

From Crisis Management to Realignment of Forces

The Diplomatic “Geometry” of the 1969–1978 Sino-Soviet Border Talks

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On the early morning of 11 September 1969, the staff of Beijing Airport observed an unlikely scene: Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and his Soviet counterpart, Aleksei Kosygin, were having a polite conversation over breakfast. For the past several months the media in both countries had condemned the actions of the other. Newspapers featured hostile speeches by central and local party elites, as well as collective proclamations from “workers and peasants.” Some people even poured onto the streets in organized protests against the aggressive policies of the other country. “Down with the new Tsars!” the Chinese headlines read. “Rebuff the provocateurs!” the Soviet newspapers demanded.

On the eve of the meeting, Chinese officials became concerned that the session was a trick—a Trojan Horse—designed to get a Soviet airplane into Beijing airspace and that the plane would actually be carrying Soviet special forces rather than the Soviet premier and his delegation. The suspicion was not unfounded. The Soviet Union had used a similar tactic the year before in Czechoslovakia. Moreover, Soviet leaders had signaled through U.S. diplomats and leaks to Western newspapers that they were considering a nuclear strike against Chinese military sites (though whether they were genuinely considering it is as yet unknown).¹ Thus, the Chinese were forced to the negotiation table. The discussion between the two premiers went on for about three hours, and though often being described as yielding little to no result, it was the beginning of a lengthy negotiation process that lasted for another nine years.

The existing scholarly literature on the border negotiations in both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), with few exceptions,

1. Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation and the Threat of a Nuclear War in 1969* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, 2010), p. 48.

was produced by people who were personally involved in the negotiation process.² Even if those authors understood the decision-making process, a simple comparison of the accounts from the Soviet and Chinese sides demonstrates the general inability of former participants to consider their counterpart’s position reasonable, and this in turn limits their treatment of the subject. Hence, many of these works are used in my analysis as personal accounts of historical events and not as academic publications per se. Western scholarship, while providing a more balanced analysis of the events, has often focused on the political or anthropological aspects of the Sino-Soviet border issue, offering relatively meager historical background.³

Unfortunately, historical research on the Sino-Soviet border has always been complicated by the limited access to PRC and Soviet archival documentation. Many obstacles still exist but recently declassified documents in the Russian State Archive of Recent History (RGANI), the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), and Khabarovsk Krai State Archive help to shed new light on the Sino-Soviet negotiations of this period.

This article distinguishes three phases in the negotiation process. The first witnessed both sides preoccupied with addressing immediate security concerns. The second revolved around a long-term commitment to maintaining peace on the border and working out the basic principles for further negotiation. In the third phase, discussions stalled and reached an impasse, but the two sides preserved the negotiation format, presumably to solve other diplomatic issues.

2. G. V. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranychnykh peregovorov* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006), p. 60; Chai Chengwen, “Zhou Enlai lingdao zhixia juxing de Zhong Su bianjie tanpan,” *Dang de Wenxian*, No. 3 (1991), pp. 45–50; Yu Zhan, “Yici bu xun chang de shi ming—Yi Zhou Enlai zui hou yi ci fang wen Sulian,” in Waijiaobu Waijiaoshi Yanjiushi, ed., *Xin Zhongguo Waijiao Fengyun*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 1994); Wang Bo, “Zhong E (Su) bianjie: Jian zheng lishi jianshe weilai,” *Shijie zhishi*, No. 17 (2009); Li Fenglin, “Qinli Zhong Su (E) bianjie tanpan,” *Bainian Chao*, No. 7 (2008), pp. 30–34; Fan Zhenshui, “Wang Youping tongzhi huiyi 1979 nian Zhong Su guojia guanxi tanpan,” in Waijiaobu Waijiaoshi Yanjiushi, ed., *Xin Zhongguo Waijiao Fengyun*, Vol. 4 (Beijing: Zhishi Chubanshe, 1996); V. S. Myasnikov, *Dogovornymi star'yami utverdili, Rossiya i Kitai: 400 let mezhgosudarstvennykh otnoshenii*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 2014); and Iu. M. Galenovich, *Rossiia i Kitai v XX veke: Granitsa* (Moscow: Muravei, 2001). The exceptions are Qi Pengfei, *Da guo jiang yu: Dangdai Zhongguo dalu bianjie wenti shulun* (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi Chubanshe, 2013); Li Danhui, “Zhengzhi dou shi yushou: 1960 niandai Zhong Su bianjie guan xi—Dui Zhong Su bian jie wenti de lishi kaocha (zhi er),” *Shehui kexue*, No. 2 (2007), pp. 146–167; and B. Tkachenko, *Rossiia-Kitai: Vostochnaya granitsa v dokumentakh i faktah* (Vladivostok: Ussuri, 1999).

3. M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Eric Hyer, *The Pragmatic Dragon: China's Grand Strategy and Boundary Settlements* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015); Bruce A. Elleman, Stephen Kotkin, and Clive Schofield, eds., *Beijing's Power and China's Borders: Twenty Neighbours in Asia* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2013); and Steven Parham, *China's Borderlands: The Faultline of Central Asia* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

Several scholarly works underscore that these negotiations were a necessary measure born out of fear of a nuclear conflict and that they aimed at reducing the tensions and managing the border crisis.⁴ My analysis here shows that, although the first phase of the talks was primarily about containing the crisis, the second and third phases served as an instrument in the greater process of realignment of forces, when both China and the USSR reconsidered their alliances and sought to improve their strategic position in the world.

The article demonstrates that other political factors interfered with and further complicated the “geometry” of the alliances. U.S. triangular diplomacy not only involved the three immediate participants, but also had a direct impact on a larger spectrum of countries, creating the concepts of a “horizontal line” and “big terrain” on one side and *détente* on the other. When relations with the West began to show cracks, the PRC replaced earlier concepts with the Theory of the Three Worlds, whereas the Soviet Union tried to stave off the decline of *détente*. The formation of the Sino-U.S. “quasi-alliance” was the final moment in the realignment process. Throughout this period, the Sino-Soviet border negotiations were used as a “card” that was often played when one of the participants needed to influence its diplomatic opponent.

First Attempt at Border Resolution

The Sino-Soviet border issue never existed in a political vacuum. Various factors, both domestic and international, influenced the two countries’ border policies and the political importance placed on them by their leaders. In 1949, the new Communist regime in the PRC turned to the USSR for political and economic support. Mao Zedong and other leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had no hesitation about “leaning to one side.”⁵ According to Soviet diplomats, the USSR raised the border problem with the Chinese multiple times throughout the early 1950s, including when Mao was in Beijing to pay homage to Joseph Stalin in December 1949 and early 1950, but the PRC always replied that “the issue was not worth discussing.”⁶ By the end of the 1950s, however, as relations deteriorated rapidly, the border dispute sparked great tension in bilateral relations.

4. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, pp. 46–53; and Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 214.

5. Niu Jun, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Duiwai Guanxishi Gailun (1949–2000)* (Beijing: Beijing Daxue Chubanshe, 2010), p. 54.

6. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranichnykh peregovorov*, p. 51.

The Chinese first brought up the border issue in August 1960 after an incident on the Buz Aigyr Pass, but Soviet officials reportedly insisted that negotiations were not necessary.⁷ Former Soviet diplomats offer a different version of events. As Chinese herdsmen crossed the border to graze their cattle—a practice they had engaged in since the Soviet outpost in the area was liquidated in 1954—they were intercepted by Soviet border troops, but instead of retreating, as they usually did, the herdsmen refused to leave the territory, claiming that instructions “from high up” prohibited them from doing so and that this territory was, in fact, Chinese.⁸

On 17 August 1960 the Soviet Union sent a diplomatic note to the Chinese embassy in Moscow expressing dissatisfaction with the illegal transit of Chinese residents across the Soviet border. Beijing then proposed that the sovereignty of the “disputed” territories be negotiated. The Soviet Union rejected this proposal and averred that the term “disputed” was inaccurate. In response to these events, the ruling organs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) established a commission on border issues. Among its members were representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the State Security Committee (KGB), which at the time had jurisdiction over Soviet border guards. The new commission concluded that the Soviet Union must negotiate with China to delimit and secure the borders between the two countries.⁹

For the remainder of the year, relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union eased and tensions diminished, but by late 1961, with multiple international and domestic factors in play, the two countries returned to a state of ideological confrontation. In early March 1963 the main CCP newspaper *People’s Daily* published an editorial claiming that treaties between China and the Soviet Union were still unequal. Shortly thereafter, on 19 April, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted a formal note to the Soviet Union calling for negotiations on the border issue. In May, the Soviet embassy in China expressed its readiness to delimit certain sections of the border.

Both sides tried to reach a compromise, mostly because Chinese and Soviet policymakers believed the cost of delaying a settlement was unacceptably high, especially considering the rapid deterioration of bilateral ties, the economic crisis and famine in the PRC after the Great Leap Forward, and the

7. Li Fenglin, “Qinli ZhongSu (E) bianjie tanpan,” *Bainian Chao*, No. 8 (2008), pp. 30–34; and Li Fenglin, interviewed by Shen Qinglan, in Beijing, 4 April 2001.

8. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranychih peregovorov*, pp. 56–60.

9. *Ibid.*

Xinjiang unrest of May 1962, during which many Uighurs crossed the border into the USSR.¹⁰

Before the negotiations began, the Chinese had already identified three kinds of “borderlines” on the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet frontier. The first was the “treaty line,” the line that existing treaties stipulated. The second was the borderline marked on Soviet maps; namely, those published by the Soviet Union after 1929, especially the large-scale maps prepared by the Soviet military in accordance with the “red line” principle, a reference to the red borderline shown on the Soviet map attached to the “Treaty of Peking”: the red line passes through the right bank of the Amur (Heilongjiang) River and the left bank of the Ussuri River toward the sea. Some sections of the border were drawn directly through Chinese territory, and other sections also deviated from the Chinese understanding. The third kind of borderline was the line of actual control. The Soviet line of actual control in some areas coincided or was basically the same with the treaty line or the line on the Soviet maps. In other areas, however, it not only greatly surpassed the treaty line and the line on the Soviet maps but extended into Chinese territory. The line of actual control on the Chinese side basically did not surpass the treaty line and surpassed the borderline on the Soviet maps only in some places.¹¹

Bilateral border negotiations officially began on 25 February 1964. During the meetings, the two sides not only discussed the border issue but also frequently debated the general state of Sino-Soviet relations. Both countries put forth terms on which they could not see eye to eye. For the Soviet Union, the main stumbling block was the Chinese demand that the USSR recognize more than 1.54 million square kilometers of land as territory that was occupied by Tsarist Russia through unequal treaties. Although Chinese diplomats repeatedly emphasized that they had no intention of retrieving these territories—with one 35,000-square-kilometer exception that they deemed a “disputed territory”—Soviet officials believed that making a concession on this issue and officially recognizing these treaties as unequal would allow China to argue in the future that all subsequent agreements made on the basis of these treaties were invalid.¹²

10. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 70; and Alsu Tagirova, “Transgressing the Boundaries: The Migration of Uighurs into Soviet Central Asia after World War II,” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2018), pp. 575–596.

