feared losing control of it. Compared to the previous years, March 1969 was relatively calm, and therefore an external crisis was less needed for domestic stability. See Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 214–215.

¹³¹ Quoted in Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 52.

¹³² Lin Biao, “Report to the Ninth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” 1 April 1969, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/lin-biao/1969/04/01.htm>.

¹³³ Mao Zedong, “Talk at the First Plenum of the Ninth Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party,” 28 April 1969, http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-9/mswv9_83.htm.

¹³⁴ See “Document No. 7: Report, Zhou Enlai to Mao Zedong and Lin Biao, 3 April 1969,” reprinted in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11, Winter 1998, p. 162. See also “Document No. 5: Zhou Enlai’s Report to Mao Zedong and Mao’s Comments, 22 March 1969,” on the same page as above.

¹³⁵ Wang Chao-tsai, “Tear Off Soviet Revisionism’s Mask of So-Called ‘Definition of Aggression,’” *Red Flag*, 13 May 1969, in *FBIS China*, 14 May 1969, p. A4.

Coercive Diplomacy in Action

The Ninth Party Congress concluded on 24 April, and exactly one month later China finally replied to the Soviet proposals for border talks. Beijing's lengthy response was occasionally cooperative and frequently provocative. While China declared it was "against resort to the use of force" and ready to "seek an overall settlement of the Sino-Soviet boundary question through peaceful negotiations," it would only enter negotiations after Moscow confirmed that "the treaties relating to the present Sino-Soviet boundary are all unequal treaties imposed on China by tsarist imperialism." China boldly asserted, "Neither a small war, nor a big war, nor a nuclear war can ever intimidate the Chinese people," and warned Moscow that it would have "miscalculated" if it were to interpret Beijing's readiness to negotiate "as a sign that China is weak and can be bullied, thinking that the Chinese people can be cowed by [Moscow's] policy of nuclear blackmail and that it can realize its territorial claims against China by means of war."¹³⁶ Four days later, Beijing said Moscow's reliance upon nuclear weapons "fully exposes the paper-tiger nature of social-imperialism."¹³⁷

Despite the stated willingness to enter border talks, the Chinese leadership was surely aware that the stipulation that Moscow must first admit the inequality of the existing treaties was a Soviet redline, as it had been in the 1964 negotiations. By including this demand, China virtually ensured that talks would not progress. In its reply several weeks later, Moscow claimed that since "the PRC government advanced a number of claims to the Soviet Union," the current situation "is not conducive to creating an atmosphere favorable for talks." The Soviets nevertheless proposed that border talks begin in Moscow in the next two to three months.¹³⁸

In the meantime, the Soviets again emphasized the "coercive" part of coercive diplomacy. In June, Soviet bomber units were moved from the west to Mongolia and Siberia, where they engaged in military exercises that included practice strikes on Chinese nuclear facilities.¹³⁹ According to the CIA, the Soviets had conducted an "usually large exercise in which China was apparently the simulated enemy."¹⁴⁰ In an 11 June radio address in Mandarin, Moscow told Chinese listeners that it was "abundantly clear that the Maoist warmongers do not care about the future of the hundreds of millions of laboring people. For the sake of fulfilling their chauvinistic ambition, Mao and his ilk are preparing to engulf the Chinese people in the flames of war."¹⁴¹ Yet, as before, Moscow flatly denied in public that it was making preparations

¹³⁶ "Chinese Statement of May 24," reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, p. 201.

¹³⁷ "Soviet Youths Undergo Militarist Education," 28 May 1969, in *FBIS China*, 28 May 1969, p. A13.

¹³⁸ "Government Statement on CPR Border Situation," 13 June 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 16 June 1969, pp. A1-A9.

¹³⁹ See Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, pp. 237-238; Wishnick, *Mending Fences*, p. 35; and David Holloway, "Assessing China's Nuclear Policy," unpublished manuscript cited with permission, pp. 16-17.

¹⁴⁰ *The USSR and China*, NIE 11/13-69, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ "Willingness to Sacrifice Masses," 11 June 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 12 June 1969, p. A5.

for an attack, calling such allegations “an absurd fabrication,” “ridiculous,” and “nonsensical libel.”¹⁴²

At the same time, conflicts on the border flared up again. In the preceding two months, tensions on the border had been relatively mild;¹⁴³ now, more serious conflicts took place. Between 1 June and 31 July, China accused the Soviets of inciting as many as 429 incidents on the border.¹⁴⁴ On 19 June, a shooting incident occurred in the mountains along the Sino-Soviet border that left (according to China) one Chinese herdsman dead. On 8 July, a conflict took place on Pacha/Goldinsky Island on the Amur River, leaving (according to Moscow) one Soviet worker dead and three wounded. In retaliation, Soviet troops returned to the island later that afternoon and set fire to a Chinese home and a forest.¹⁴⁵ The largest and most violent clash since Zhenbao occurred on 13 August in the Tielieketi area of the Xinjiang region, near the Chinese border with Kazakhstan and close to the Soviet settlement of Zhalanaskol. Soviet troops, using APCs and tanks and supported by two helicopters, ambushed and killed 38 Chinese soldiers.¹⁴⁶ According to a Soviet official, the motivation for the attack was to signal to Beijing “that they couldn’t continue to get away with” provocations on the border.¹⁴⁷ For China, the Tielieketi incident was particularly worrisome because officials in Beijing believed that China was especially vulnerable in this region.¹⁴⁸

The Soviets also initiated a new round of nuclear threats. In August, Moscow revealed that Colonel-General Vladimir F. Tolubko, the former Deputy Commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces, had been appointed as the new head of the Far Eastern Military District. Beijing did not miss the significance – or, in its view, the apparent

¹⁴² See “CPR Goldinsky Island Provocation Condemned,” 9 July 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 10 July 1969, p. A1; and “CPSU Leninist Foreign Policy,” 10 June 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 12 June 1969.

¹⁴³ China claimed that incidents occurred on 16, 17, 25 April, and 2, 12, 14, 15, 20, 25, 28-31 May. China did not report any serious injuries or deaths, but claimed that on several occasions Soviet troops kidnapped Chinese civilians. Such claims, however, are likely fabricated. See “Chinese Note of Protest, 6 June,” reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, pp. 202-204.

¹⁴⁴ “Chinese Government Lodges Strong Protest with Soviet Government,” *Peking Review*, 22 August 1969, p. 4.

¹⁴⁵ On the 10 June conflict, see “Chinese Note of Protest, 11 June, 1969,” reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, p. 221. On the 8 July conflict, see Soviet note to China, 9 July 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 10 July 1969, p. 2; and NCNA note, 8 July 1969, in *FBIS China*, 9 July 1969, p. A2.

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Viktor M. Gobarev, “Soviet Policy Toward China: Developing Nuclear Weapons 1949-1969,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (December 1999), p. 46; Cohen, “The Sino-Soviet Border Crisis of 1969,” pp. 285-286; Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 56; Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 34; and Burr, “Sino-American Relations, 1969,” p. 85. See also “Chinese Note of Protest, 13 August” and “Soviet Note of Protest, 13 August,” both reprinted in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, pp. 237-238.

¹⁴⁷ “Memorandum of Conversation between William L. Stearman and Boris N. Davydov,” 18 August 1969, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Lyle J. Goldstein, *Preventive Attack and Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 79.

signal – of the appointment of a commander with significant experience in nuclear weapons to oversee Soviet forces in the Sino-Soviet border region.¹⁴⁹ On 6 August, Colonel-General Tolubko published an article commemorating the establishment of the special Far East army and the past “victory over the Chinese militarists” in conflicts along the border in 1929. Tolubko referenced the “feverish military preparations” then underway in China, and starkly warned, “Let those who like aggressive adventures remember the lessons of history: the Soviet frontiers have always been and will remain firmly closed. Any attempt to encroach on our motherland has met and will meet with a decisive rebuff.”¹⁵⁰

Several weeks later, the Soviets issued another nuclear threat. A 27 August editorial in *Pravda* noted that “the Maoists’ military arsenals are being filled with ever more and new weapons” – the first Soviet reference to China’s nuclear weapons – and contended that “war, should it break out in present conditions and with present-day devices, because of the lethal weapons and the present means of their delivery, would not leave a single continent unaffected.”¹⁵¹ By couching the threat in terms of the effect of a Sino-Soviet nuclear conflict on the entire world, Moscow sought not only to warn Beijing of the dangers of continued belligerence, but also to encourage the international community to support Soviet efforts to negotiate a peaceful settlement.¹⁵²

Most important, whereas in March the Soviets had communicated its nuclear threats only through official newspapers and radio broadcasts (which were apparently dismissed by Beijing), this time the Soviets also used third parties to convey a credible nuclear threat to China.¹⁵³ Specifically, the Soviet leadership approached foreign capitals to inquire about how they would react to a Soviet nuclear attack on China, particularly a strike on China’s nuclear facilities. An important objective of these inquiries was almost certainly for those governments to relay the overtures to Beijing. In the summer of 1969, Moscow approached the Communist parties in Australia, Finland, and Italy to inquire about their reactions to a nuclear attack.¹⁵⁴ Significantly, Moscow also approached the United States. This overture was somewhat ironic, given that in the early 1960s U.S. officials had broached the same issue with the Soviets to

¹⁴⁹ According to the CIA, the Chinese Ambassador in Paris remarked that Moscow had “moved their best rocket expert to the border as commander of the armed forces in the area.” See *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 75.

¹⁵⁰ Colonel-General V.F. Tolubko, “The Heroes’ Glory Lives On,” 6 August 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 7 August 1969, pp. E1-E4.

¹⁵¹ “The Adventurist Course in Peking,” *Pravda*, 27 August 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 28 August 1969, p. A5.

¹⁵² Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics*, p. 190.

¹⁵³ Cohen, “The Sino-Soviet Border Crisis of 1969,” p. 286.

