



Thirty years of frozen relations on the thaw: Mao and Khrushchev at the last Sino-Soviet encounter in 1959

Warm Fronts Moving East

When the party leaders of China and the Soviet Union shake hands at the Sino-Soviet Beijing summit in mid-May, party-to-party relations will have been restored and inter-state communications normalised.

This is the most important shift in global strategic balance since the original Sino-Soviet split in the early 1960s.

Despite a close alliance in the 1950s the Soviet model of communism was never

appropriate to the poor, peasant conditions of China. The abandonment of that model was at the heart of the Sino-Soviet split, and disputes over foreign policy made matters worse. The more revolutionary-inclined Chinese wanted a more forthright challenge to the United States and stronger support for revolutionary movements around the world. The detente-oriented Soviet leadership under Khrushchev felt it was more important

to manage superpower relations and reduce the dangers of nuclear war.

The severance of Sino-Soviet party ties came in March 1966, prompting the two sides to engage in open polemics. After an increase in armed forces along their lengthy frontier, the two communist giants fought major border incidents in 1969. The USSR even threatened a surgical strike against China's new nuclear weapons programme. In the decade from 1969, some 80% of the increase in Soviet defence spending went on the 'second front' against China.

In the early 1970s China upset the Soviet Union even

more by normalising relations with the US and then accusing Moscow of being the major threat to world peace. This flip-flop left the Chinese Communists in the uncomfortable position of supporting right-wing movements in the Third World merely because they were anti-Soviet. The Chinese had leaned so far to the American side of the great-power triangle that they were nearly horizontal.

Although China had begun healing the rift in the early 80s by moderating its more extreme policies, it was the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev that set the pace for the current detente. Gorbachev realised that China was his

single most-easily solved foreign policy problem. Since 1986 the Soviet Union has met nearly every Chinese demand, including withdrawal from Afghanistan, pressure on Vietnam to get out of Kampuchea and reduction of tension along the Sino-Soviet frontier. Gorbachev allowed the East European countries to establish party-to-party relations at least two years before Moscow, thereby proving that the USSR was serious about tolerating diversity in international communism.

Although Europeans tend to see Gorbachev's foreign policy reforms as aimed at them, the view from east Asia is very different. The majority of cuts in Soviet conventional troops announced by Gorbachev in December will come from Asia, and 40% from the Sino-Soviet frontier. From the Soviet perspective, the summit in Beijing is more important than a routine meeting with George Bush.

Of course, the May summit is unlikely to result in a major formal agreement. As happened in 1972 after Nixon visited China, major shifts in strategic balance are more often marked by a change of mood and vast but quiet changes in practice. It is already clear that Sino-Soviet relations are warmer than at any time in 30 years.

The reduction in the second-front threat is the single greatest improvement in the USSR's strategic position since the hold on Eastern Europe was consolidated 40 years ago. Troop reductions along the Sino-Soviet frontier will cut force levels by more than 200,000 on each side: far more than is being proposed in Europe. Border trade is booming. Chinese industries in the north east are run by Soviet electric power. Soviet factories and farms in the far east are staffed by Chinese. Visas are no longer required for travel between the two countries, something that has not been achieved in Eastern Europe.

The impact of Sino-Soviet detente stretches further

afield. For instance, both sides are improving their relations with South Korea and pressuring North Korea to do likewise with the capitalist world. Europe also stands to gain. We could not have had either the INF agreement or the major Soviet cuts in conventional troops if Moscow was not feeling happier about the security of east Asia.

In the short term then, the new detente serves almost everyone's interests. Yet there must be question marks over the future. Sino-Soviet relations will not return to the warmth of the 1950s, but they are leading to a major shift in the global balance of power. The trends suggest Japan will be encouraged to become more genuinely independent and this will probably mean a stronger Japanese military force. Japan already spends more money on defence than anyone except the superpowers.

China will also be more free to pursue its irredentist claims in Asia without threat of Soviet deterrence. Actions such as the March 1988 attack by Chinese forces on Vietnamese naval units in the South China Sea, show that not all conflict is being wound up and some of the new disputes can threaten Western trade interests. The lifelines of trade for Japan run through these disputed waters where the south-east Asian nations claim many of the islands that China covets.

But it is the Soviet Union that stands to gain the most. If the USSR is to fulfil its promise as a real Pacific power, it will have to become more integrated into the Pacific economy and project a more peaceful image. Detente with China has taken it further down this road than ever before. The image of the 'Pacific century' has so far been sketched in terms of the success of the global market economy. But a more successful socialist China and USSR in the region may well offer an alternative vision of economic prosperity. •
Gerald Segal

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