11. Jiang Changbin, *Zhong'E guojie dongduan de yanbian* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2007), pp. 292–293.

12. Miasnikov, *Dogovornymi stat'yami utverdili, Rossiya i Kitai*, pp. 350–351.

At the beginning of the talks, Soviet officials claimed that the river borders should go through the Chinese bank. The Chinese, in response, referred to norms of international law requiring borders to be drawn through the thalweg (the midpoint of the main navigable channel).¹³ From 26 February to 16 April, the negotiations revolved primarily around the ideological differences between the two countries, and discussion of the Sino-Soviet border was delayed until 18 April. The two sides maintained different interpretations and usage of some terms, including "unequal treaties" and "disputed territories." Moreover, after preliminary study, the negotiators marked 22 areas for further discussion, of which 17 were in the western section of the Sino-Soviet border and only 5 in the east. According to the Soviet diplomats, the exchange of maps with a provisional border marked by both parties revealed that the Chinese had extended only one unexpected territorial claim: the area near the Bedel' Pass in Soviet Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴

During these meetings, a wide range of topics pertaining to the border dispute was discussed. In addition to the issues of managing and using the land and water in the border regions, the two sides conversed about their competing claims in Central Asia. According to a retired diplomat, China sought to link its acceptance of Soviet control over the Pamirs to the two disputed islands in the eastern section.¹⁵

Several months later, the two countries reached a consensus on 4,200 kilometers of the eastern section of the border, except for the Bolshoi Ussuriiski and Tarabarov Islands (Heixiazidao). On this basis, the Soviet delegation requested permission from the CPSU to initial related agreements.¹⁶

As the Soviet delegation awaited instructions from Moscow, the Chinese unexpectedly made a move that worsened the already deteriorating relationship between the two countries. On 10 July 1964, when Mao met with Japanese Socialist Party members, he insisted that "the places occupied by the Soviet Union were too numerous," including Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and the Kamchatka Peninsula, and he declared that the Chinese "have not yet presented the bill for this roll call."¹⁷ Soviet leaders responded to Mao's comments

13. Hyer, *The Pragmatic Dragon*, p. 133.

14. Galenovich, *Rossiya i Kitai v XX veke*, p. 84.

15. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 123.

16. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 60.

17. Mao subsequently attempted to walk back that statement by claiming he was just "firing empty cannons" (*fāng kōngpào*). "Minutes of Mao Zedong's meeting with the leaders of Komeito," 10 July 1964, in Guangxi Zizhiqu Danganguan, X1/35/116, 37–45, in Li, "Zhengzhi dou shi yushou," pp. 146–167.

by instructing the delegation in mid-July that the agreement could be signed only after agreement on all sections of the border, including the Bolshoi Us-suriiski and Tarabarov Islands, had been achieved. The Soviet diplomat G. V. Kireev wrote in his memoir that the instructions to change the negotiation strategy came from Nikita Khrushchev himself.¹⁸

This particular part of the border, however, presented a great challenge. Soviet officials insisted that the borderline should be drawn through a tributary of the Amur (Heilongjiang) River, whereas the Chinese believed the borderline was on the mainstream of the river. Depending on which borderline was accepted, the islands situated between the tributary and mainstream of the Amur River would be on either the Soviet or the Chinese side of the border. Historical documents were not able to provide enough evidence to make a definitive conclusion on where the border was drawn originally. In any case, after these events, the border talks reached an impasse.

In October 1964, Khrushchev was forced to step down, and Leonid Brezhnev assumed leadership of the CPSU. That same month Brezhnev gave a speech stating that the Soviet Union would continue to follow the general line accepted at the 20th, 21st, and 22nd Party Congresses, implying that Soviet policy toward China would continue along the lines set out by Khrushchev. Therefore, the negative outcome of Zhou Enlai's visit to Moscow at the beginning of November 1964 was not at all surprising. The CCP delegation returned to Beijing empty-handed. The November visit was the final attempt by Chinese diplomats to initiate improvement in Sino-Soviet relations.¹⁹

In February 1965 the Soviet Union attempted to continue border negotiations. Kosygin stopped in Beijing on his way from Moscow to Hanoi. After greeting Kosygin at the airport, Zhou Enlai accompanied him to his residence. Soviet diplomats who witnessed Kosygin get out of the car claim that he was in a good mood and that he and Zhou seemed to have had a friendly conversation during the ride. After visiting Hanoi, the Soviet prime minister made another stopover in Beijing and met Mao Zedong. The Chinese leader reportedly took a sarcastic tone during the discussion, and many Soviet diplomats later wrote that Kosygin was outraged by Mao's conduct and returned to the embassy without saying a word, remaining alone for half an hour as he, apparently, tried to calm down.²⁰

18. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranichnykh peregovorov*, pp. 72–78.

19. Li Danhui, "Cong fenlie dao duikang (1960–1978)," in Shen Zhihua, ed., *Zhong Su guanxi shigang (1917–1991)* (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2015), p. 369.

20. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranichnykh peregovorov*, p. 86.

In March 1966, Chinese leaders refused to send delegations to participate in the 23rd CPSU Congress. The Cultural Revolution reached its zenith in 1966–1967 and further deepened the split between the two countries. In August 1967, during violent demonstrations in front of the Soviet embassy in Beijing, Zhou Enlai had to intervene personally to turn the Red Guards away from the Soviet diplomats.²¹ Starting in 1963, the Soviet Union not only began to enhance its military and security forces in the region near the Chinese border, but also sent troops and strengthened its military assistance to Mongolia.²² However, the stationing of Soviet troops in the Far East, Transbaikalia, Siberia, Central Asia, and Mongolia, as well as the USSR's continued effort to strengthen its Pacific Fleet, was not necessarily aimed solely at China per se, and the Chinese recognized this. Nevertheless, the presence of Soviet troops in close proximity to the border undoubtedly put pressure on China and created a potential military threat.²³ Throughout the period from 1965 to 1968, tensions between China and the Soviet Union reportedly gave rise to 8,690 incidents on the border, with about 35,000 Chinese residents participating, of which only about 3,000 were military.²⁴

Crisis Management (11 September–21 October 1969)

By 1969, as the Soviet patrols over islands on the Chinese side of the thalweg intensified, tensions on the border surged. Internal political instability took a toll on the Chinese authorities' ability to respond to the threat. That, along with the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia and the announcement of the Brezhnev Doctrine, pushed the Chinese to believe that Moscow might use the new political situation to bring matters to a head.²⁵

On 2 March 1969, one of the most serious border clashes occurred on Damanskii-Zhenbao Island, causing significant casualties on both sides. Some in the Soviet government had foreseen the possibility of escalation over the

21. Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 188–195.

22. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 92.

23. Wang Zhongchun, "Zhong Mei guanxi zhengchanghua jincheng zhong de Sulian yinsu (1969–1979)," *Dangde Wenxian*, No. 4 (2002), pp. 50–60.

24. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 92.

25. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 211.

patrol policies as early as 1964, when a draft resolution was prepared that included a clause calling for patrols of the islands directly connected to the Chinese territory to cease. But the resolution ultimately passed without that clause.²⁶

After the 1969 border clash, the two governments finally realized they were facing a dangerous crisis. Scholars identify three periods in the process of Chinese military preparations in 1969. During the first period, from March to July, the Chinese focused on strategic defense against the Soviet Union. In the second phase, from August to October, the focus was on preventing “sudden attacks.” During the third phase, from November to December, the Chinese military remained alert to new threats. At the same time, the Chinese had to be cautious not to let the enemy use any relaxation in the Chinese state of high alert as an opportunity for a sudden attack.²⁷

From March 1969 onward, tensions on the border continued to rise. Despite statements about readiness for a Sino-Soviet war, neither side was truly interested in a full-scale military conflict. Even if one were to discount the probability of a nuclear exchange, the Soviet Union had superior conventional forces, and the Chinese acknowledged this, all the while pointing out that Soviet artillery power, as well as Soviet tanks and armored vehicles, would play only a limited role in any fighting.²⁸

On the Soviet side, officials were deeply concerned by China’s enormous superiority in human resources, as well as the instability of the political situation in Beijing. The CPSU Politburo regularly received reports from the Soviet embassy warning that, amid the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, certain Chinese leaders might attempt to strengthen their position in the ongoing power struggle by giving orders to begin military action along the Sino-Soviet border.²⁹

On 21 March 1969, Kosygin, on behalf of the Soviet Politburo, tried to call Mao and Zhou. However, the operator at the telephone station in Beijing rebuked him and refused to put the call through. On 29 March 1969, in light of an unsuccessful attempt to reach out to Chinese leaders, the Soviet

26. B. N. Vereshchagin, *V Starom I Novom Kitae: Iz vospominanii diplomata* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Instituta Dal'nego Vostoka, 1999), p. 179.

27. Liu Zhinan, “1969 nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui Mei Su guanxi de yanjiu he tiaozheng,” *Dangdai Zhongguoshi Yanjiu*, No. 3 (1999), pp. 41–57.

28. Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (August 2000), pp. 21–52.

29. A. I. Elizavetin, “Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En'laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu,” *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, No. 5 (1992), pp. 39–63.

government issued an official statement regarding the events on Damanskii Island.³⁰

A few days later, on 1 April 1969, Lin Biao delivered a report to the CCP's 9th National Congress expressing harsh criticism of Moscow's actions and calling for a "fight against Soviet social-imperialism." On 11 April, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a note to its Chinese counterpart, proposing to resume negotiations in Moscow either on 15 April "or at any time in the near future that is convenient for the Chinese side."³¹ The next day, the Chinese government responded by saying the PRC would soon reply to the proposal and that Soviet leaders should "calm down and not rush."³²

In mid-May, Zhou Enlai, following Mao's instruction, asked four marshals, Chen Yi, Ye Jiaoping, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen, to "pay attention to" international affairs. They were to work out a strategy for both Sino-Soviet and Sino-U.S. relations. The four marshals contended that, for China to be ready for a major confrontation with the Soviet Union, "the American card" should be played. They proposed that, in addition to waging a "tit-for-tat struggle against both the United States and the USSR," China should use "negotiation as a means to struggle against them."³³

As a result, on 24 May 1969, the Chinese issued a statement suggesting that both sides reach an agreement on maintaining the status quo at the border. By this, the Chinese meant that neither side would take unilateral action to change the line of actual control (which the Chinese proposed to define as the thalweg on the navigable rivers and the middle of the stream on non-navigable rivers), and also that border troops would under no circumstances open fire on the other side. On 13 June the USSR gave its official response to the Chinese statement, suggesting that the two sides resume the border negotiations within the next two to three months.³⁴

Chinese leaders worried that the United States was trying to "provoke China and the Soviet Union and instigate a fight between China and the USSR." After the airport talks, Mao feared that U.S. officials would "jump to conclusions" (*zuo wenzhang*) and try to pit the Soviet Union and China against one another. On 21 July the U.S. State Department announced that

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Danhui Li and Yafeng Xia, *Mao and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1959–1973: A New History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), p. 252.