¹⁵⁴ See Igor Petrov, *Sovetsko-Kitaiskie Voyny: Pravda o Damanskom* [Soviet-Chinese Wars: The Truth about Damansky] (Moscow: Eksmo, 2009); *Intelligence Memorandum: Sino-Soviet Border Talks: Problems and Prospects*, CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, 10 November 1969, p. 9; and Memo, William Rogers to President Nixon, “The Possibility of a Soviet Strike Against Chinese Nuclear Facilities,” 10 September 1969, pp. 1-2.

no avail.¹⁵⁵ Just six years later the tide had turned, and now it was Moscow that was probing the United States about a possible strike on China's nuclear program.

While Soviet officials had questioned their U.S. counterparts about a possible nuclear strike on China as early as April, the most serious approach occurred in mid-August.¹⁵⁶ At an 18 August lunch meeting in Washington between William Stearman, a mid-level State Department official in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), and Boris Davydov, the Second Secretary of the Soviet Embassy, Davydov asked "point blank what the U.S. would do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China's nuclear installations." Stearman, obviously surprised by the question and cautious in his answer, replied that while he was "in no position to predict exactly what the U.S. would do," he believed the United States would view a major Sino-Soviet conflict "with considerable concern" and would "most certainly want to keep out of any such conflict."¹⁵⁷

Although Davydov's question took U.S. officials by surprise, this was not the first time that the United States considered the possibility of a Soviet strike on China. In January 1967, Alfred Jenkins, a China analyst on the National Security Council staff, had examined the likelihood of a Soviet "nuclear tonsillectomy" on China and concluded that Moscow "would not dare to cripple China's nuclear capability."¹⁵⁸ By 1969, however, this view was changing. Even before the Stearman-Davydov meeting, a 12 August CIA report concluded that there was "some chance that Moscow might think it could launch a strike against China's nuclear and missile facilities" and cited "recent evidence" suggesting that "Moscow may be preparing to take action against China in the near future."¹⁵⁹ Similarly, Allen Whiting, a respected China analyst who had recently left INR, told Henry Kissinger in a 16 August memo that "Soviet military deployments and political behavior indicate an increasing probability of a Soviet attack on China, presumably aimed at destroying China's nuclear capability."¹⁶⁰

The Stearman-Davydov meeting ignited a far-reaching debate within the Nixon administration about the significance and meaning of Davydov's query, about what U.S. policy should be toward the proposal, and about broader U.S. policy toward to

¹⁵⁵ See William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, "Whether to 'Strangle the Baby in the Cradle:' The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960-64," *International Security* (Winter 2000/01), pp. 54-99.

¹⁵⁶ In early April, D.M. Gvishiani, Kosygin's son-in-law, and another Soviet official said in Boston that "eventually it would be necessary for the USSR to destroy China's nuclear arsenal, even if this meant using nuclear weapons." See *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 57.

¹⁵⁷ "Memorandum of Conversation between William L. Stearman and Boris N. Davydov," pp. 1-2.

¹⁵⁸ Memo, Alfred Jenkins to Walt Rostow, "Possible Soviet 'Nuclear Tonsillectomy' on China," 27 January 1967, National Security File, Files of Alfred Jenkins, box 3, p. 1, LBJL.

¹⁵⁹ *The USSR and China*, NIE 11/13-69, p. 1, 7.

¹⁶⁰ Memo, Allen S. Whiting to Henry Kissinger, "Sino-Soviet Hostilities and Implications for U.S. Policy," 16 August 1969, p. 1.

the Sino-Soviet dispute.¹⁶¹ In general, the State Department was skeptical of Davydov and of the likelihood of a Soviet strike. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow believed that the Soviet leadership was probably “not too unhappy about speculation concerning Soviet future moves,” but concluded that if the Soviets were actually planning to attack, “we would expect to see more of a psychological build-up than up to the present within the USSR.” While Moscow might continue to use conflicts on the border “as a means of teaching the Chinese exemplary lessons,” the Embassy argued that the Soviets would “refrain from a major escalation.”¹⁶² State Department analysts doubted that the Soviets would attempt a disarming strike because Moscow “would presumably not be assured of destroying [the] entire Chinese inventory of nuclear weapons and they would have to consider [the] prospect of China’s rebuilding.” Moreover, an attack would carry the “substantial risk of triggering protracted, possibly all-out war.”¹⁶³ On 10 September, Secretary of State William Rogers told President Nixon that it was “extremely unlikely that Davydov would be privy to top-level Soviet discussions on this matter, much less any decisions taken.” More likely, Davydov’s questions were “curiosities rather than signals.” Although a Soviet strike “cannot be ruled out,” Rogers told the President, “my advisers and I do not believe such a move to be probable.” In the State Department’s view, the chances of a Soviet strike was “substantially less than fifty-fifty.”¹⁶⁴

Henry Kissinger, President Nixon’s National Security Advisor, was more willing to credit the possibility of a Soviet strike. Kissinger was skeptical of the State Department’s assessment, since the Soviets “would not ask such questions lightly – though this does not mean that they intend to attack.”¹⁶⁵ In late August, U.S. intelligence detected a standdown of the Soviet air force in the Far East, a telltale prelude to a possible attack. “At a minimum,” Kissinger later wrote, the standdown was “a brutal warning in an intensified war of nerves.”¹⁶⁶ In a 29 September memo to Nixon, Kissinger expressed concern about the U.S. response to Soviet “probes,” since U.S. reactions to them “could figure in their calculations.” Kissinger also raised the possibility that Moscow “may be using us to generate an impression in China and the world that we are being consulted in secret and would look with equanimity on their military actions.” He believed the United States should “make clear that we are not playing along with these tactics,” and recommended that Nixon authorize him to ask the State Department to draft guidance for U.S. interactions with the Soviets and

¹⁶¹ For an excellent analysis of these debates, see Burr, “Sino-American Relations, 1969,” pp. 87-95.

¹⁶² Telegram, U.S. Embassy Moscow to the Department of State, “Question of Soviet Belligerent Moves Against China,” 4 September 1969, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶³ Telegram, Department of State to U.S. Mission, NATO, “Guidance for POLAD Discussion on August 26 of Sino-Soviet Border Incidents,” 25 August 1969, p. 4.

¹⁶⁴ Memo, William Rogers to President Nixon, “The Possibility of a Soviet Strike Against Chinese Nuclear Facilities,” pp. 2-4.

¹⁶⁵ See Kissinger’s handwritten notes on the memo from Helmut Sonnenfeldt and John Holdridge to Kissinger, “The Role of Soviet Maneuvering Against Peking,” 12 September 1969, p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. 1983

other states “deploring reports of a Soviet plan to make a preemptive military strike against Communist China.”¹⁶⁷

According to an April 2010 article in the Chinese publication, *Wenshi Cankao* (Historical Reference), the United States threatened the Soviet Union with nuclear war in response to an attack on Beijing. In this recounting, Kissinger told Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador to the United States, that Nixon had “signed a secret order to prepare a nuclear reprisal against over 130 [Soviet] cities and military bases.” As soon as Soviet missiles were launched, the “retaliation plan will be in effect.”¹⁶⁸

The available archival evidence, however, does not support these claims. On the contrary, much of the debate within the Nixon administration reflected the view that there were significant drawbacks to strong and overt support for either Beijing or Moscow. Support for China would provoke a “massively hostile” reaction from Moscow that would “poison Soviet-American relations for a very long time.”¹⁶⁹ In Kissinger’s view, U.S. support for China “would be practically to declare war on the USSR.” Given the emerging U.S.-Soviet détente and the prospects for the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I), a sharp downturn in bilateral relations was certainly against U.S. interests. On the other hand, if Washington gave “all-out” support to Moscow, “they might take this as a signal for them to take care of China and might then make a preemptive move.”¹⁷⁰ A Soviet attack would likely strengthen Mao’s position in China and foment nationalism and unity. In addition, Beijing would almost certainly lash out in response, most likely in Southeast Asia, thereby creating new “unpleasantries” for the United States in Vietnam.¹⁷¹

Given the drawbacks of overt support for either side, U.S. officials ultimately decided to remain neutral. National Security Study Memorandum 63 (NSSM 63), an interagency study commissioned to examine U.S. policy toward the Sino-Soviet dispute, argued that clear support for either country would prevent the United States from gaining “advantages in relations with the other” and create “difficulties with third countries not adopting the same partisan attitudes.” Conversely, a policy of

¹⁶⁷ Memo, Kissinger to the President, “The US Role in Soviet Maneuvering Against China,” 29 September 1969, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976* [hereafter cited as *FRUS*] (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), Vol. 17, China: 1969-1972, pp. 102-103.

¹⁶⁸ Liu Chenshan, “1969 nian Zhebao Dao chongtu: Sulian yu Zhongguo waikeshou shi he daji” (The 1969 Zhenbao Island Conflict: The Soviet Union’s Desire to Conduct a Surgical Nuclear Strike Against China), *Wenshi Cankao* (Historical Reference), 30 April 2010.

¹⁶⁹ William Hyland to Kissinger, “Sino-Soviet Contingencies,” 28 August 1969, p. 3.

¹⁷⁰ This quote and the one above are from “Minutes of the Senior Review Group Meeting, Subject: U.S. Policy on Current Sino-Soviet Differences (NSSM 63),” 20 November 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 17:132.