34. "Zayavlenie Pravitel'stva SSSR," *Pravda* (Moscow), No. 165 (14 June 1969), p. 1, in Elizavetin, "Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En'laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu," pp. 39–63.

it would relax restrictions on U.S. tourists purchasing Chinese goods and on U.S. citizens traveling to China—gestures that were misconstrued in Beijing as hostile.³⁵

Although the dispute over whether to hold Sino-Soviet negotiations continued into the summer, by May the Chinese had agreed to hold the fifteenth meeting of the Joint Sino-Soviet Navigation Commission. This event, held from 18 June to 8 August, became a major rehearsal for the upcoming talks.

The head of the Soviet delegation wrote: “Keeping in mind the forthcoming talks with the PRC on border issues, we could in the process of the commission’s work establish how far the Chinese territorial claims on the border rivers go.”³⁶ In another message to Moscow, he wrote that “the text of the report of the Chinese part of the commission abounds with phrases like ‘Sino-Soviet border rivers,’ etc., and the city of Khabarovsk is referred to as ‘Boli.’”³⁷ The Soviet delegation refused to sign the report and legitimize the use of these terms. As another report later described, “such a formulation would give the Chinese side the opportunity to substantiate their claims not only on those sections of rivers through which the . . . border is currently passing, but also on other sections which are the internal waters of the USSR (including the Khabarovsk section of the Amur River).”³⁸

Soon after, on 13 August, another border incident near Lake Zhalanashkol and the Tereky River on the western section of the border resulted in multiple casualties. Although Moscow and Beijing presented different narratives of these events (and still do even now), the clash had two important implications. On the one hand, the USSR ceased patrols of Damanskii Island, spurring the Chinese to conclude they had successfully defended the territory they claimed; on the other hand, the Soviet Army’s increased presence in the region pressured the Chinese into sitting down at the negotiating table.³⁹

35. Liu, “1969 nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui Mei Su guanxi de yanjiu he tiaozheng,” pp. 41–57.

36. “Doklad predsedatelya sovetsoi chasti Smeshannoi sovetso-kitaiskoi Komissii po sudokhodstvu na pogranichnykh rekah A. Smirnova Ministru Inostrannykh Del SSSR A. Gromyko i Ministru Rechnogo Flota RSFSR S. Kuchkinu,” 24 June 1969, in Khabarovsk State Archive, Fond (F.) II-35, Opis’ (Op.) 96, Delo (D.) 405A, List (L.) 10–11.

37. “Telefogramma po VCh ot predsedatelya sovetsoi chasti Smeshannoi sovetso-kitaiskoi Komissii po sudokhodstvu na pogranichnykh rekah A. Smirnova Ministru Inostrannykh Del SSSR A. Gromyko i Ministru Rechnogo Flota RSFSR S. Kuchkinu,” 27 June 1969, in Rossiiskii Tsentri Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Noveishei Istorii (RGANI), F. 5, Op. 61, D. 436, Ll. 3–5.

38. “Informatsiya k rabote ocherednoi XVIII sessii smeshannoi sovetso-kitaiskoi komissii po sudokhodstvu na pogranichnykh uchastkah rek Amurskogo basseina,” 17 December 1973, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 66, D. 664, Ll. 58–65.

39. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, p. 211

The Chinese understood the need to negotiate. Despite disagreeing with the wording of the Soviet document, they agreed in principle to hold the negotiations and therefore decided to exercise restraint. On 7 October, when discussing the 13 June statement of the Soviet government with the Chinese delegation, Zhou Enlai pointed out that when the two premiers met, he had already explained to the Soviet side that the Chinese must respond:

We must explain it to the people, not refuting it or not explaining it is not good. But now that negotiations are about to begin, we are not willing to exacerbate tensions. Therefore, we have agreed with the [PRC] Ministry of Foreign Affairs to prepare and publicize a document prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instead of an official government statement. From the diplomatic point of view, it will not be symmetrical, but it is more reasonable and beneficial from the political point of view.⁴⁰

By then the Soviet Union had used multiple channels to convey to the Chinese that a nuclear strike was being considered as a possible response to the Chinese threat.⁴¹ On 11 September 1969, when Kosygin and Zhou Enlai met at Beijing Airport and made the important decision to begin border talks, they repeatedly stressed their desire to avoid full-scale military conflict.⁴²

During the conversation, Zhou Enlai formulated the basic principles of the talks as he saw them. First, both parties were to maintain the status quo on the border; second, they were to avoid all military confrontations and exchanges of fire; finally, the two countries were to recognize the existence of disputed territories and pull their troops several kilometers away from the border to avoid direct contact.⁴³ Reportedly, Kosygin, in response, asked how the "disputed territories" were to be determined. Zhou Enlai responded that the disputed territories should be determined by who lived there. Taking a pencil and a sheet of paper, he wanted to sketch what the Chinese side understood by the term "disputed territories." Kosygin stopped him, saying, "it was not the business of the two premiers to determine this."⁴⁴

According to the memoirs of Boris Kulik, Kosygin met Zhou hoping to improve Sino-Soviet relations and, therefore, was not ready to discuss the

40. Chai Chengwen, "Zhou Enlai lingdao women jinxing Zhong Su bianjie tanpan," in Dangle Wenxian Bianjibu, Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, and Zhongyang Dang'anguan, eds., *Zhonggong Dangshi Zhongda Shijian Shushi* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2008), pp. 189–199.

41. Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 215–235.

42. Elizavetin, "Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En'laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu," pp. 107–119.

43. Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian Yanjiushi, ed., *Zhou Enlai Nianpu* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1997), Vol. 3, pp. 320–321.

44. Elizavetin, "Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En'laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu," pp. 107–119.

border issue in detail.⁴⁵ Despite the unfortunate use of the term “disputed territories,” the Soviet side subsequently refused to add it to official documentation. Aleksei Elizavetin, who was present during the negotiation, claimed that Kosygin used the word derivatively, in a follow-up question, without any intention to indicate his acceptance of its use.⁴⁶ Li Fenglin explains the incident as follows: “After Kosygin returned to the USSR, he was criticized at a Politburo meeting, [with] hardliners [saying that] he should not have recognized the ‘disputed territories’ and [that] they were Soviet territory.”⁴⁷

During the meeting with Zhou, Kosygin spoke about the principles the Chinese premier had put forth as the basis for the border talks. On maintaining the status quo, he said that the Soviet Union, too, wanted this principle to be observed. On Zhou’s second point (concerning the withdrawal of troops from disputed territories so that the Soviet and Chinese militaries would not come into direct contact), Kosygin was not as forthcoming:

Let’s say we withdraw troops, and your people will occupy this territory. What then? We ask you to give orders to your troops to resolve all issues arising at the border through negotiations in order to avoid armed clashes. Let two border posts meet and resolve the [day-to-day] issues in a constructive spirit. If the frontier posts do not resolve the issues, [these issues] should be brought up with the regiment [further up the chain of command] and so on, but [we should make sure that] the issues are resolved without anger and insults.⁴⁸

Zhou confirmed the need to uphold the status quo on the border. By the end of the discussion, Kosygin suggested that no one be present on the disputed territories so that the parties would not exchange fire. “If the parties want to engage in economic activities on the disputed territories,” he continued, “the border posts should resolve these issues in a benevolent manner.”⁴⁹

On 18 September Zhou wrote a letter to Kosygin affirming that temporary measures would be taken by both sides to maintain the status quo on the border and to avoid armed clashes. But the areas where the provisional frontiers coincide, he said, should be distinguished from the so-called disputed territories, and the status quo should be maintained on both. Control over the undisputed areas was to be maintained in accordance with the maps

45. B. T. Kulik, *Sovetsko-kitaiskii raskol: Prichiny i posledstviya* (Moscow: Institut Dal’nego vostoka, 2000), p. 473.

46. Elizavetin, “Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En’laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu,” pp. 107–119.
47. Li, interviewed by Shen.

48. Elizavetin, “Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En’laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu,” pp. 107–119.

49. *Ibid.*

exchanged during the Sino-Soviet border negotiations in 1964; residence, travel, and the economic activity of local populations on the disputed territories were to be facilitated by the two sides until the border issue was resolved. Thus, the foundation was laid for the subsequent Chinese demand to divide the border into “disputed” and “undisputed” territories.⁵⁰

Two days later, in another letter, Zhou wrote:

1. In those areas where the provisional borderline of the two parties does not coincide, i.e., in areas that are disputed, both parties guarantee that the populations of both sides will continue to reside, engage in economic activity and travel freely on the territories where they previously lived, engaged in economic activity, and traveled. 2. Both parties agree to avoid armed conflict; this includes the non-use of force, the respect of each other’s airspace, and the navigation of vessels exclusively along the thalweg and in accordance with the rules of navigation. 3. The armed forces of both sides shall avoid direct contact on disputed territories of the Sino-Soviet border.⁵¹

In response, Kosygin wrote that the Soviet side had already taken appropriate measures to normalize the situation, but he did not distinguish between disputed and undisputed territories, suggesting the preservation of the status quo on the border as a whole. Kosygin also pointed out that Soviet troops had been given the following order: “Provided that the Soviet and Chinese border authorities have agreed in advance on terms and areas [of economic activity], and they both observe the border regime, both sides shall allow the economic activities of Chinese and Soviet citizens to be carried out in those areas where this activity was previously systematically carried out.”⁵²

Nevertheless, Zhou’s understanding of the temporary measures differed dramatically from Kosygin’s understanding:

In your reply on 26 September, you did not confirm the points on which agreement was already reached between the two sides. . . . Some measures undertaken by the Soviet side [and] mentioned in your letter are not in accord with the verbal agreement between us. We concurred that once agreement has been reached between the border authorities on both sides regarding the residence, traveling and engagement in various types of economic activity by the [local]

50. Thus the Chinese laid the basis for the use of “disputed territories” as a specific term. Originally the Chinese used *you zhengyi de diqu* (territories where the disputes exist) to express the meaning; later they used *zhengyi diqu* (disputed territories). “Tekst Pis’ma Chzhou En’laya Kosyginu razoslannyy V. Kuznetsovym chlenam Politburo i kandidatam v chleny Politburo,” 20 September 1969, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 434, Ll. 21–23.

51. *Ibid.*

52. “Pis’mo A. Kosygina Prem’eru Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou Enlaiu,” 26 September 1969, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 434, Ll. 39–41.

populations of the disputed territories . . . there will be no further need for notification in each case. However, you say in your letter that the border authorities on both sides must [each time] agree in advance on the time and areas [of the economic activities performed by the local population] and observe the border regime.⁵³

Some scholars even maintain that “the letter [of 26 September] failed to mention the cooperative tension-reduction measures mutually accepted at the Kosygin-Zhou airport talks and noted in Zhou’s letter to Kosygin on the eighteenth” and that “the Chinese interpreted this as [Soviet] backtracking and became even more convinced that the Kremlin was not sincere and might even be plotting an attack under the cover of the upcoming negotiations.”⁵⁴ The letter, in fact, listed the measures the Soviet side had already taken, but the Chinese believed those steps to be insufficient.⁵⁵

To avoid becoming embroiled in a debate on specific issues, Kosygin wrote a low-key reply to Zhou’s obvious protest: “Through the letters exchanged between the Chinese and Soviet sides, certain specific issues concerning the border were touched upon, along with some [other] issues that went beyond boundary lines, and the viewpoint of the Soviet side on them is stated in our letter dated 26 September of this year.”⁵⁶ The disparate understandings of the agreement reached between the two premiers on 11 September 1969 overshadowed all subsequent negotiations. Among the topics on which the two sides could not reach mutual understanding was the question of whether these negotiations should be on border disputes in particular or on Sino-Soviet relations in general. Finally, Soviet officials gave in and agreed to accept the negotiations as focusing exclusively on the border.⁵⁷ Despite that, the exchange between the highest leaders of the two countries was indispensable in addressing immediate concerns. Both sides took measures, even if partial, to eliminate violent military clashes on the border.