¹⁷¹ See Miriam Camps to the Undersecretary of State, “NSSM 63 – Meeting with Consultants,” 29 August 1969, p. 2; and Roger Morris to Kissinger, “NSSM 63, Sino-Soviet Rivalry – A Dissenting View,” 18 November 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 17:127.

neutrality would “provide maximum flexibility.”¹⁷² Similarly, a report by the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), an NSC subcommittee, recommended that the United States “do all possible to avoid involvement while doing what we can to encourage termination of the hostilities.”¹⁷³

For Kissinger, however, neutrality was not absolute. While he believed a public policy of strict neutrality was the best option, he wondered whether it was possible “within the spectrum of neutrality to carry out policies slightly leaning to one side or the other.” The side to which Kissinger wanted to lean was clearly China. Within the context of the Sino-Soviet dispute, Kissinger saw an opportunity to further pave the way for improvement in Sino-American relations, and much of his analysis of this situation was colored by this broader objective. In recommending that Nixon tell the State Department to develop guidance to U.S. officials “deploring” media reports of a potential Soviet strike, Kissinger told the President that the “principal gain” in clarifying the U.S. position had to do with China, since there were growing signs from Chinese diplomats indicating a possible desire to put Sino-American relations “on a more rational and less ideological basis than has been true for the past two decades.”¹⁷⁴ While Kissinger believed it was “extremely unwise” to get involved in the border dispute, the United States could still “lean toward China.” Within a policy of neutrality, Washington could “take steps toward China which would annoy the USSR but could still stop short of the big issues.” The United States could, for example, “promote maximum trade with China without getting involved in the Sino-Soviet dispute – still throwing our weight toward China.”¹⁷⁵

Notwithstanding Kissinger’s clear interest in courting Beijing, his belief that the United States could favor China within the context of neutrality is a far cry from the threat to launch nuclear weapons in response to a Soviet strike. The only mention of U.S. nuclear forces in this context is the WSAG report’s recommendation to raise the Defense Condition (DEFCON) in response to a Soviet nuclear attack on China.¹⁷⁶ Given that the United States was stuck in a costly and unpopular war in Vietnam and had yet to establish strong diplomatic relations with Beijing, it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, for President Nixon to justify starting a nuclear war with the Soviet Union over China. As Kissinger remarked in his memoirs, “A Soviet attack on China could not be ignored by us...But a direct American challenge would not be supported by our public opinion and might even accelerate what we sought to prevent.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² “Draft Response to National Security Study Memorandum 63,” 17 October 1969, *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 17: 110.

¹⁷³ Washington Special Actions Group Report, “Immediate U.S. Policy Problems in the Event of Major Sino-Soviet Hostilities,” *FRUS*, 1969-1976, 17:118.

¹⁷⁴ Memo, Kissinger to the President, “The US Role in Soviet Maneuvering Against China,” p. 103.

¹⁷⁵ “Minutes of the Senior Review Group Meeting, Subject: U.S. Policy on Current Sino-Soviet Differences (NSSM 63),” pp. 134-135.

¹⁷⁶ Washington Special Actions Group Report, “Immediate U.S. Policy Problems in the Event of Major Sino-Soviet Hostilities,” p. 119.

¹⁷⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp. 185-186.

Prelude to a Nuclear Crisis

In just a few months, Beijing's attitude toward the possibility of a major conflict with the Soviet Union, including a nuclear conflict, changed dramatically. Whereas China seemed to have dismissed Moscow's earlier nuclear threats in the aftermath of the conflicts on Zhenbao, by August the Chinese leadership had become increasingly concerned about the possibility of a Soviet nuclear strike, particularly an attack on China's nuclear facilities in Xinjiang. How did this happen? Why did Beijing deem Soviet nuclear threats as incredible at one point in time and then believe they were credible at another?

For China, two factors contributed to the belief that Soviet nuclear threats were credible. First, continued conflicts on the border, many of which were likely initiated by Moscow, demonstrated to Beijing the seriousness and gravity of the Soviet threat. China had originally hoped to deter Soviet aggression, but additional violence on the border in the spring and summer forcefully demonstrated the failure of that effort. China could reasonably interpret the Soviet attack on 15 March as merely retaliation for Chinese actions two weeks earlier – a tit-for-tat or action-reaction interpretation – but there was no such explanation for Soviet aggression over the following months. The only conclusion, Beijing reasoned, was that Moscow was bent on an aggressive posture toward China.

For Mao, the clash on 13 August in the Tielieketi area was an important turning point in the evolution of his perception of the Soviet threat. As late as July, many senior Chinese officials believed the possibility of a large-scale war was remote. An 11 July report by four prominent Chinese marshals (Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Ziangqian, and Nie Rongzhen) concluded that the Soviets were “unlikely” to initiate a major war in the “foreseeable future.”¹⁷⁸ At that point, Mao agreed. Consequently, the massive Soviet ambush on 13 August took Mao by surprise, and subsequently forced a reconsideration of the possibility of a major war, perhaps even a nuclear war.¹⁷⁹ This incident also solidified an already prominent view in Beijing that Moscow was not really interested in negotiations, which further contributed to fears of Soviet escalation. Although Moscow had proposed “urgent” negotiations, Beijing argued that the Soviets had “actually adopted measures to ceaselessly aggravate tensions along the border.”¹⁸⁰

Second, and most important, Beijing's perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats was profoundly influenced by the knowledge that Moscow had floated the idea of strikes against China's nuclear program with foreign governments. It was one thing

¹⁷⁸ “Document No. 9: Report by Four Chinese Marshals – Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Ziangqian, and Nie Rongzhen – to the Central Committee, ‘A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation’, 11 July 1969,” in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11, Winter 1998, p. 166.

¹⁷⁹ The argument that Mao agreed with the July 11 report and was therefore surprised by the August 13 conflict is from Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 35.

¹⁸⁰ See “CPR Protest Note to USSR,” 19 August 1969, in *FBIS China*, 20 August 1969, p. A3.

for the Soviets to make general references to their nuclear capabilities in newspaper articles and radio broadcasts, as they had done in March; it was quite another for them to discuss the possibility of a particular action – a strike on Chinese nuclear facilities – with foreign governments. If Beijing was not already aware of this, confirmation of Moscow's inquiries was provided by none other than the United States. On 27 August, CIA Director Richard Helms told the press that the Soviets had been approaching Communist governments in Eastern Europe about an attack on China's nuclear program, conspicuously leaving out the fact that similar inquiries had been made to United States. Several newspaper articles discussing CIA and State Department views on the Soviet probes appeared over the next few days, thereby ensuring that Beijing was informed of Moscow's activities.¹⁸¹

To be sure, there were trepidations in Beijing about a Soviet attack even before Helms' comments.¹⁸² In fact, by August the State Department was "struck by [the] frequency" of "new and urgent expressions of concern that [the] Soviets may be about to take further military action against China."¹⁸³ On 5 August, a Chinese official in Hong Kong said he believed the Soviets were "foolish enough" to attempt a preemptive strike on China's nuclear installations.¹⁸⁴ In mid-August, Beijing claimed that Moscow had "stepped up anti-China military deployment," conducted "frequent military exercises with our country as the hypothetical enemy," "waved nuclear weapons...and threatened our country with nuclear blackmail," and "openly threatened to start a nuclear war." According to China, Soviet military leaders had published numerous articles "raving wildly about launching an 'unexpected' 'surprise attack,' just as Hitler boasted of the 'blitzkrieg' in his day."¹⁸⁵ But before Helms' speech and the subsequent flurry of press, China took few concrete actions beyond occasional rhetoric about the importance of preparing for war. It was not until the U.S. announcement made Soviet threats appear more ominous and credible that Beijing issued specific orders for concerted war preparations. If the United States took Soviet probes seriously enough to make them public, Beijing likely reasoned, then there must be a real and immediate possibility of an attack.

Upon learning of Helms' announcement, China immediately issued orders for war preparations. On 27 August, the Central Committee and the CMC issued an order establishing a "Leading Group for People's Air Defense," headed by Zhou. The group

¹⁸¹ See, for example, "Russia Reported Eyeing Strikes at China A-Sites," *Washington Post*, 28 August 1969; "Western Envoys Differ on Soviet Threat to China," *Washington Post*, 29 August 1969; and "U.S. Doubts Soviet Will Bomb China," *New York Times*, 29 August 1969.

¹⁸² A Chinese statement on June 26, for example, referenced an article in the *Christian Science Monitor* reporting Soviet "soundings" to Washington and others about "the possibility of a nuclear war in the Far East." See "USSR Seeks Western Support in Anti-CPR Plot," 26 June 1969, in *FBIS China*, 27 June 1969, p. A2.

¹⁸³ Department of State telegram to Hong Kong consulate, "ChiCom Officials' Comments on Sino-Soviet Relations," 25 August 1969, pp. 1-2.

¹⁸⁴ *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 70.

¹⁸⁵ See "War Mobilization Activities," 14 August 1969, in *FBIS China*, 15 August 1969, p. A2; and "USSR Steps Up Anti-China Deployment," 15 August 1969, in *FBIS China*, 15 August 1969, p. A1.

was tasked with preparing for large-scale evacuations of the population and for dispersing critical industries out of large cities. Beijing also instructed citizens in major cities to dig air-raid shelters and stockpile basic necessities. The next day, the Central Committee issued an order for “General Mobilization in Border Provinces and Regions,” which instructed both citizens and the military along the border to prevent “sudden attacks” and “be fully prepared to fight a war against aggression.” Military personnel were ordered to stay at their posts and protect key military positions, war preparation facilities, and transportation routes. Mass revolutionary organizations were to be “dissolved immediately,” factional struggles should be “stopped immediately” and all weapons “handed back,” and all laborers were to return to work “so that extensive support can be given to the front-line.”¹⁸⁶ By 30 August, the U.S. press was reporting troop movements, military training, and other war preparations in China.¹⁸⁷

As concerns about a Soviet strike on Chinese nuclear facilities grew stronger during this period, Beijing also turned to deterrence. Whereas earlier attempts to deter the Soviets had included aggressive, offensive actions, most notably the “ambush” on Zhenbao, this time China’s strategy was more closely aligned with traditional Western conceptions of deterrence – the threat to impose unacceptable costs only after an opponent has initiated some unwanted action. But Beijing’s deterrence strategy had an important twist, as it was based on conventional, rather than nuclear, threats.

The reliance on conventional forces for deterrence reflected a prevailing view in Beijing that China’s nascent nuclear arsenal could not effectively deter a Soviet nuclear attack.¹⁸⁸ China had been a nuclear power for less than five years, and its forces were small in number and highly vulnerable to a first strike. The CIA estimated at the time that China had fewer than 10 single-stage, liquid-fueled DF-2 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) and a handful of strategic bombers – a strategic arsenal that a capable opponent could destroy in a preemptive or preventive strike.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, at this point China had paid scant attention to nuclear strategy and doctrine beyond a commitment to a minimalist force posture and a No First Use (NFU) policy.¹⁹⁰ In November 1968, Mao told E. F. Hill, a leader in the Australian Communist Party, “Our country, in a sense, is still a non-nuclear power. With this little

¹⁸⁶ On the August 27 and 28 orders, see Liu Zhinan, “1969 nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui MeiSu guanxi de yanjiu he tiaozheng” [China’s War Preparations and the Study of the Readjustment of Relations with the United States and the Soviet Union in 1969], *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu* [Studies in Contemporary Chinese History], no. 3 (1999), p. 46; Li, “Zhengzhi doushi yu dishou: 1960 niandai ZhongGuo bianjie guanxi” [Political Figures and Adversaries: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1960s], p. 161; Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” pp. 36-37; and “Document No. 10: The CCP Central Committee’s Order for General Mobilization in Border Provinces and Regions,” 28 August 1969, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 11, Winter 1998, pp. 168-169.

¹⁸⁷ Tillman Durdin, “Troop Movements in China Reported,” *New York Times*, 30 August 1969, p. 1.

¹⁸⁸ For a similar argument, see A. Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century*, p. 72.

¹⁸⁹ *Communist China’s Weapons Program for Strategic Attack*, NIE 13-8-71, 28 October 1971.

¹⁹⁰ See Evan S. Medeiros, “Evolving Nuclear Doctrine,” in Paul J. Bolt and Albert S. Willner, *China’s Nuclear Future* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), pp. 46-48.

nuclear weaponry, we cannot be counted as a nuclear country. If we are to fight a war, we must use conventional weapons.” This view was more than just rhetoric given to an outside party, as it was echoed in internal memoranda the following year. China’s nuclear forces “are still under development,” the four Chinese Marshals noted in a September 1969 report to the central leadership in Beijing, and some “adventurers” in Moscow “want to seize this opportunity to use missiles and tanks to launch a quick war against China and thoroughly destroy China, so that a ‘mortal danger’ for them will be removed.”¹⁹¹

Lacking confidence in the deterrent value of its rudimentary and vulnerable nuclear capability, China relied on its primary strength, a massive conventional army, to deter a Soviet strike. To be sure, China might still have responded to a nuclear strike with its own nuclear weapons if any remained, but its principal deterrent – the message it communicated to Moscow in an effort to forestall an attack – was based on its conventional power. Beijing’s deterrence strategy rested on the threat to launch a large-scale conventional “people’s war” in response to a Soviet attack – a threat that, if executed, would seek to mire the Soviet Union in protracted, costly, and seemingly endless conflicts with a populous opponent that was willing to make large sacrifices and conduct guerilla warfare.¹⁹² “If the Soviet revisionists decide to launch a large-scale attack on China,” the four Marshals wrote in their July 1969 report to the Chinese leadership, “they will try to fight a quick war...But, once they start a major war against us, we certainly will not allow them to fight a quick war and achieve quick results...We will change the war into a protracted ground war. This will create great difficulties for the Soviet revisionists.”¹⁹³ By threatening to initiate a prolonged conventional conflict in retaliation for a nuclear strike, Beijing employed an asymmetric deterrence strategy intended to convince Moscow that the costs of an attack would outweigh the benefits.

This kind of strategy had precedent in earlier Chinese deterrence efforts. Since the Korean War, Beijing had relied on the country’s sheer landmass and vast, dispersed population as a principal component of its deterrent.¹⁹⁴ Following the U.S. escalation in Vietnam in 1965, which China had previously declared it would regard as an attack on itself, Zhou told the Pakistani foreign minister (with the hope that it would be relayed to Washington) that even if the war escalated and the United States attacked

¹⁹¹ For Mao’s comments, see “Document No. 2: Conversation between Mao Zedong and E.F. Hill,” 28 November 1968, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 11, Winter 1998, p. 159. For the Marshals’ report, see “Document No. 11: Report by Four Chinese Marshals – Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian – to the CCP Central Committee, ‘Our Views about the Current Situation,’” p. 170.

¹⁹² See, for example, Lyle J. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenal Deter? The Sino-Soviet Crisis of 1969,” *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 2003), pp. 72-73; Gurtov and Hwang, *China Under Threat*, p. 231; A. Goldstein, *Deterrence and Security in the 21st Century*, pp. 98-99;

¹⁹³ “Document No. 9: Report by Four Chinese Marshals – Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen – to the Central Committee, ‘A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation,’” 11 July 1969, p. 167.

¹⁹⁴ See Rosemary Foot, “Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict,” *International Security* (Winter 1988-1989), pp. 105-106.

China with airpower, China might respond “using [another] strategy everywhere on the ground. If the U.S. is to carry out extensive bombing of China, that is war, and a war has no boundaries.”¹⁹⁵ Four years later, Beijing adopted a similar deterrence strategy against Soviet nuclear threats.

In communicating the threat of a long and costly conventional conflict, Beijing repeatedly referenced the size and tenacity of its population. Numerous statements warned Moscow that “the 700 million Chinese people are not to be bullied,” and that they would not be “intimidated by...nuclear blackmail.” If the Soviets attacked, they would be “drowned in the sea of people’s war,” and “hundreds of millions of Chinese people and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army” would rise up in resistance. The Chinese people, Beijing threatened, would “fight to the finish.”¹⁹⁶ In September, Mao personally contributed a slogan for China’s upcoming National Day on 1 October, which proclaimed, “All the peoples of the world must rise up together and oppose all wars of aggression...especially wars of aggression using nuclear weapons. If this kind of war occurs, all the people of the world should use revolutionary war to end wars of aggression and should start preparing now!”¹⁹⁷ The next month, when Chinese fears about a Soviet nuclear strike reached their zenith, Beijing warned Moscow in an official government statement, “Should a handful of war maniacs dare to raid China’s strategic sites in defiance of world condemnation, that will be war, that will be aggression, and the 700 million Chinese people will rise up in resistance and use revolutionary war to eliminate the war of aggression.”¹⁹⁸

China had indeed found a potent threat. While most Soviet military specialists did not fear a Chinese nuclear reprisal, believing that China’s arsenal was so small, rudimentary, and vulnerable that it could not survive a first strike and carry out a retaliatory attack, there was great concern about China’s massive conventional army.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Quoted in Lyle J. Goldstein, “When China was a ‘Rogue State’: The Impact of China’s Nuclear Weapons Program on US-China Relations During the 1960s,” *Journal of Contemporary China* (November 2003), pp. 748-749.

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, Lin Biao, “Report to the Ninth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” p. 34; “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China,” 24 May 1969, p. A10; “Full Support for Chinese Government’s Just Stand on the Sino-Soviet Boundary,” “Down with the New Tsars!” and “Rapping the Anti-China Baffoon Simonov,” all in *Peking Review*, 6 June 1969, pp. 15-19; “Soviet Revisionists Discard Mask of So-Called Willingness for ‘Consultations,’” p. 19; “Soviet Troops Flagrantly Intrude Into China’s Tiehliekti Area in Creating Incident of Bloodshed,” *Peking Review*, 15 August 1969, p. 7; and “The Nation Angrily Condemns Soviet Revisionists for Crime of Provoking New Bloody Incident,” *Peking Review*, 22 August 1969, p. 10.

¹⁹⁷ Office of Party History of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, *Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao* [Historical Materials of the Chinese Communist Party] (Beijing: Chinese Communist Party History Press, 1992), p. 214. See also Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics*, p. 202; and Stanley Karnow, “China Warns of Nuclear War, Urges World Revolution,” *Washington Post*, 17 September 1969, p. A21.

¹⁹⁸ “Statement of the Government of the People’s Republic of China,” 7 October 1969, in *FBIS China*, 8 October 1969, p. A1.

¹⁹⁹ Aleksei Yelizavetin, “Peregovory Kosygina i Chzhoi Enlaia v Pekinskom Aeroportu” [Conversation Between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai in the Beijing Airport], *Problemy Dal’nego*

A large-scale Chinese incursion could threaten key strategic centers in Blagoveshchensk, Vladivostok, and Khabarovsk, as well as crucial nodes of the Trans-Siberian Railroad.²⁰⁰ According to Arkady Shevchenko, a high-ranking Russian defector to the United States, “The Politburo was terrified that the Chinese might make a large-scale intrusion into Soviet territory...A nightmare vision of invasion by millions of Chinese made the Soviet leaders almost frantic. Despite our overwhelming superiority in weaponry, it would not be easy for the U.S.S.R. to cope with an assault of this magnitude.”²⁰¹ Given China’s “vast population and deep knowledge and experience in guerilla warfare,” if the Soviets launched a major attack on China’s nuclear program they would surely become “mired in an endless war.”²⁰² In fact, concerns about China’s strength in manpower and its “people’s war” strategy ran so deep that some bureaucrats in Moscow argued the only way to defend against a massive conventional onslaught was to use nuclear weapons. Some even advocated deploying nuclear mines along the Sino-Soviet border.²⁰³

But was Moscow really planning a nuclear attack? Even if a conventional “people’s war” was a frightening proposition, it can only be credited as an effective deterrent if Moscow was seriously considering a strike and subsequently refrained because the costs of a protracted war outweighed the benefits of aggression. The evidence, though still incomplete, is mixed. According to Shevchenko, in the aftermath of the 2 March conflict Soviet Defense Minister Andrei Grechko advocated a nuclear “blockbuster” involving “unrestricted use” of multi-megaton nuclear weapons to “once and for all get rid of the Chinese threat.” On the other hand, Nikolai Ogarkov, a senior military officer, believed that a massive nuclear attack “would inevitably mean world war.” Even a limited counterforce strike on China’s nuclear facilities was dangerous, Ogarkov argued, because a few nuclear weapons would “hardly annihilate” a country the size of China, and in response China would “fight unrelentingly.”²⁰⁴

Given the seriousness with which Moscow took Sino-Soviet political and military hostilities, it is likely that military planners and political officials considered a nuclear strike as at least one option among many.²⁰⁵ There is no available evidence, however, that Moscow ever seriously contemplated launching a nuclear strike. Rather, it appears that the nuclear threats, including the probes to Washington and elsewhere, were part of Moscow’s coercive diplomacy strategy designed to pressure Beijing into

Vostoka [Problems of the Far East], No. 5 (1992), p. 46. See also L. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?” pp. 69-71, 78; and Holloway, “Assessing China’s Nuclear Policy,” pp. 17-18.