At the same time, the prospect of upcoming negotiations did not ease Beijing’s suspicions and fears. If anything, Chinese leaders grew more concerned

53. “Pis’mo Chzhou Enlaya predsdatliu Soveta Ministrov SSSR A. Kosyginu,” 6 October 1969, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 434, Ll. 65–67.

54. John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai, *Imagined Enemies: China Prepares for Uncertain War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 60.

55. “Pis’mo A. Kosygina Prem’eru Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En’layu,” 26 September 1969.

56. “Pis’mo A. Kosygina Prem’eru Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En’layu,” 14 October 1969, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 434, Ll. 105–106.

57. Elizavetin, “Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En’laya v Pekinskom Aeroportu,” pp. 107–119.

about a preemptive nuclear attack. Chinese National Day, an annual celebration commemorating the founding of the PRC, was scheduled for 1 October, and Lin Biao became concerned that the Soviet Union might "[take] advantage of our holiday to launch a surprise attack."⁵⁸ After the holiday passed without incident, the Chinese focused on a new date for a potential Soviet assault: the eve of the beginning of bilateral negotiations in Beijing on 20 October. When that attack, too, did not happen, both parties proceeded with the talks.⁵⁹ A crisis was averted.

Border Talks and Triangular Diplomacy (1969–1973)

The most detailed discussions were held from 21 October 1969 to 14 June 1973. This period coincided with the beginning of a new U.S. foreign policy seeking parallel, coordinated rapprochement with both Beijing and Moscow. Henry Kissinger referred to it as "triangular diplomacy"; its aim was to exploit the rivalry between the two Communist states to create a new diplomatic environment.⁶⁰ Both China and the USSR were at this time trying to improve their relations with the United States, and the Sino-Soviet talks played an indispensable role in the process.

For the United States, the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969 provided a crucial opportunity to improve relations with Beijing.⁶¹ In 1970 and 1971, Soviet production of new weapons systems and deployment of nuclear missiles had sparked even greater U.S. concern.⁶² U.S. political elites for the most part agreed that far-reaching changes were needed in U.S. policy toward the two Communist great powers, especially toward China.⁶³

In early 1969, the Chinese had dispatched large numbers of engineering and anti-artillery forces to North Vietnam, increasing the risk that Chinese and U.S. troops would come into conflict.⁶⁴ But in the aftermath of the border clashes with the USSR, as the former Chinese diplomat Li Fenglin has

58. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, p. 59.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 210.

61. Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969," pp. 21–52.

62. Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969–1989* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) p. 21.

63. Yafeng Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy: U.S.-China Talks during the Cold War, 1949–1972* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 136.

64. Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, p. 136.

noted, the PRC came to seek improved relations with the United States.⁶⁵ The clear signs of improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations under the new U.S. president Richard Nixon, made the Chinese even more concerned. Shortly after the beginning of the Sino-Soviet talks, the USSR and the United States had announced that a preparatory meeting for the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty negotiation would be held in Helsinki on 17 November 1969. On 24 November the Soviet Union and the United States signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. On 8 December, the USSR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) began to hold talks in Moscow on an agreement to renounce the use or threat of force in bilateral relations.⁶⁶

All of these changes were conditioned by a shift in Soviet foreign policy toward the West. In October 1969, when Willy Brandt, who had campaigned on a platform of *Ostpolitik*, became chancellor of West Germany, the Soviet Union became hopeful of achieving a rapprochement with the FRG.⁶⁷ KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov had long since decided that economic, technological, and cultural cooperation with West Germany would facilitate Moscow's quest to end U.S. domination in Western Europe. He was also reportedly hopeful that closer relations with and technology transfers from West Germany could help in modernizing the Soviet economy.⁶⁸ Kissinger claimed that the Soviet Union's deeper motivation was "to practice selective détente—to ease tension with some allies while maintaining an intransigent position toward us."⁶⁹

The United States, however, proved to be an indispensable part of the relaxation process. By 1971, Nixon and his national security adviser, Kissinger, had indicated a strong interest in rapprochement with the USSR. As a quid pro quo for Soviet assistance in helping the United States to withdraw from Vietnam, Nixon and Kissinger promised to facilitate a settlement on Berlin.⁷⁰

Thus, in the wake of the 1969 border conflict, the Soviet Union and the PRC each found itself bidding against the other in attempting to secure better relations with the West. Officials in both Moscow and Beijing believed that Nixon's foreign policy would suffer a hard blow if the two Communist countries were to revive their ties. Therefore, maintaining contact and continuing negotiations between the two was important not only for keeping peace in

65. Li, interviewed by Shen.

66. Chai, "Zhou Enlai lingdao women jinxing Zhong Su bianjie tanpan," pp. 189–199.

67. Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, p. 211.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p. 410.

70. Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, p. 212.

the region but also for leverage vis-à-vis the United States. At the same time, having been forced to the negotiating table after the Soviet Union hinted at the possibility of a nuclear attack, the Chinese continued to perceive Moscow as the PRC's most imminent military threat.⁷¹

Before the negotiations began, the Soviet KGB gathered information about the members of the Chinese delegation and assessed possible outcomes of the talks. One of the KGB reports, which used a high-ranking Chinese defector as a source, stated:

As for the forthcoming negotiations, at the present stage a final decision and an agreement between the parties seem impossible. During the talks, either an interim agreement will be reached, or they [the negotiations] will be delayed, like the Sino-American talks in Warsaw, or [the negotiations will be] interrupted, like the Sino-Indian talks on the border issue. Judging by the composition of the delegation, at least some of the Chinese leaders intend to probe the state of Sino-Soviet relations and test the limits of the Soviet concessions.⁷²

The Chinese also prepared for the negotiations. During a meeting of the delegation on 7 October 1969 Zhou Enlai divided the Chinese leaders who worked on the issue of the Sino-Soviet border into three "lines." The head of the Chinese delegation, Qiao Guanhua, and his deputy Chai Chengwen were deemed "the first line." Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Ji Pengfei and Chief of Staff of the People's Liberation Army Huang Yongsheng were "the second line," and the CCP ruling organs constituted "the third line." Zhou Enlai asked all members of the delegation to concentrate on the talks immediately, put down all other work, and go all-out to prepare for the negotiations: first, by studying the statements and notes that the two governments had already exchanged, and then by studying the history of and the current situation on the border.⁷³

On 9 March 1970, as the U.S.-China opening was about to materialize the Chinese delegation submitted a draft status quo agreement to the Soviet side stipulating that both sides should "strictly maintain the position on the border that existed on 11 September 1969, at the moment when two

71. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict*, pp. 46–52.

72. "Material KGB po voprosu o granitse," 18 October 1969, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 61, D. 434, Ll. 94–97. Even though full diplomatic relations between the United States and the PRC were established only in 1979, the two countries had maintained communications via Sino-American ambassadorial talks in Warsaw that lasted from August 1955 through February 1970. After skirmishes in late 1959, the PRC and India sat down at the negotiation table in April 1960. When the talks reached an impasse, the Indians adopted a more straightforward policy. In an effort to force the Indians back to the negotiation table, the Chinese launched an attack.

73. Chai, "Zhou Enlai lingdao women jinxing Zhong Su bianjie tanpan," pp. 189–199.

premiers met.” The Soviet Union’s failure to have withdrawn its troops far enough from the border remained one of Beijing’s main concerns. Such a withdrawal was understood to be a part of the tension-reduction measures that would facilitate bilateral negotiations.⁷⁴ Other actions of the Soviet side close to the border seemed equally troubling. For example, on 18 November 1969 the USSR established a Central Asian Military District in the area bordering Xinjiang.⁷⁵

The Chinese draft was also of great significance for the Soviet Union. Soviet officials later emphasized that the draft made no mention of the two types of territories, “disputed” and “undisputed,” and that the status quo was to be maintained on the border as a whole.⁷⁶ The Chinese further developed their understanding of the border dispute as the negotiations progressed, later demanding that on undisputed territories the status quo should be maintained in accordance with a borderline that both sides agreed on, whereas on disputed territories the status quo was to be maintained in accordance with the situation on the border on 11 September 1969.

Meanwhile, U.S. contacts with China continued to develop. On 12 February 1970 the Chinese Politburo passed a resolution welcoming the U.S. government’s decision to send a ministerial-level representative or presidential envoy to Beijing to negotiate with Chinese leaders. The Chinese government also decided to hold ambassadorial talks in Warsaw on 20 February. But on 18 March in Cambodia, General Lon Nol, with U.S. support, staged a military coup d’état, overthrowing the government of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian head of state.⁷⁷ On 28 April Nixon approved a U.S. incursion into Cambodia to support Lon Nol, thereby expanding the war from Vietnam and Laos to all of Indochina. U.S.-China contacts froze.⁷⁸

The Sino-Soviet talks, meanwhile, presented a unique opportunity to relay a message to the United States. On 20 March, Mao had the representatives of the Soviet delegation participate in Labor Day celebrations at Tiananmen Square. Yurii Gankovskii, the deputy chairman of the Soviet delegation, was then introduced to Mao. The two men talked about the commitment

74. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel’svennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan’-hua,” 5 October 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 437, Ll. 245–262.

75. Chai, “Zhou Enlai lingdao women jinxing Zhong Su bianjie tanpan,” pp. 189–199.

76. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel’svennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan’-hua,” 5 October 1971.

77. Kuisong Yang and Yafeng Xia, “Vacillating between Revolution and Détente: Mao’s Changing Psyche and Policy toward the United States, 1969–1976,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 2010), pp. 395–423.

78. Jussi Hanhimäki, *The Flawed Architect* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 70.

of both parties to the non-use of force. During the conversation, Mao said, "We should negotiate well so that they [negotiations] lead to friendly, neighborly relations. We must struggle through words, not through force."⁷⁹ In this manner, the Chinese vividly demonstrated the feasibility of a Sino-Soviet rapprochement, a gesture that only a few days later was followed by canceling the U.S.-China ambassadorial meeting in Warsaw as a protest against the U.S. invasion of Cambodia.⁸⁰

The United States withdrew its troops from Cambodia at the end of June 1970, reviving hope of a Sino-American rapprochement.⁸¹ In light of these events Kosygin wrote a letter to Zhou on 8 July 1970 asking whether the two premiers could make a public statement on behalf of their two governments. He proposed that they emphasize that neither side was making territorial claims for the other, that they were determined to maintain the status quo and the normal situation on the border, and that neither country intended to negotiate using the threat of force.⁸²

The letter proposed several measures. First, pick up the border negotiations from where the two delegations had left off during the 1964 consultations, which were meant to formalize the intergovernmental understanding reached by the working groups on the eastern section of the borderline in 1964 and continue negotiating over other sections of the border. Second, simultaneously have the delegations of the two countries begin negotiating a draft treaty between the USSR and the PRC on the non-use of force, including nuclear force, and prohibiting propaganda of war and preparation for war against the other side, bearing in mind that such a document could then be signed at a higher state level along with the conclusion of a new border agreement. Third, continue negotiations in Beijing on the measures to maintain the status quo on the border and other issues related to ensuring the continuation of border talks.⁸³

Behind the Soviet attempt to facilitate a joint public statement was the need to downplay the scale of Sino-Soviet disagreement and make sure Beijing's rapprochement with the West did not further shift the balance of power. Kosygin's letter, however, went unanswered. The Chinese were preoccupied

79. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 138.

80. Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, p. 240.

81. Iver Peterson, "Last Combat Unit Out of Cambodia after 2 Months," *The New York Times*, 30 June 1970, p. 1; and Kissinger, *On China*, pp. 202–203. Although U.S. forces withdrew, the South Vietnamese army continued to conduct military operations in Cambodia until late July.

82. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 139.

83. *Ibid.*

with the prospect of Sino-American rapprochement, and on 10 July Beijing released Bishop James Walsh, a U.S. citizen who had been imprisoned in China since 1958 on espionage charges. This was Beijing's signal to the United States that the PRC was keenly interested in improving relations.⁸⁴

Desperate to get a message through, the Soviet Union turned to the Vietnamese, who conveyed Kosygin's letter to Beijing. Later, Zhou Enlai explained these events:

If I had replied [to the letter], we would have begun to quarrel, especially because the situation after 11 September 1969, has not improved, but has worsened. Then Comrade Kosygin through Pham Van Dong and Le Thanh Nghi conveyed to me some of his considerations. I, in turn, through Comrade Pham Van Dong thanked Comrade Kosygin for good intentions and explained why I cannot meet with the Premier of the USSR Council of Ministers and cannot reply to his letter: what we agreed on at the meeting on 11 September 1969 has not been implemented.⁸⁵

The Chinese thus chose to ignore the Soviet attempt to facilitate a public statement and create an image of improved Sino-Soviet relations.

Meanwhile, the Chinese put up their navigation signs on Damanskii, Kirkinskii, Sychevskii, and Kultuk Islands along the Amur and Ussuri Rivers because "the border was to be drawn along the thalweg, and these islands were to remain on the Chinese side of the border."⁸⁶ This behavior was not limited to a few instances, and therefore it could have sparked clashes. The Soviet section of the Joint Navigation Commission on the border rivers urged the CPSU Politburo to adopt a resolution requiring the KGB's Main Border Guards Directorate to employ all necessary measures to guarantee the safety of Soviet technicians when they tried to access the signs on the Chinese side of the thalweg.⁸⁷

Unable to make progress with the Chinese, the USSR signed the Moscow Treaty with the FRG on 12 August 1970. The treaty renounced the use of force and recognized the existing borders, thus legitimizing the divide between

84. Yang and Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," pp. 395–423.

85. "Zapis' besedy L. F. Il'icheva i V. S. Tolstikova s Prem'erom Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En'-laem," 21 March 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 41, Ll. 1–40.

86. "Informatsiya v Kraikom KPSS tov. A. K. Chernomu ot nachal'nika upravleniya KGB I. Petrov," 31 August 1970, in Khabarovsk Krai State Archive, F. II-35, Op. 96, D. 408A, Ll. 22–29.

87. "Proekt postanovleniya TsK KPSS o merakh po obespecheniyu bezopasnosti proizvodstva putevykh rabot na pogranichnykh rekah Amurskogo basseina v navigatsii 1970 goda," 15 September 1970, in Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), F. A562, Op. 1, D. 4273, L. 9.

the two German states.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the Chinese were trying to confirm to the United States that the time was ripe to improve Sino-U.S. relations. On 1 October 1970 Mao's old friend Edgar Snow, a leftist U.S. journalist and writer, and his wife were invited to China to view the annual National Day celebration parade from the wall of the Forbidden City overlooking Tiananmen Square.⁸⁹ In a *Time* magazine interview four days later, Nixon stated, "If there is anything I want to do before I die, it is to go to China." In the final few months of 1970, the two sides secretly communicated through a Pakistani channel and agreed to conduct high-level talks in Beijing.⁹⁰

In the meantime, Sino-Soviet negotiations revolved solely around the status quo agreement. The parties submitted four drafts each. Different variants contained ten to thirteen articles, and the two sides had different interpretations of almost all the provisions. Among the issues discussed was the question of whether to conclude an agreement on the basis of five principles or four. The Chinese were unwilling to include the term "proletarian internationalism" in the document, but they insisted on keeping the principle of "peaceful coexistence."⁹¹ The Soviet side pointed out that the principle of peaceful coexistence was mentioned in the PRC's treaties with Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia, but not in Chinese treaties with Italy, Canada, and Chile. The Soviet side objected to being placed on a par with Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia.⁹² This seemingly trivial dispute underscored the differences in how Beijing and Moscow viewed the Sino-Soviet relationship.

In early 1971, the Soviet side still maintained hope that the atmosphere would allow the border issue to be positively resolved: "First of all, the Soviet delegation would like to emphasize that now, with the exception of a few cases, a businesslike atmosphere has generally been established, objectively creating favorable conditions for Sino-Soviet negotiations. We can not only accelerate

88. Margot Light, "Anglo-Soviet Relations: Political and Diplomatic," in Alex Pravda and Peter J. S. Duncan, eds., *Soviet British Relations since the 1970s* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 134.

89. Yang and Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," pp. 395–423.

90. Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, p. 241.

91. The remaining four principles were: mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, and equality and cooperation for mutual benefit. The 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was the first in Chinese history to include all five principles; therefore, the use of these terms was not all that surprising. Niu Jun, ed., *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Duiwai Guanxiishi Gailun (1949–2000)*, p. 86.

92. "Zapis' besedy L. F. Il'icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel'stvennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan'-hua," 9 February 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 436, Ll. 37–54.

the course of the talks, but also bring them to a successful conclusion.”⁹³ As the discussions became more heated, the Chinese grew dissatisfied with the conduct of Soviet delegates, accusing them of engaging in “quixotism” and bringing up “unsubstantiated accusations” mostly about recent incidents on the border: “you yourselves painted a nonexistent object, and now you shoot at it.”⁹⁴

Military actions in Vietnam further complicated bilateral relations. On 15 January 1971, Soviet Ambassador Vasilii Tolstikov was received by PRC Deputy Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, to whom the Soviet ambassador handed a draft of the treaty on non-use of force.⁹⁵ Three days later, on 18 January, Kosygin met with Chinese Ambassador Liu Xinquan, and during their conversation he briefly discussed the article on the non-use of force. Zhou Enlai later discussed the same issue with Ambassador Tolstikov:

In our meeting with comrade Zhou Enlai, he expressed his wish to discuss the issue regarding an agreement or a document on mutual renunciation of the use of force, including the use of nuclear missiles. This was the first question that Comrade Zhou Enlai raised. He also expressed a wish that the negotiations take place in conditions that exclude any threat. Our side agreed with this. However, on the way in which to formalize this commitment, the parties did not agree.⁹⁶

On 26 February, on instructions from Zhou Enlai, the acting Chinese Foreign Minister Ji Pengfei met with Tolstikov. The Soviet ambassador handed over a statement from his government regarding the “American-Saigon aggression in Laos.” The statement called for immediate consultations at any level with the leadership of the PRC regarding the possibility of joint actions by the two countries “in support of the Indochinese people in their heroic struggle against the aggression of American imperialism.”⁹⁷

At the same time, the full text of the Soviet government’s statement on this issue appeared in the Soviet press, sparking a rebuff from the PRC:

93. “Protokol piatnadsatogo plenarnogo zasedaniya pravitel’svennykh delegatsii Sovetskogo Soiuzia i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki na peregovorah po utocnениyu prohozhdeniya linii sovetsko-kitaiskoi granitsy,” 21 January 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 435, Ll. 1–13.

94. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel’svennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan’-hua,” 9 February 1971.

95. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva i V. S. Tolstikova s Prem’erom Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En’-laem,” 21 March 1971.

96. “Protokol vosemnadsatogo plenarnogo zasedaniya pravitel’svennykh delegatsii Sovetskogo Soiuzia i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki na peregovorah po uregulirovaniyu pogranichnykh voprosov,” 23 April 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 435, Ll. 70–90.

97. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva i V. S. Tolstikova s Prem’erom Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En’-laem,” 21 March 1971.

We could tell you this: about the situation in Indochina we have long had the opportunity to make statements together with the Soviet side. We argue that there are great differences between the PRC and the Soviet Union on positions toward the United States, and we told you that we could not make statements together.⁹⁸

Still the Soviet Union continued to pursue an improvement of bilateral relations with China. At the CPSU's 24th Congress held in March 1971, Soviet leaders emphasized that the Soviet Union was "willing not only to promote the normalization of relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, but also to pursue the restoration of neighborly and friendly relations between the two countries."⁹⁹

Meanwhile, the Chinese continued to seek better relations with the United States. Although Beijing had already used several channels to signal its desire for a rapprochement, it was puzzled by the U.S. ping-pong team's request to visit the PRC after the 31st International Table Tennis Tournament in Nagoya, Japan, in late March 1971. After Chinese leaders discussed the matter at length, they granted the team permission to visit.¹⁰⁰

Around the same time, the Soviet side submitted another draft of the status quo agreement to the PRC that omitted any mention of mutual non-use of force.¹⁰¹ From the beginning of the talks, the Chinese had stressed the need to adopt a document that eliminated the threat of attack. They claimed that "an atomic bomb [was] hanging over the [negotiating] table" and that the signing of a status quo agreement was a prerequisite for conducting border talks.¹⁰² Soviet officials suggested that two documents be signed: one to secure the status quo on the border and another to guarantee the elimination of the threat or use of force.

On 21 March 1971, Zhou held a meeting with Ambassador Tolstikov and the head of the Soviet delegation, Leonid Ilichev. The conversation lasted four hours and forty minutes. During their talk, the two sides discussed the status quo agreement. Zhou sharply pointed out:

98. *Ibid.*

99. Niu Jun, "Zouxiang 'Zhengchanghua' (1979–1991)," in Shen Zhihua, ed., *Zhongguo Guanxi Shigang 1917–1991 nian: Zhongguo Guanxi Ruogan Wenti Tantaoyan* (Beijing: Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2016), pp. 611–612.

100. Yang and Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," pp. 395–423.

101. "Protokol vosemnadsatogo plenarnogo zasedaniya pravitel'stvennykh delegatsii Sovetskogo Soiuza i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki na peregovorah po uregulirovaniyu pograniichnykh voprosov," 23 April 1971.

102. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 134.