²⁰⁰ Gobarev, “Soviet Policy Toward China: Developing Nuclear Weapons 1949-1969,” p. 40.

²⁰¹ Arkady N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 164-165.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ N.S. Leonov, *Likholet’e* [The Wild Years] (Moscow: Russkii Dom, 2003), p. 119.

²⁰⁴ Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow*, p. 165. For additional evidence on Grechko’s view, see L. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?” p. 64.

²⁰⁵ See Yelizavetin, “Peregovory Kosygina i Chzhoi Enlaia v Pekinskom Aeroportu” [Conversation Between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai in the Beijing Airport], p. 47; L. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?” p. 64; and Holloway, “Assessing China’s Nuclear Policy,” p. 18.

negotiations.²⁰⁶ A National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) reached similar conclusions, arguing that while several military options were “surely under review,” the “main intent of [Moscow’s] ominous hints was to move the Chinese into negotiations.”²⁰⁷ There is some evidence, however, suggesting that Moscow might have thought more seriously about a conventional, rather than a nuclear, strike on China’s nuclear facilities.²⁰⁸ According to the CIA, a “conventional air strike” on China’s nuclear sites was “most attractive” among Moscow’s various military options. But this was still a risky and ultimately unappealing course of action, since “Moscow would have to reckon with the possibility that [China] would be able and determined to wage a protracted conventional campaign.” In addition, Soviet decision-makers could not be entirely confident in their ability to destroy all of China’s deliverable nuclear weapons, and might therefore be subject to nuclear retaliation.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ See also Yelizavetin, “Peregovory Kosygina i Chzhoi Enlaia v Pekinskom Aeroportu” [Conversation Between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai in the Beijing Airport], p. 47; and Holloway, “Assessing China’s Nuclear Policy,” p. 20, 29.

²⁰⁷ See *Soviet Policy in Asia*, NIE 11-9-71, 15 April 1971, p. 9.

²⁰⁸ See L. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?” pp. 65-66; and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, p. 238.

²⁰⁹ See *Soviet Policy in Asia*, p. 11; *The USSR and China*, p. 8; *The Sino-Soviet Relationship: The Military Aspects*, NIE 11-13-73, 20 September 1973, p. 11; and *Possible Changes in the Sino-Soviet Relationship*, NIE 11/13/6-73, 25 October 1973, p. 1.

War Scare: Negotiations and the Fear of a Nuclear “Sneak Attack”

The belief that Soviet nuclear threats were credible made Chinese leaders increasingly suspicious about Moscow’s intentions and potential actions. Emotions, stress, fear and consequently fanciful thinking took hold, especially for Mao and Lin. On three separate occasions beginning in September, Chinese decision-makers convinced themselves that a Soviet sneak attack was imminent. In some cases, these suspicions were understandable if not justified, but in others they were based on little more than fear and fantasy. As will be shown, these beliefs had serious consequences and led to major decisions, including the evacuation of the central leadership from Beijing and the order to place China’s nuclear forces on alert.

In the midst of its campaign of nuclear threats, Moscow, in keeping with its coercive diplomacy strategy, once again attempted diplomatic engagement. During a visit to Vietnam on 6 September to attend Ho Chi Minh’s funeral, Kosygin asked the Vietnamese government to communicate a message to Chinese officials proposing a meeting. Mao was suspicious of Kosygin’s motivations and deliberated for several days before answering, finally agreeing on 10 September to a high-level meeting.²¹⁰ China’s decision to meet with the Soviets signified an important shift in policy and behavior, as Beijing had ignored or dismissed Moscow’s earlier diplomatic overtures. Compared to the context in which Moscow’s previous proposals had been made, the situation in September was quite different: the Soviets had now sufficiently convinced Beijing that its nuclear threats were credible and, as a result, China was in the midst of frantic war preparations. Faced with the credible prospect of a nuclear strike if tensions continued, Beijing agreed to meet. The Soviets had successfully coerced – or, more precisely, compelled – China to come to the negotiating table.²¹¹

A meeting between Kosygin and Zhou was set for the next day, 11 September, at the Beijing airport. As the Chinese leadership prepared for the meeting, suspicion and fear kicked in. Many became concerned that the meeting was a trick – a Trojan Horse – designed to get a Soviet airplane into Beijing that would actually be carrying Soviet commandos and special forces rather than Kosygin and the Soviet delegation. This fear was somewhat understandable, given that the Soviets had used a similar tactic the year before in Czechoslovakia. As a result, Mao ordered Zhou to put military

²¹⁰ See Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 37.

²¹¹ See, for example, Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict,” pp. 281, 283; Robinson, “The Sino-Soviet Border Conflicts of 1969: New Evidence Three Decades Later,” p. 214; Wishnick, *Mending Fences*, p. 36; and An, *The Sino-Soviet Territorial Dispute*, p. 109. The CIA also concluded that Moscow’s nuclear threats coerced China into negotiations. See *Weekly Summary*, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, 24 October 1969, p. 6; and *Communist China’s International Posture*, NIE 13-7-70, 12 November 1970, p. 8. The U.S. press also reached a similar conclusion. See Stanley Karnow, “Fear Drives China to Talk to Russia,” *Washington Post*, 9 October 1969, p. A1. On compellence, see Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 69-91.

forces in the area on alert and to move several units to the airport. Army officers and civilians alike were told to expect an “inevitable attack.”²¹²

Even though no attack occurred when Kosygin landed in Beijing, Chinese trepidations about a Soviet nuclear strike were evident throughout the meeting. At the outset, Zhou brought up the “rumors” of a possible Soviet attack on China’s nuclear facilities and asked Kosygin to clarify Soviet intentions.²¹³ Zhou sought both to convince Kosygin that nuclear aggression against China was unnecessary, and to deter an attack by communicating China’s threat to initiate a long and costly conventional war.²¹⁴ In an effort to remind the Soviets that China’s nuclear capability was small and rudimentary and therefore not a serious threat requiring preemptive action, Zhou candidly admitted that the Soviets “must be well aware of [China’s] nuclear weapons capability.” Zhou also reminded the Soviet Premier that China “had [its] hands full” with domestic issues, especially the Cultural Revolution, and consequently had no desire for war.²¹⁵ At the same time, he also warned Kosygin of the consequences of an attack. “In the event of the Soviet Union destroying Chinese nuclear bases,” Zhou stated, China “would consider itself at war” with the Soviet Union and “would fight to the bitter end.” He continued, “Even if the hypothetical preemptive strike by the Soviet Union were technically a success, it would only entail colossal political problems in the decades to come.”²¹⁶ In essence, Zhou was telling Kosygin, “You can destroy my nuclear bases [but] I can still launch a [conventional] attack and weaken the Soviet Union.”²¹⁷ On 18 September, Zhou sent a letter to Kosygin reiterating and confirming the key points of their discussion, including the “promise that the armed forces of each side, including nuclear forces, will not attack and open fire on the other side.”²¹⁸

A few days after the meeting, however, Chinese suspicions again flared up. Upon close examination of the minutes of the airport meeting, Chinese Politburo members

²¹² Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 58; and Stanley Karnow, “Soviet Attack Coming, Peking Tells its People,” *Washington Post*, 11 September 1969, p. A12.

²¹³ See, for example, Elizavetin, ““Peregovory Kosygina i Chzhoi Enlaia v Pekinskom Aeroportu” [Conversation Between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai in the Beijing Airport], p. 56; Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Personal Feelings Between Mao Zedong and Moscow], p. 512; Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 38; and Holloway, “Assessing China’s Nuclear Policy,” p. 23.

²¹⁴ On the threat to initiate a long “people’s war,” see Holloway, “Assessing China’s Nuclear Policy,” p. 24.

²¹⁵ See Xie Yixian, ed., *Zhongguo dangdai waijiao shi, 1949-2001* [China’s Contemporary Foreign Affairs History, 1949-2001] (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2002), pp. 246-247; Elizavetin with Goncharov and Usov, “Kosygin-Zhou Talks at Beijing Airport,” p. 110; and Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Personal Feelings Between Mao Zedong and Moscow], p. 512.

²¹⁶ Elizavetin with Goncharov and Usov, “Kosygin-Zhou Talks at Beijing Airport,” p. 111. See also Xie, *Zhongguo dangdai waijiao shi, 1949-2001* [China’s Contemporary Foreign Affairs History, 1949-2001] (Beijing: China Youth Press, 2002), pp. 246-247; and Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Mosike de enen yuanyuan* [Personal Feelings Between Mao Zedong and Moscow], p. 512.

²¹⁷ Quoted in L. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?” p. 62.

²¹⁸ “Document No. 13: Letter, Zhou Enlai to Alexei Kosygin,” 18 September 1969, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 11, Winter 1998, p. 171.

discovered that Kosygin had never firmly disavowed a Soviet nuclear strike. Although Kosygin had assured Zhou that the Soviets had no interest in war with China, the fact that he did not specifically rule out the use of nuclear weapons raised worries in Beijing. Chinese leaders were also concerned upon learning that senior Soviet officials did not greet Kosygin at the airport when he returned to the Soviet Union. The implication, Chinese leaders reasoned, was that Kosygin was not speaking for the Soviet government and therefore the assurances he had given could not be taken seriously. With this “evidence” in hand, senior Chinese decision-makers, including Lin and Mao, came to the conclusion that Kosygin’s visit was actually a “smokescreen” for a future strike, just like the Japanese special envoy’s meeting with President Roosevelt before the attack on Pearl Harbor.²¹⁹

To make matters worse, just as Beijing was beginning to pore over the details of the airport meeting, a 16 September article in the *London Evening News* further stoked Chinese suspicions, as it contained some of the most specific Soviet nuclear threats of the Sino-Soviet conflict. The author was Victor Louis, a Soviet citizen (born Vitaly Yevgenyevich Lui) with close KGB connections who had been previously accused by Beijing of carrying out “secret activities” on Taiwan on behalf of the Soviet government, and was labeled an “agent of the Soviet State” by the CIA.²²⁰ Louis’ article said there was not “a shadow of a doubt that Russian nuclear installations stand aimed at the Chinese nuclear facilities.” The Soviet Union, he wrote, clearly “prefers using rockets to manpower” and has “a variety of rockets to choose from.” As if to hint at the possibility of a surprise attack, Louis wrote, “Whether or not the Soviet Union will dare to attack Lop Nor...is a question of strategy, and so the world would only learn about it afterwards.” But in keeping with Moscow’s well-worn strategy of making nuclear threats and then denying any aggressive intentions, Louis concluded that there were “no noticeable preparations for a war” in Moscow.²²¹

The Louis article and the reexamination of the airport meeting prompted more extensive emergency war preparations in China. Mao ordered the CMC to transfer elite military units from the south to the north; the air force began moving surface-to-air missile battalions to the northern city of Zhangjiakou; new tank divisions were formed; a crash program to build air-raid shelters was established; and shelters were

²¹⁹ This section is based on Xiong Xianghui, “Dakai ZhongMei guanxi de qianzou –1969 nian siwei laoshuai dui guoji xingshi yanjiu he jianyi de qian qian hou hou” [The Prelude to the Opening of Sino-American Relations: The Judgment and Proposals of Four Marshals Regarding the International Situation in 1969], in CCP Central Party History Research Section, ed., *Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao*, vol. 42, p. 83; Liu, “1969 nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui MeiSu guanxi de yanjiu he tiaozheng” (China’s War Preparations and the Study of the Readjustment of Relations with the United States and the Soviet Union in 1969), p. 46; and Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” pp. 39-40. See also Stanley Karnow, “Peking Stokes Stokes Dispute with Moscow,” *Washington Post*, 20 September 1969, p. A18.

²²⁰ See “Soviet Revisionists Step Up Counter-Revolutionary Collusion with Chiang Kai-shek Bandit Gang,” *Peking Review*, 14 March 1969, p. 13; and *Intelligence Report: The Evolution of Soviet Policy in the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute*, p. 76.

²²¹ Victor Louis, “Will Russia Czech-Mate China?” *London Evening News*, 16 September 1969, in *FBIS USSR*, 19 September 1969, p. A11-A12.

built throughout the country.²²² In addition, Zhou ordered key ministries to evacuate critical archives. At a PLA conference on 22 September, Zhou remarked that the situation was “extremely tense,” and that China “must be fully prepared.”²²³ According to the Indian Foreign Ministry, China had even stepped up efforts to move some of its nuclear facilities to Tibet.²²⁴

It was at this point that Beijing made its own attempt at nuclear signaling. On 23 September, China conducted its first underground nuclear test, and just six days later, it tested a thermonuclear device. The rapid succession of the tests was unprecedented in Chinese nuclear behavior, and given the political and military context in which the tests occurred, some scholars have argued that they were intended to send a strong deterrent message to Moscow.²²⁵ It would be a mistake, however, to infer too much from these actions about China’s belief in the deterrent value of the nuclear tests and of its small nuclear arsenal. In conducting these tests, Beijing was uncharacteristically quiet and circumspect. Whereas China had widely publicized its previous nuclear tests, Beijing delayed public announcement of the September tests until early October. Even then, the tests were “virtually ignored” by the Chinese press.²²⁶ Although archival evidence on this issue remains unavailable, Beijing’s behavior after the September tests, especially when compared to its behavior after earlier tests, suggests that in this instance Chinese leaders were acutely sensitive to the political and military dangers of nuclear saber-rattling, and consequently sought to underplay the tests in order to avoid overtly antagonizing Moscow.²²⁷ At best, the tests were likely a last-ditch effort to augment China’s primary deterrent – the threat of a protracted conventional “people’s war” – in the face of what was believed to be an imminent Soviet nuclear attack.

On 26 September, Kosygin responded to Zhou’s 18 September letter and proposed that formal negotiations begin in Beijing in early October. Zhou responded favorably to Kosygin’s offer, suggesting in his reply that negotiations commence in Beijing on 20 October.²²⁸ But the agreement for negotiations did not ease Beijing’s suspicions and fears; if anything, the Chinese leadership – especially Lin – became even more concerned about a nuclear sneak attack. Chinese National Day, an annual celebration commemorating the founding of the PRC, was scheduled for 1 October, and Lin became concerned that the Soviets might “[take] advantage of our holiday to launch a surprise attack.” In order to be prepared for such an attack, Lin ordered the military

²²² Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 59.

²²³ Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 40.

²²⁴ See Sydney H. Schanberg, “China Said to be Moving Nuclear Plant to Tibet,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1969, p. 5.

²²⁵ See, for example, Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall – Six Presidents and China: An Investigative History* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 73; Burr, “Sino-American Relations, 1969,” p. 94; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 60. A list of China’s nuclear tests is available at <http://www.nti.org/db/china/testlist.htm>.

²²⁶ “Moderates’ Touch Seen in China,” *Washington Post*, 9 October 1969, p. A27.

²²⁷ For a similar argument, see Segal, *Defending China*, p. 182.

²²⁸ Li Ping and Ma Zhisun, eds., *Zhou Enlai nianpu (1949-1976, xia jua)* [A Chronicle of Zhou Enlai (1949-1976, Part II)] (Beijing: Central Literary Press, 1997), pp. 323-324.

to enter “first-degree combat readiness.” Airplanes stationed at airports around Beijing were dispersed to other locations; obstacles were placed on runways to prevent Soviet planes from landing; and airport workers were given weapons and told they must be prepared “to shoot at enemy paratroopers.” Lin’s concern was so great that he even proposed emptying the water at the Miyun Reservoir in order to prevent the Soviets from blowing up the dam. Zhou quickly opposed this plan, since it would flood dozens of communities downstream.²²⁹

When nothing happened on 1 October, the Chinese leadership became even more apprehensive. Within a short time period, Beijing had been wrong about an imminent Soviet attack on two separate occasions – before the 11 September airport meeting in Beijing and on National Day on 1 October – but rather than reevaluating their perceptions of the immediacy of the Soviet threat, the Chinese instead chose to interpret the absence of Soviet hostilities as “proof” that aggression must be coming. For Beijing, the fact that an attack had not yet occurred seemingly confirmed that one was in the offing.²³⁰

China set the new date for a Soviet assault as the eve of the negotiations in Beijing on 20 October.²³¹ Apparently based on incoming intelligence, Mao and Lin worried that the airplane transporting Kosygin and the Soviet delegation to Beijing might actually be armed with nuclear weapons.²³² Fearing a decapitating nuclear strike, Mao said, “The concentration of all of the members of the central leadership in Beijing is not good; one atom bomb would kill many. We should disperse a bit. Some old comrades can be evacuated to other places.”²³³ At Mao’s suggestion, on 14 October the Central Party Committee advised all central Party, military, and civilian leaders to leave Beijing before 20 October.²³⁴ Mao fled to Wuhan in central China; Lin flew to Suzhou in the east; key military officials went to a hardened wartime command center under the Hundred Hope Mountain in western Beijing; and the State Council and the Party’s

²²⁹ This section is based on Zhang Yunsheng, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao’s Secretary] (Beijing: Chunqiu Publishing House, 1989), pp. 307-308; *Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao* [Historical Materials of the Chinese Communist Party], p. 219; Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 40; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, pp. 60-61.

²³⁰ See Yang, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,” p. 40; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 61.

²³¹ Wu Faxian, *Wu Faxian Huiyilu* [Memoirs of Wu Faxian] (Hong Kong: North Star Press, 2006), p. 764; and Zhang, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao’s Secretary], p. 316.

²³² Zhang, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao’s Secretary], pp. 319-320; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, pp. 61-62.

²³³ Yan Mingzai, “1969 nian ‘yihao hao ling’ xiada jingguo” [The Process of Issuing the “No. 1 Order” in 1969], *Dangshi Xinxi Bao* [Party History Information Newspaper].

²³⁴ Mang Donghong, “1969 nian de Beijing da ganbu shusan” [The 1969 Evacuation of Important Cadres from Beijing], *Dangshi bolan* [General Review of the Communist Party of China], Vol. 1, 2006.

Central General Office took refuge in hardened posts in Elephant Nose Valley, also in western Beijing.²³⁵

Lin was especially concerned that a nuclear strike would occur on 19 October, when the airplane that was supposed to be carrying the Soviet delegation entered Chinese airspace.²³⁶ In anticipation of an attack, and without Mao's prior approval, on 18 October Lin sent a message to General Huang Yongsheng entitled, "Urgent Directive Regarding Strengthening Combat Readiness to Prevent an Enemy's Surprise Attack." Originally containing six directives, the message was re-written into four separate orders and transmitted to military commands under the collective title, "No. 1 Order." The orders directed the regional commands, especially the three in the north, to "disperse and protect their heavy weapons, such as tanks, aircraft, and artillery," and to "rapidly accelerate the production of anti-tank weapons...and anti-tank guns." Intelligence units were told to maintain constant surveillance and reconnaissance.²³⁷

Most important, the second directive of the No. 1 Order instructed China's strategic forces, the Second Artillery, to conduct "launching preparations."²³⁸ For the first – and only – time, China's nuclear weapons were put on combat alert. Lin and his staff clearly recognized the significance of this order.²³⁹ Given the sensitivity of the order and the secrecy with which China conducts all its nuclear activities, the directive was transmitted only to the Second Artillery headquarters. Lin was also emphatic that Mao must personally approve any missile launch. One of Lin's aides warned, "The Second Artillery fires by pressing a button; if they fail to be cautious, even a single shot could start a world war." Consequently, the aide suggested that some "limiting words be added" to the alert order. Despite the obvious caution in dealing with issues related to China's nuclear forces, at least one mistake was made. Specifically, Lin included the DF-3 intermediate-range ballistic missile in his directive to the Second Artillery, but none of the missiles were yet operational. While this was not a potentially catastrophic error, it does suggest that senior decision-makers might not be fully informed about their nuclear arsenal, and thus there is a possibility that a leader could overestimate, or underestimate, the extent of their nuclear capabilities in a crisis.²⁴⁰

Lin's fears did not diminish after issuing the No. 1 Order. As the Soviet airplane approached Beijing, Lin asked for minute-by-minute intelligence updates and

²³⁵ Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, pp. 62-63; and Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969," p. 41.