Replying to Comrade Kosygin through comrade Le Thanh Nghi, I said that the Soviet side is now proposing not one document, but two, and I called these actions “tricks.” It means that these are not serious negotiations, but some kind of juggling.¹⁰³

When discussing temporary measures that were to secure the status quo on the border, including withdrawal of military personnel from the region, the Soviet officials said to Zhou: “We are against such suspicion; we need mutual trust. Without it, negotiations are difficult to conduct. We are in doubt; do you not mean to turn temporary measures into permanent ones.” Soviet documents show that, at this point in the conversation, Zhou leaned toward Qiao Guan-hua and asked him whether the term “temporary measures” was in the title of the draft agreement. Qiao replied that it was not in the title but in the preamble.¹⁰⁴ Zhou then said that if the Soviet delegation so wished, the Chinese could omit or take out the word “temporary” from the text of the agreement. Zhou also spoke about the long-existing Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance between the two countries. He said that if the treaty needed to be amended, this could be discussed after the conclusion of a new border treaty.¹⁰⁵

The Soviet officials proposed that the withdrawal of troops from direct contact be carried out in the following manner: On the river sections of the border, armed personnel (military units) of both sides would not travel to islands whose sovereignty had yet to be determined by mutual agreement of the parties; on the land sections of the border in places where economic activity was conducted, the armed forces of both sides would withdraw from direct contact from the line where they were located to equal minimum-required distances agreed by the parties; on the abovementioned sections, the administrative management of the parties would remain unchanged, and existing border posts (outposts) would be preserved.¹⁰⁶

The Chinese side maintained that these proposals could not actually achieve the stated goals. On the river sections of the border, the new Soviet draft did not raise the question of withdrawing armed forces stationed on the disputed islands. On the land sections of the border, the point about

103. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva i V. S. Tolstikova s Prem’erom Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En’-laem,” 21 March 1971.

104. *Ibid.*

105. “Protokol vosemnadtsatogo plenarnogo zasedaniya pravitel’stvennykh delegatsii Sovetskogo Soiuza i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki na peregovorah po uregulirovaniyu pogranychnykh voprosov,” 23 April 1971.

106. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranychnykh peregovorov*, p. 142.

prohibiting armed forces from entering the disputed territories was not raised. As for the Soviet proposal to withdraw armed forces from the borderline as it was on 11 September 1969, such a proposal, the Chinese believed, would merely cause disputes between the parties about where the line passed and did not help in reaching agreement. During the meeting, Zhou also pointed out "you, for example, suggest maintaining all border outposts. If you mean at the same time to leave all the border troops in these border outposts, then, in fact, it would mean ultimately revoking the [measures facilitating] withdrawal of the armed forces from contact."¹⁰⁷

The atmosphere during the meeting was tense. Zhou referred to Brezhnev as "comrade" and then added, "I did not really have to say 'comrade.'" The Soviet officials, nevertheless, were not taken aback; they hoped it was just Zhou trying to correct himself in front of the other members of the Chinese delegation.¹⁰⁸ The Chinese also addressed recent news about the prospect that a Japanese delegation would visit the Sino-Soviet border regions:

Recently there were reports in the Japanese press that you are inviting a Japanese military delegation which is to visit the Soviet Far East in April, including areas bordering China. Does this look like a relationship between the allied countries? You have not had any refutations on this score.

The Soviet officials responded that even if such a plan existed, it would not be a violation of the alliance treaty.¹⁰⁹ The meeting concluded with little progress.

By then, the Chinese had already approved the visit of the U.S. ping-pong team to Beijing. For four days, starting on 11 April 1971, the team toured historical landmarks of the city, including Tiananmen Square. The U.S. players and the journalists who accompanied them were among the first U.S. citizens allowed to enter China since 1949. Bilateral relations were beginning to gain momentum.¹¹⁰

Nevertheless, the Sino-Soviet negotiations continued. During the discussion on 23 April, the Soviet side expressed a sincere desire to find a solution to this issue that would allow both parties to remove it from the agenda once

107. "Poyasneniya k proektu soglasheniya kitaiskoi storony ot 17 marta 1971 goda," 17 March 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 435, L. 65–69.

108. "Zapis' besedy L. F. Il'icheva i V. S. Tolstikova s Prem'erom Gosudarstvennogo Soveta KNR Chzhou En'-laem," 21 March 1971.

109. Ibid.

110. Ruth Eckstein, "Ping Pong Diplomacy: A View from behind the Scenes," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations*, No. 3 (1993), pp. 327–342.

and for all and “put an end to all conversations that someone is being threatened with the use of force.”¹¹¹ The Soviet side proposed two options: either sign two documents (one temporary agreement on the status quo and a long-term treaty on the non-use of force) or include a confirmation of the 1950 bilateral alliance treaty while omitting the clause about the non-use of force in the status quo agreement. The Chinese side believed that both confirmation of the 1950 treaty and an additional clause committing the two sides to the non-use of force should be included in the status quo agreement. The Chinese also pointed out that, because the 1950 treaty said nothing about not using nuclear weapons, the Chinese wanted to include this issue in the status quo agreement. The Soviet side proposed signing a separate treaty as a way to reduce the nuclear threat.¹¹²

On 7 May 1971 the Soviet delegation introduced its third draft of the status quo agreement, including an article on the non-use of force. The draft underscored that such obligations should not be limited in time. On 26 June the Chinese side introduced the fourth (and last) draft agreement on the status quo. In it, the Soviet provisions on the non-use of force were taken into account, with that part of the Chinese draft almost fully mirroring the Soviet one from 7 May.¹¹³

U.S.-China relations, meanwhile, continued to develop. By June, the United States had lifted its embargo against China. Acting in the spirit of a 29 May CCP Politburo report, which primarily addressed the issue of Sino-American rapprochement, the Chinese side received Kissinger from 9 to 11 July 1971.¹¹⁴ During their talks, Zhou and Kissinger focused on Taiwan, which had been tied to the United States since 1954 with a mutual defense treaty. Zhou secured much needed, although not completely satisfactory, U.S. assurances regarding Taiwan. Kissinger promised Zhou that the United States would soon disengage itself from Taiwan and that the Nixon administration would not seek “two Chinas” or a “one China, one Taiwan” policy, would not support Nationalist action against the mainland, and would not support the Taiwanese independence movement.¹¹⁵ By 15 July of the same year, Nixon

111. “Protokol vosemnadsatogo plenarnogo zasedaniya pravitel'stvennykh delegatsii Sovetskogo Soyuza i Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki na peregovorakh po uregulirovaniyu pograniichnykh voprosov,” 23 April 1971.

112. *Ibid.*

113. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 144.

114. Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, pp. 167–172.

115. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

had gone on U.S. national television and declared that he was planning an official visit to Beijing.¹¹⁶

Meanwhile, the Sino-Soviet talks continued. On 6 July, during another meeting, the head of the Chinese delegation, Qiao Guanhua, discussed the second and third articles of the status quo agreement with his Soviet counterpart, Ilichev. Qiao claimed that since 7 May, when the Soviet Union had offered a new draft, Soviet planes had violated Chinese airspace five times. Qiao expressed hope that such incidents would not be repeated in the future. Ilichev vehemently denied that any such incidents had occurred.¹¹⁷

The Soviet side also tried to separate the issue of the economic activity of the local populations and their permanent residence in these regions. The Chinese always listed the two together. The Soviet Union was willing to permit the Chinese citizens to engage in the former, but the latter, they feared, would be used as a pretext to assert claims on some of the border territories. The issue of economic activity was tied to the notion of disputed territories, and therefore the two sides ultimately reached an impasse.¹¹⁸

On 17 September 1971 the Soviet side submitted the fourth and final draft of the status quo agreement. In addition to editorial changes aimed at "harmonizing individual formulations," it contained additions to Article 1, "reflecting word for word the notion of *status quo* expressed by Zhou Enlai on 11 September 1969."¹¹⁹

The atmosphere during the negotiation was becoming tenser. During one of the meetings, Yu Zhan pointed out that Ilichev did not understand the situation, to which Ilichev retorted that he had "understood quite a few things long before Yu Zhan was born."¹²⁰ Despite these testy exchanges, both parties agreed "the negotiation was held in a calm atmosphere."¹²¹ To Soviet and Chinese officials alike, the benefits of maintaining the negotiations while seeking to improve relations with the United States outweighed any minor difficulties.

The Soviets continued working toward détente with the West. In September 1971 a preliminary four-power agreement on Berlin was signed between

116. "Nixon Announces His Visit to China" 15 July 1971, in Associated Press Archive, <http://www.aparchive.com/>.

117. "Zapis' besedy L. F. Il'icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel'stvennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan'-hua," 6 July 1971, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 437, Ll. 16–32.

118. Ibid.

119. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 145; emphasis added.

120. "Zapis' besedy L. F. Il'icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel'stvennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan'-hua," 6 July 1971.

121. Ibid.

the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. The agreement specified various rights and responsibilities, including a Soviet guarantee that the flow of traffic between East and West Berlin would not be impeded.¹²²

The following month, on 5 October, the U.S. and Chinese governments issued a joint statement that, “in order to make basic arrangements for President Nixon’s visit,” a delegation led by Kissinger would visit China on 20 October 1971. At the same time, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly placed the Albanian resolutions that supported the membership of the PRC on the agenda ahead of the U.S. resolutions for dual representation. On 25 October the UN General Assembly voted by an overwhelming majority to let Beijing have China’s seat at the UN and to expel Taiwan. In the PRC, this development was hailed as a triumph for Chinese foreign policy, greatly enhancing the country’s international status and reputation.¹²³

Coinciding with Kissinger’s visit, these events reinforced the progress achieved by Beijing and Washington ahead of Nixon’s visit. Kissinger, without getting a mutually acceptable formulation of the traditional joint communiqué, assured Zhou that his aide Alexander Haig would travel to China in January with a new formulation. The dates were already set for Nixon’s visit: 21 to 28 February 1972.¹²⁴

Although U.S.-China relations were developing rapidly, unpleasant exchanges between Soviet and Chinese officials during the border talks became more frequent. On 13 October 1971, during a plenary meeting, the Chinese were displeased by Ilichev’s remark that the use of the term “disputed territories” suggested by the Chinese actually meant that China had territorial claims on the Soviet Union. After Ilichev asked his counterpart to stop demonstrating “malign reactions,” the Chinese referred to Soviet leaders as “imperialists.” Soviet officials at the time suspected that “raising the temperature in the negotiations” had been China’s plan all along.¹²⁵ Ilichev and his colleagues evidently perceived the heated exchange as having stemmed from Kissinger’s visit to China and the recent Chinese diplomatic success in the UN.

From 20 November 1971 through 20 March 1972, Sino-Soviet negotiations were paused while the head of the Soviet delegation returned to

122. Richard W. Stevenson, *The Rise and Fall of the Détente: Relaxations of Tension in US-Soviet Relations 1953–84* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1985), p. 149.

123. Xia, *Negotiating with the Enemy*, p. 181.

124. *Ibid.*

125. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel’svennoi delegatsii Tsiao Guan’-hua,” 13 October 1971, RGANI, F. 5, Op. 63, D. 437, Ll. 267–289.