²³⁶ Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 63.

²³⁷ Zhang, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao's Secretary], p. 317; Yan, "1969 nian 'yihao haoling' xiada jingguo" [The Process of Issuing the "No. 1 Order" in 1969]; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, pp. 63-66.

²³⁸ Zhang, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao's Secretary], p. 317;

²³⁹ Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 65.

²⁴⁰ This section is based on Yan, "1969 nian 'yihao haoling' xiada jingguo" [The Process of Issuing the "No. 1 Order" in 1969]; Zhang, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao's Secretary], p. 318; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 69.

situation reports, and he refused to sleep until the plane had landed. Not until the plane touched down in Beijing without incident did Lin relax and go to bed.²⁴¹ On October 20, after eight months of violence, threats, and scathing political rhetoric, China and the Soviet Union finally sat down at the negotiating table. Negotiations were protracted and complex, lasting several decades before a final agreement was reached. Beijing claimed on more than one occasion that its bargaining position was disadvantaged because “above the negotiating table hangs the Soviet atomic bomb.”²⁴² But for Mao, Lin, and the rest of the Chinese leadership, the immediate threat of a Soviet nuclear strike had at last subsided.

²⁴¹ Zhang, *Maojiawan Jishi Lin Biao Mishu Huiyilu* [A Firsthand Account of Maojiawan: The Memoirs of Lin Biao's Secretary], pp. 319-320; and Lewis and Xue, *Imagined Enemies*, p. 69.

²⁴² See A.A. Brezhnev, “Kitskie Zarisovki,” [Notes from China], in *Diplomaty Vspominaiut* [Diplomats Remember] (Moscow: Nauchnaia Kniga, 1997), p. 350; and Kireev, *Rossia-Kitai. Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranychnykh peregovorov* [Russia-China. Unknown Pages of Border Negotiations], p. 126.

Conclusion: Lessons and Implications for Future Nuclear Challenges

In the policy and academic literature on nuclear history, the “big” crises – especially the Cuban Missile Crisis – have traditionally received the most attention and analysis. This is understandable and indeed necessary, since initial efforts to draw useful and meaningful lessons about deterrence and nuclear interactions from the Cold War should focus on situations where the United States and the Soviet Union stood at the brink.

While insights from the U.S.-Soviet nuclear experience remain useful and relevant for thinking about some modern nuclear challenges, this should not be the only empirical foundation upon which U.S. nuclear policies are built. By the late 1960s, the U.S.-Soviet strategic relationship was characterized by rough numerical parity and mutual possession of survivable second-strike forces, thereby creating a strategic condition of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). Some modern nuclear relationships, however, are unlikely to approximate this kind of strategic balance. In these cases, the experiences of minor nuclear powers, and the interactions between major and minor nuclear states, will likely be more instructive for designing and implementing effective U.S. policies and deterrence strategies. From this perspective, the Sino-Soviet conflict is particularly important because it was a confrontation between states with vastly asymmetric nuclear (and conventional) capabilities; a wide gap in experience as nuclear powers (in 1969, the Soviet Union had been a nuclear state for 20 years, compared to only 5 for China); and different strategic cultures and views on deterrence.

It is important to emphasize that the value of re-examining Cold War nuclear crises and drawing out lessons is not to make specific predictions about how states will necessarily think or behave in future nuclear contingencies. This study does not claim that because China and the Soviet Union took certain actions in 1969, a future crisis between the United States and Iran, or between India and Pakistan, will necessarily follow a similar path or involve the same kinds of strategic calculations. Rather, the value of insights and lessons from nuclear history is to add to the empirical databank that is used to craft modern policies and to provide new perspectives on the many concepts, theories, and general beliefs about deterrence and crisis behavior. Given that the effectiveness of deterrence is inherently unprovable and that nuclear weapons have not been used since August 1945, much of the discussion and debate that informs U.S. nuclear policy has been based on logic and intuition rather than on a large and robust dataset. Consequently, the objective of this line of research is to provide empirical evidence that can be used to refine – and perhaps challenge – some of the existing views about deterrence and nuclear behavior that inform U.S. nuclear policies and crisis management.

The evidence from the Sino-Soviet border conflict suggests several important insights, lessons, and issues to consider for future nuclear challenges. We outline and examine each below.

Conflicts between Nuclear-Armed States Are Not Always Related to or Dominated by the Nuclear Balance

A central argument in much of the deterrence literature is that nuclear weapons induce great caution in international behavior and significantly reduce the likelihood of any level of direct conflict between nuclear-armed states.²⁴³ Nuclear weapons, according to this view, cast a “long shadow” over international relations, bounding the range of acceptable policies and behaviors and significantly limiting military options.²⁴⁴ The danger of nuclear escalation is ever-present and can occur unintentionally, thereby conditioning and circumscribing all interactions between nuclear-armed states.²⁴⁵

This argument is central to explanations for the “long peace” of the Cold War. The presence of nuclear weapons and the condition of MAD had a stabilizing and caution-inducing effect on the superpowers, effectively deterring not only large-scale nuclear and conventional aggression but also more limited attacks.²⁴⁶ Today, this view plays an important role in ongoing debates about the desirability of global nuclear abolition. Whereas some argue that abolishing nuclear weapons would strengthen international security, others contend that, without the pacifying effects of nuclear weapons, the world would be “safe” for conventional war.²⁴⁷ In addition, the effect of nuclear weapons on state behavior has important consequences for the “stability-instability paradox” – the issue of whether mutual nuclear possession encourages or permits aggression below the nuclear threshold. This issue has particular salience in current debates on Iran, as some argue that a nuclear-armed Iran might be emboldened to act aggressively in the region in the belief that its nuclear arsenal provides an effective deterrent to U.S. retaliation or intervention.²⁴⁸

The Sino-Soviet border conflict adds important empirical evidence to these debates. In this case, nuclear weapons had little apparent influence on China’s decision to attack the Soviets on 2 March. The border conflict was not a result of the “stability-

²⁴³ See, for example, Kenneth Waltz, “More May be Better,” in Waltz and Sagan, eds., *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate*, ch. 1; and Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁴⁴ See Muthiah Alagappa, “Nuclear Weapons and National Security: Far-Reaching Influence and Deterrence Dominance,” in Alagappa, ed., *The Long Shadow: Nuclear Weapons and Security in 21st Century Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 479.

²⁴⁵ Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, p. 21.

²⁴⁶ See, for example, John Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security* (Spring 1986), pp. 120-123; John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War,” *International Security* (Summer 1990), pp. 19-22, 27-29; and Wolfgang K.H. Panofsky, “The Mutual Hostage Relationship Between America and Russia,” *Foreign Affairs* (October 1973), pp. 109-118.

²⁴⁷ See Peter Baker, “With Arms Pact, Disarmament Challenges Remain,” *New York Times*, 7 April 2010.

²⁴⁸ Devin T. Hagerty, “Iran: The Nuclear Quandary,” in Alagappa, ed., *The Long Shadow*, pp. 296-322.

instability paradox,” since China was not emboldened by its rudimentary nuclear capability. But neither was China initially more cautious because of nuclear weapons. Rather, nuclear weapons and the nuclear balance simply were not a relevant factor in Chinese leaders’ strategic calculations in the run-up to the conflict on Zhenbao; in their view, the attack on 2 March was narrowly conceptualized as a limited, one-time effort designed to signal resolve and deter future aggression. Thus, in contrast to the long-held view that nuclear weapons and the possibility of escalation *must* factor into almost all calculations between nuclear-armed states, the evidence from this case indicates that there can be conflicts and other aggressive actions that, for the initiator, have nothing to do with the nuclear balance. Indeed, the border conflict did not take on a nuclear dimension until Moscow deliberately injected it into the situation.

Even if China was not actually emboldened by its nuclear capability, it is possible that Moscow assumed otherwise. At least one Russian scholar attributes Beijing’s aggressiveness to its possession of nuclear weapons. According to this view, Beijing believed that its nuclear capability would “prevent the Soviets from retaliating, regardless of Chinese actions.”²⁴⁹ Given the ongoing Cultural Revolution in China, there were serious concerns in Moscow that China was becoming increasingly unpredictable and might be willing to take great risks.²⁵⁰ As Sino-Soviet tensions escalated, Brezhnev brought up a 1957 speech in which Mao spoke with “startling lightness and cynicism” about the potential destruction of “half of mankind” in a nuclear war.²⁵¹ As previously noted, Moscow was surprised by the attack on Zhenbao, and the decision to escalate on 15 March and in the following months stemmed in part from its shock that Beijing was willing to attack a state with such overwhelming superiority in military power. Moscow may have projected its own way of thinking on Beijing, thereby leading to the conclusion that China must have been encouraged by the attainment of even a rudimentary nuclear capability.

This raises the possibility of misinterpretation and miscalculation in future contingencies with a nuclear-armed opponent. If there is a widespread view that nuclear considerations are always factored into decisions, there is a risk that U.S. decision-makers could misinterpret a limited action by an opponent as somehow related to its possession of nuclear weapons. The Sino-Soviet case indicates that deliberately limited aggression by a nuclear-armed adversary might not always be connected to nuclear possession or motivated by the “stability-instability paradox.” However, there is a danger that the United States could misinterpret an opponent’s actions and turn a non-nuclear crisis or conflict into a nuclear one in the mistaken belief that the adversary must have been emboldened by its nuclear arsenal.

²⁴⁹ Gobarev, “Soviet Policy Toward China: Developing Nuclear Weapons 1949-1969,” p. 36.

²⁵⁰ L. Goldstein, “Do Nascent WMD Arsenals Deter?” p. 62.

²⁵¹ “Brezhnev Speech at International Communist Conference,” 7 June 1969, in *CDSP*, 2 July 1969, p. 11.

A Nuclear “Learning Period”

The Sino-Soviet border conflict suggests that there can be a “learning period” for new nuclear states.²⁵² During this period, a new nuclear state may be unsure of its nuclear capabilities, how much deterrence or coercive power it provides, and consequently how to behave as a nuclear power. Whereas some analysts contend that the acquisition of even a small and unsophisticated nuclear capability immediately provides a strong deterrent, this case suggests that an immature arsenal coupled with a leadership inexperienced in nuclear matters may not provide the same level of deterrence as a mature arsenal possessed by an experienced power. Thus, in some instances, the United States may have to grapple with a nuclear power on a possibly bumpy learning curve.

This learning period might also give the United States greater relative freedom of action as well as the ability to shape the strategic relationship in favorable ways. From this perspective, the United States might be able to “teach” a nuclear state about how to behave as a nuclear power, carefully communicating information about the limits of nuclear possession for coercive purposes; their limited utility as warfighting instruments; the importance of command and control; and adequate security against theft or diversion.

The consequences of this learning period are likely to vary on a state-by-state basis. Like China in the 1960s, some emerging nuclear powers might lack confidence in the political and military utility of a small – and perhaps vulnerable – nuclear arsenal. These new nuclear states may not be emboldened by nuclear possession. Other states, however, could believe that the attainment of any level of nuclear capability provides a robust deterrent, and consequently might become more aggressive and risk-acceptant.²⁵³

In addition, this learning period might also extend to current and potential opponents of the new nuclear state. Not only might the proliferating country be unsure of the political and military consequences of its new nuclear arsenal, but so too might other states be unsure of how it will behave as a nuclear power. Concerned states will therefore likely go through a “learning period” as well, as they pay close attention to the actions and policies of the new nuclear state, and compare them to its behavior before nuclear acquisition, to gain an understanding of how it views nuclear weapons and how it will likely behave as a nuclear power.

²⁵² On nuclear leaning, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Nuclear Leaning and U.S.-Soviet Security Regimes,” *International Organization* (Summer 1987), pp. 371-402.

²⁵³ According to a recent study, new nuclear states are more likely to “play the nuclear card” and engaged in international disputes more often than experienced nuclear powers. See Michael Horowitz, “The Spread of Nuclear Weapons and International Conflict: Does Experience Matter?” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (April 2009), pp. 234-257.

Asymmetric Strategies for Nuclear Deterrence

In the history and theory of nuclear deterrence, it is axiomatic that a primary purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks. It is equally well known that nuclear weapons can be used by weaker powers to deter conventional aggression by militarily superior adversaries. During the Cold War, for example, NATO's strategy relied on the threat of nuclear escalation to help deter conventional aggression by the numerically superior Warsaw Pact forces. Today, the situation is essentially reversed. Among the many reasons why states might want to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, one of the primary motivations for nuclear proliferation vis-à-vis the United States is to deter its conventional, rather than its nuclear, capabilities. In this context, nuclear proliferation is an asymmetric response to U.S. conventional superiority.

In the Sino-Soviet conflict, China employed a different kind of asymmetric strategy to deter what it believed was an imminent Soviet nuclear strike. Whereas nuclear weapons have been used to deter nuclear strikes, and nuclear weapons have been used to deter conventional attacks, in this case China used conventional forces to deter a nuclear threat. Lacking confidence in the deterrent power of its rudimentary nuclear capability, China relied on its major strengths – its superiority in manpower and a military doctrine that emphasized protracted non-nuclear conflict – as its primary deterrent.

This case indicates that there can be a much closer relationship between nuclear and non-nuclear forces in deterrence strategies than previously recognized. There is a common view that in a nuclear world, conventional forces are subservient to, and subsumed by, the nuclear balance. However, the Sino-Soviet conflict suggests that conventional forces can remain relevant in nuclear contexts, and that it might be possible for conventional threats and war-fighting strategies to contribute to deterring nuclear threats. Such a strategy relies on an asymmetric form of deterrence, since the threatened retaliation seeks to inflict costs on a completely different level and in a different way, and deliberately shifts the nature of the conflict to an area where the state has an advantage over its opponent.

China's deterrence strategy in the Sino-Soviet conflict suggests the need for new and sustained research on countering asymmetric deterrence strategies. Given current U.S. nuclear and conventional superiority, it is possible that some U.S. adversaries – including those with small nuclear arsenals – will rely on asymmetric deterrence options, including conventional threats, terrorism, cyber, and space, to deter U.S. power projection. Iran, for example, might threaten increased support to terrorist organizations in response to a conventional strike on its nuclear facilities. Similarly, Ashley Tellis has argued that China's anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons program is motivated in part by the desire for an asymmetric option to counter – or at least complicate – U.S. power projection in the region.²⁵⁴ In order to counter asymmetric strategies, the United States might need to rely on asymmetric options of its own. For example, rather than relying solely on its cyber capabilities to deter cyber attacks, it

²⁵⁴ Ashley J. Tellis, "China's Military Space Strategy," *Survival* (Autumn 2007), pp. 41-72.

might need to threaten to take the conflict into another arena where it has an advantage. In other words, deterring asymmetric strategies is likely to require asymmetric options.

The Role of Strategic Culture and Differing Views of Deterrence

The Sino-Soviet border conflict highlights the central importance of studying and understanding different strategic cultures.²⁵⁵ In initiating the conflict on 2 March at Zhenbao, Beijing viewed its actions as inherently defensive and designed to deter future Soviet aggression. Moscow, however, viewed China's actions as aggressive and emblematic of intense and prolonged hostility. This difference in interpretation was one of the most important factors in the longevity and intensity of the conflict.

While policymakers and analysts have often warned of the dangers of “mirror-imaging” regarding what kinds of threats will effectively deter a specific opponent, it is equally problematic to assume that current and future adversaries will have similar views and definitions of the entire concept of deterrence. For example, China's traditional word for deterrence, *weishe*, means “to intimidate militarily” and to use threats for coercive purposes. In contrast to more classical views of deterrence, where the concept is defensive and status quo-oriented, China has traditionally viewed deterrence as offensive and aggressive – more akin to the concept of compellence.²⁵⁶ With more nuclear powers in the international arena and more complex and multifaceted strategic relationships, it is more likely than ever that a country might misinterpret an opponent's intentions or actions due to an inadequate understanding of that state's strategic culture.

Fear, Paranoia, and Suspicion Affect Crisis Decision-Making

Much of the existing literature on nuclear deterrence, signaling, and crisis behavior is predicated on the assumption that leaders will behave rationally in the heat of an intense nuclear crisis. Yet, in this case, as Beijing became more concerned about the possibility of a Soviet nuclear strike, Chinese leaders' suspicions and fears led them to concoct outlandish scenarios for a nuclear “sneak attack” under the cover of negotiations. While the Soviets certainly wanted to convince Beijing that their threats were credible, the extent of China's reaction almost certainly exceeded Moscow's intentions and expectations. In fact, Beijing's perception of the credibility of Soviet threats made the situation more dangerous: Lin's order to put the Second Artillery on alert not only increased the chances of an accidental or inadvertent detonation, but also raised the possibility that Moscow would detect and misinterpret these preparations as signs of an impending launch and decide to preempt.

²⁵⁵ See Jeannie L. Johnson, Kerry M. Kartchner, and Jeffrey A. Larsen, eds., *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction: Culturally Based Insights into Comparative National Security Policymaking* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

²⁵⁶ On China's view of deterrence, see Medeiros, “Evolving Nuclear Doctrine,” p. 52.

Chinese behavior in September and October 1969 should temper beliefs that nuclear crises can be carefully managed, and that subtle and finely tuned nuclear signals will be intercepted and interpreted as desired. Stress, fear, and paranoia can cloud judgment and have unintended consequences in the midst of an intense crisis. In addition, these issues also highlight an important dilemma in deterrence: for deterrence to be effective, an opponent must fear the consequences of its actions; however, too much fear is potentially dangerous, as it can lead to paranoia and dangerous actions. Consequently, a detailed and nuanced understanding of an opponent's decision calculus, strategic culture, psychology, and actions in past crises could be very useful in future scenarios, since this kind of expertise can help U.S. decision-makers better predict how an opponent might react in specific situations and to specific threats.

The Credibility of Threats

Credibility, according to Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, is the “magic ingredient” of deterrence.²⁵⁷ In order to make a threat credible, an opponent must believe that the state has both the military capabilities and political resolve to take action if its demands are not met. Of all the concepts and theories associated with nuclear weapons, the issue of communicating credibility has received the most attention. A key insight of this literature is that making threats public can increase credibility. A public threat engages a state's reputation, thereby increasing credibility by raising the political costs of backing down and gaining a reputation for bluffing.²⁵⁸

One of the central puzzles of the Sino-Soviet border conflict is why China dismissed Moscow's public nuclear threats in March but took them seriously beginning in August. As this study has shown, Beijing's perception of the credibility of Soviet nuclear threats changed when Chinese leaders learned that Moscow had been approaching foreign governments. This shift suggests that diplomatic overtures, as well as more traditional military posturing, can affect an opponent's perception of threat credibility. Overtures to foreign governments appear to add a new dimension of credibility, since an adversary is likely to reason that a state would not raise such issues with others if it were not committed to carrying out its threats.

²⁵⁷ Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 96.

²⁵⁸ On making threats public, see Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, pp. 49-50.