Moscow.¹²⁶ Meanwhile, the PRC's relations with the United States continued to improve. On 15 November 1971, the Chinese delegation headed by Qiao Guanhua was present for the first time at the UN General Assembly.¹²⁷ On 21 February 1972, Nixon came to China for a one-week visit that was widely televised and promoted in both countries and around the globe. The visit also marked the beginning of a new era of bilateral relations.¹²⁸

Sino-Soviet relations outside the negotiations were complicated by the two countries' competition for the loyalty of the North Vietnamese ally. In January and March 1972, China signed an agreement with the Soviet Union and East European countries regarding the transportation of military aid for North Vietnam through Chinese territory. While encouraging the transfer of a greater amount of weaponry, China tried to limit the Soviet Union's ability to control the transportation of commodities through Chinese territory, thus preventing Hanoi and Moscow from excluding Beijing and negotiating the aid directly. Another big incentive for the Chinese to expand the amount of military aid to North Vietnam was to end the Vietnam War and eliminate this major obstacle to rapprochement with the United States.¹²⁹

After Ilichev returned to Beijing in March 1972, the meetings of the delegations resumed. They held an item-by-item discussion of draft agreements on the status quo and reviewed the points on which the two parties disagreed.¹³⁰ These exchanges did not help the negotiation process. An internal document prepared by the Chinese Foreign Ministry claimed that Soviet officials involved in the negotiations not genuinely want to improve bilateral relations and instead were "attempting to gain [political] capital before Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union, deceive the people, enhance their position in bargaining with the United States, and place the responsibility on us for the lack of progress in the Sino-Soviet border negotiations and in bilateral relations."¹³¹

Indeed, U.S.-Soviet relations at the time also saw rapid development. In May 1972 Nixon made a historic visit to the Soviet Union, only a few months after his visit to Beijing. On 26 May 1972, he and Brezhnev signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and an interim accord to limit long-range nuclear

126. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 147.

127. See, for instance, Zhang Yi, *Waijiao Fengyun Qinliji* (Wuhan: Hubei Renmin Chubanshe, 2004).

128. Kissinger, *On China*, pp. 255–275.

129. Li Danhui, "Zhongsu zai Yuan Yue Kang Mei wenti shang de maodun yu chongtu (1965–1972)," in Zhang Baijia and Niu Jun, eds., *Zhongguo yu Lengzhan* (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2002), pp. 372–415.

130. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 147.

131. "Waijiaobu guanyu Zhong Su guanxi biaotai koujing de tongbao," 4 April 1972, in Fujian Provincial Archive, 222-4-297, pp. 8–10.

weapons. They also signed agreements on space development, environmental issues, and health care. Displeased, in December 1972, Mao announced the “dig tunnels deep” slogan, calling on ordinary Chinese to construct large-scale underground tunnels and exhibit them to foreign visitors as a sign of their determination to resist Soviet aggression.¹³²

Around the same time, Yu Zhan was promoted to head the Chinese delegation at the Sino-Soviet border talks.¹³³ The former head, Qiao, had by then long been in charge of the negotiations with Kissinger and drafting a joint U.S.-Chinese communiqué. Although the Sino-Soviet border negotiations continued, little progress was made. In an interview with Scandinavian journalists on 10 November 1972, Zhou Enlai said: “China has patience and will not rush during the negotiations on border issues with the Soviet Union.”¹³⁴ Thus, Beijing’s approach to the Sino-Soviet border talks was officially stated: China was not going to speed up the negotiations, seeing them as quite beneficial for the development of closer ties with the United States.

Despite all of these changes in the power dynamic among the three countries, the Chinese tried at the local level to reinstate control over the territories situated on the Chinese side of the thalweg. Before 1970, the Soviet Union was responsible for maintaining 48 navigation signs on 80 islands on the Chinese side of the rivers of the Amur Basin. In 1970, the Chinese took over the maintenance of 8 signs on 4 islands, and by 1971 they had begun servicing another 14 signs on 12 islands. Although Soviet officials formally protested, they never took military measures to regain control.¹³⁵

From Horizontal Line to Quasi-Alliance (1973–1978)

On 17 February 1973, in a meeting with Kissinger, Mao proposed for the first time his strategy of establishing “a horizontal line [*yitiaoxian*]”—the United States—Japan—China—Pakistan—Iran—Turkey and Europe” that

132. Kazushi Minami, “Re-Examining the End of Mao’s Revolution: China’s Changing Statecraft and Sino-American Relations, 1973–1978,” *Cold War History*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (September 2016), pp. 359–375.

133. “Zapis’ besedy L. F. Il’icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel’svennoi delegatsii Yui Chzhanem,” 16 July 1973, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 66, D. 661, Ll. 132–149.

134. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranychnykh peregovorov*, p. 138.

135. “Spravka o poryadke obsluzhivaniya znakov navigatsionnoi obstanovki, raspolozhennykh v storonu KNR ot glavnogo farvatera na pogranychnykh uchastkakh rek Amurskogo basseina,” June 1976, in GARF, F. A562, Op. 1, D. 5685, L. 271.

would "commonly deal with a bastard [i.e., the Soviet Union]." Later, during a meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Masayoshi Ohira in early January 1974, Mao replaced the horizontal alignment with an even broader concept of a *big terrain* (*yidapian*), referring to countries that were adjacent to the horizontal line.¹³⁶ The strategy that incorporated these two notions aimed at creating an "international anti-hegemonic united front."¹³⁷

During this period, discussion within the Chinese government on the prospects of Sino-Soviet normalization continued. In the early 1970s, the Chinese representative at the talks had proposed to the Soviet Union that the relationship between the two countries be based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Afterward, the Chinese approach seemed to change very little. In September 1973, the CCP held its Tenth National Congress. The political report presented there highlighted the challenge posed by "Soviet hegemonism" for the world and for Chinese foreign policy. Even so, the report still considered the possibility that Sino-Soviet relations could be normalized.¹³⁸

As the Chinese effort to solidify relations with the United States began to bear fruit, U.S.-Soviet relations became more complicated. In the wake of Soviet human rights violations and the subsequent 1974 Jackson-Vanik Amendment, acute tensions sparked by the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and the Watergate scandal of 1972–1974, détente began to decline.¹³⁹

By late 1974, the Chinese might have surmised that U.S. triangular diplomacy was no longer equidistant. As the balance of power in the region began to shift, the Chinese grew to believe that the probability of a Soviet nuclear attack had been reduced significantly. Therefore, by 1974, the Chinese cut their military budget and markedly reduced their armed forces.¹⁴⁰

The plenary sessions of the ongoing Sino-Soviet border negotiations were not held until March 1973, and by that point the two sides had become entangled in ideological polemics, unable to deal with the issues at hand. The number of minor border incidents also increased, and the meetings therefore often focused solely on those incidents.¹⁴¹

On 7 May 1973, the PRC sent a telegram to Soviet personnel on the Joint Navigation Commission notifying them that three Chinese ships were

136. Yang and Xia, "Vacillating between Revolution and Détente," pp. 395–423.

137. *Ibid.*

138. Niu Jun, "Zouxiang 'Zhengchanghua' (1979–1991)," pp. 611–612.

139. Zubok, *A Failed Empire*, pp. 229–247.

140. Elizavetin, "Peregovory A. N. Kosygina i Chzhou En'laiem v Pekinskom Aeroportu," pp. 39–63.

141. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranichnykh peregovorov*, p. 147.

planning to pass by Khabarovsk. The Soviet personnel responded that they were not authorized to resolve such issues.¹⁴² A few days later, on 11 May 1973, the head of the Far Eastern Department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Mikhail Kapitsa, passed to Ma Lie, the Chinese chargé d'affaires in the USSR, a diplomatic note about the perceived military buildup in “Soviet internal waters.”¹⁴³

At that moment, Chinese military and civilian vessels were moving toward Khabarovsk. Soviet officials claimed that by 10 May some 25 Chinese ships were already approaching. In addition, the Chinese personnel reportedly removed 16 coastal navigation signs installed by the Soviet side on 7 Soviet islands on the Middle Amur and put up their own signs, in contravention of the 1951 Agreement on Navigation and Facilitation of Navigable Situation on the River Section of the Border. Soviet officials stressed that “the question of passage of Chinese ships through the internal waters of the USSR in Khabarovsk would be easy to resolve if the Chinese side raised the issue in an appropriate form, as is customary in relations between sovereign states.” The Chinese were reluctant to do so because they disagreed that the passage was, in fact, through Soviet internal waters, instead believing it to be a part of the Sino-Soviet border.¹⁴⁴ In 1973, the Chinese took over the maintenance of another 29 signs on 16 islands. Thus, by the end of the navigation season in 1973, the Chinese had 51 signs on 32 islands under their direct control.¹⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the maintenance of a dialogue using the border negotiations format was becoming more difficult. Even organizational issues could not be resolved. During a meeting on 16 July 1973 between the heads of two delegations, the Soviet side informed the Chinese that Ilichev needed to fly back to Moscow on state business. The Soviet delegation also contended that, “based on the principles of parity and equality,” talks should be continued in Moscow after having taken place in Beijing for the previous four years. Yu Zhan, the head of the Chinese delegation, expressed displeasure with the suggestion. The Chinese, he said, perceived this as an attempt to “depart from the understanding reached by the two premiers” during the airport meeting in

142. “Zapis’ besedy M. S. Kapitsy so vremennym poverennym v delakh KNR v SSSR Ma Le,” 11 May 1973, in RGANI, F. 5, Op. 66, D. 661, L. 24–28.

143. Ibid.

144. Ibid.

145. “Spravka o poryadke obsluzhivaniya znakov navigatsionnoi obstanovki, raspolozhennykh v storonu KNR ot glavnogo farvatera na pogranychnykh uchastkakh rek Amurskogo basseina,” June 1976.

September 1969. With the two parties unable to see eye to eye even on the location of the talks, the subsequent conversation never went beyond discussing the border incidents.¹⁴⁶

The exchanges between the delegations were also becoming more heated. During one of the meetings, Yu Zhan accused the USSR of racism, arguing that, according to Soviet leaders, "the Chinese are the inferior race." To this, Ilichev responded angrily: "Shame on you, colleague. . . . Do you want to end the discussion in a poisoned atmosphere?! Pull yourself together."¹⁴⁷ The will to continue constructive dialogue was weakening on both sides of the table.

Breaks between the plenary sessions were becoming increasingly lengthy, lasting from one year to almost a year-and-a-half at a time. The first prolonged break, from June 1973 to July 1974, coincided with several developments in Sino-Soviet-U.S. relations. When, in June 1973, Washington and Moscow negotiated the Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement, the Chinese started to criticize Washington for "step[ping] on the Chinese shoulders to reach the USSR" in the hopes of pitting Beijing and Moscow against each other.¹⁴⁸ Mao criticized a Chinese Foreign Ministry report that characterized the Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement as creating "a stronger atmosphere of US-Soviet domination." The "unsatisfactory" report, he said, focused on "the superficial"—namely, superpower collusion—while ignoring "the essence"; that is, "great chaos, great disintegration, and great reshuffle" resulting from their hidden competition.¹⁴⁹ In February 1974, during a meeting with Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, Mao laid out the Theory of the Three Worlds, thus marking the abandonment of the "horizontal line" and "big terrain."¹⁵⁰

By this point, Yu Zhan had suffered health problems and been replaced by Han Nianlong as the head of the Chinese delegation to the Sino-Soviet border talks. Four meetings were held in July 1974, followed by a nine-month break until April 1975. During this period Deng Xiaoping emphasized strategic concurrence with the United States from the viewpoint of economic and geopolitical realism. Economically, he linked, albeit subtly, U.S.-China

146. "Zapis' besedy L. F. Il'icheva s glavoi kitaiskoi pravitel'stvennoi delegatsii Yui Chzhanem," 16 July 1973.

147. Ibid.

148. U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Vol. XVIII, Doc. 39, quoted in Minami, "Re-Examining the End of Mao's Revolution," pp. 359–375.

149. Ibid.

150. Ibid.

normalization to the “four modernizations” (agriculture, industry, defense, and science and technology).¹⁵¹

The next round of talks was completed in April–May 1975, after which the longest break—a year and seven months—was taken.¹⁵² At the same time, the annual meeting of the Joint Navigation Commission, which was scheduled to be held in China in 1975, was canceled—another sign of souring relations.¹⁵³ By the end of the year, the Chinese had gained control over 67 navigation signs on 41 islands. By the beginning of navigation season in 1976, the Soviet had control of only 13 navigation signs on 7 islands. Finally, on 30 May 1976, the Chinese section of the Joint Commission informed the Soviet Union that the PRC was now servicing all remaining signs on the Chinese side of the thalweg and that on 9 islands the Chinese had installed signaling equipment.¹⁵⁴ Despite that, Soviet leaders were unwilling to use military force to restore control over the signs. The USSR’s Main Border Guards Directorate declined to provide troops to replace signs installed by the Chinese side.¹⁵⁵

Instead, Soviet officials took measures to restrain Chinese actions around Bolshoi Ussuriiski (Heixiazi) Island. Jiang Changbin points out:

The Soviet Union built an international airport in Khabarovsk (Boli) close to Heilongjiang and built a cross-river bridge from Boli to the Heixiazi Island. This bridge had strategic meaning: it could open and close, [and] after the closure, no Chinese vessel could sail through the river. For many years, whenever a Chinese ship wanted to sail between the two rivers [Amur and Ussuri Rivers], it could go only through the Fuyuan [Kazakhevich] waterway, which has a lot of shallow water and mud and must be dredged frequently. It is just a small tributary.¹⁵⁶

The bridge described by Jiang Changbin was a pontoon structure installed and dismantled by the Soviet Union every year starting in 1975.¹⁵⁷

151. Ibid.

152. Niu Jun, “Zouxiang ‘Zhengchanghua’ (1979–1991),” pp. 611–612.

153. “Spravka o polozhenii na pogranichnykh uchastkakh rek Amurskogo basseina podgotovlennaya zamestitlem ministra rechnogo flota RSFSR L. V. Bagrovym,” 1 May 1976, in GARF, F. A562, Op. 1, D. 5685, Ll. 249–251.

154. “Spravka o polozhenii na pogranichnykh uchastkakh rek Amurskogo basseina podgotovlennaya zamestitlem ministra rechnogo flota RSFSR V. A. Kurdinym,” 1 June 1976, in GARF, F. A562, Op. 1, D. 5685, Ll. 252–255.

155. “Spravka k soveshchaniyu MRF o sudokhodstve na pogranichnykh uchastkakh rek Amurskogo basseina,” May 1976, in GARF, F. A562, Op. 1, D. 5685, Ll. 19–22.

156. Wang Bo, “Heixiazidao Huiguiji,” *Shejie Zhishi*, No. 21 (2008), pp. 46–53.

157. Tatiana Dmitrakova, “V Khabarovskom Krae Navedut Pontonnyi Most Cherez Amurskuiu Pro-toku,” *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 3 May 2012p. 3.

Even at this point, however, Soviet leaders seemed to hope that Sino-Soviet relations could be improved once the "normalization based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence" was implemented. After the deaths of Zhou and Mao in January and September 1976, the Soviet Union aspired to forge better relations with the new Chinese leaders.¹⁵⁸ After Mao's death in the early morning of 9 September 1976, the Soviet Union quickly broadcast a simple announcement without comment. The CPSU Politburo sent a message of condolence to the CCP. Most observers saw this as an attempt to improve relations. On 13 September Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and others went to the Chinese embassy to express their condolences on the death of Chinese leader, and the main media outlets in the Soviet Union broadcast news of the visit. The Soviet leaders' gestures received no significant response from Beijing.¹⁵⁹

The Sino-Soviet negotiations resumed in December 1976 and continued until February 1977. On almost all diplomatic occasions, the new Chinese leaders reiterated that they would adhere to Mao's foreign policy, including treating the Soviet Union as the new source of war. In August 1977 the CCP held its Eleventh National Congress and issued a political report declaring: "The USSR and the USA are the places where the new world war would originate, and Soviet social imperialism specifically is the greater danger." China faces the "threat of imperialism, especially social imperialism, the desire of the Soviet social imperialists to destroy China is not dead." The Soviet Politburo was dismayed by the new Chinese leaders' harsh stance toward the USSR, and in the spring of 1977 the Soviet Union returned to earlier diplomatic practices in its relations with the PRC, and Soviet media resumed their anti-Chinese rhetoric.¹⁶⁰

The next round of Sino-Soviet border talks began in April 1978, and the 40th plenary meeting, which became the final one in the nine-year negotiation period, was held on 27 June 1978.¹⁶¹ Not long before that, in May 1978, President Jimmy Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, visited China. As a result of that trip, the United States decided to reorient its policy from "triangular diplomacy" toward a "quasi-alliance" with the

158. Niu Jun, "Zouxiang 'Zhengchanghua' (1979–1991)," pp. 611–612.

159. *Ibid.*, pp. 613–614.

160. Fan Chao, "1980 Niandai Zhongguo Waijiao Zhanlüe Tiaozheng de Yuanqi," *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu*, Vol. 1 (2013), pp. 121–134.

161. Kireev, *Neizvestnye stranitsy pogranichnykh peregovorov*, p. 159.

Chinese.¹⁶² Cognizant of this change, Soviet officials looked for additional support in the region. On 3 November 1978, Vietnam and the Soviet Union signed a bilateral Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which cemented the military alliance between the two countries. Moscow played an important role in encouraging Vietnam to seek regional hegemony. On 25 November Vietnam established a puppet government in Cambodia and immediately sent a large army to invade the country. On 7 January 1979 it captured the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh.¹⁶³

In response to these events, on 17 February 1979, Chinese border troops launched a military offensive against Vietnam in Longzhou and Jingxi (Guangxi Province) and the Hekou and Jinping areas of Yunnan Province. The Chinese government publicly declared that the military strike against Vietnam was meant as a crackdown on Soviet expansion in Southeast Asia, arguing that “the big and small hegemonies of the Soviet Union and Vietnam have united and carried out aggression and expansion. The peace in Indochina has been destroyed and that is the core of the threat to security and stability of Southeast Asia.”¹⁶⁴

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 eliminated any near-term prospect of Sino-Soviet normalization. Yet the bilateral negotiations of 1969–1978 had by then served multiple purposes. Both countries used the sessions as a “card” in building a relationship with the United States and changing the geometry of their alliances. At the same time, the talks became one of the few remaining channels of communication between China and the USSR during this period, ensuring that the conflict between the two countries did not return to open military confrontation.¹⁶⁵

Conclusion

The Sino-Soviet border negotiations were more than just a way to de-escalate the border conflict. The Soviet and Chinese governments gradually moved from crisis resolution toward a realignment of forces, creating a new political

162. Robert Legvold, “Sino-Soviet Relations: The American Factor,” in Robert S. Ross, ed., *China, the United States, and the Soviet Union: Tripolarity and Policy Making in the Cold War* (Armonk, NY: Routledge, 1993), p. 69.

163. Niu Jun, “Zouxiang ‘Zhengchanghua’ (1979–1991),” p. 615.

164. *Ibid.*, p. 624.

165. Kireev, *Neizvestnyye stranitsy pograniichnykh peregovorov*, p. 159.

environment in which China and the Soviet Union competed against each other in trying to improve their relations with the United States.

The talks began in late 1969 after a series of military clashes on the border. Initially, the Soviet Union attempted to normalize Sino-Soviet relations, whereas the Chinese focused more on containing the border conflict. Unable to convince the Chinese that the threat of Soviet attack was not imminent, Soviet officials shifted their focus to reducing tensions on the border. Although both sides continued to be displeased by the other's actions, the talks secured peace and facilitated the implementation of limited measures to prevent military conflict between the two countries. Thus, the early period of the talks served the primary purpose of the negotiations: it facilitated crisis management. At the same time, the process was continually overshadowed by mutual distrust and concerns about the counterpart's intentions.

Analysis of the drafts prepared by both sides shows that the Soviet approach to signing the agreement was conditioned by a fear that if the status quo stretched for decades and was coupled with recognition of the existence of "disputed territories," it would give the Chinese the right to use the disputed territories for an undetermined amount of time, thereby increasing the strength of their territorial claim. Soviet representatives repeatedly tried to convey these concerns to their counterparts during the talks.

At the same time, the Soviet Union was ready to confirm the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance. The Chinese, nevertheless, pointed out throughout the negotiations that the treaty was insufficient because it did not include a clause on the non-use of nuclear weapons, a concern that was most relevant during the early stages of the negotiations. Soviet withdrawal from certain border regions and a status quo agreement without an expiry date were beneficial for the Chinese. Each weakened the Soviet Union's actual control over the "disputed" territories. Yet, Moscow was unwilling to compromise on the "disputed territories" issue, primarily because of concern that the Chinese would then stall the resolution of the border problem.

The reaction of the West became crucial to the development of the talks. Regardless of the actual state of bilateral relations, both sides had to depict the situation in a certain way. The Soviet Union emphasized that progress was being achieved, thus suggesting the possibility of a rapprochement with Beijing. By contrast, the Chinese, who wanted to facilitate the rapprochement with the United States, argued that only meager progress was made during the negotiations with the USSR.

For the Chinese, the decision to maintain the negotiation channel without settling the dispute was influenced by both domestic and international factors. First, the USSR still had a significantly more powerful military than

the Chinese did, and simultaneous defense against two superpowers was impossible. A Sino-U.S. rapprochement was thus one of Beijing's most viable security options. At the same time, further deterioration of the Sino-Soviet relationship was not beneficial for Beijing. Both countries were nuclear weapons states, and as the incidents on Damanskii Island and Zhalanashkol vividly demonstrated, it was quite difficult to keep a military clash limited. In addition, U.S. triangular diplomacy prevented the Chinese from fatally worsening their relations with the Soviet Union because the tacit threat of Sino-Soviet normalization helped to improve relations with the United States.¹⁶⁶ The U.S.-Soviet détente was perceived by the Chinese as part of the "great reshuffle," or realignment of forces, and in response to these changes the PRC departed from the concept of the horizontal line and moved on to the Theory of the Three Worlds, wherein China stood apart from both superpowers.

For the Soviet Union, the goal of improved relations with the West was to be accomplished through a show of strength. Securing better relations with China was thus perceived as a factor that would help achieve détente. Later, as détente began to fall apart, improving Sino-Soviet relations became even more important for the USSR. The U.S.-China rapprochement was perceived as a failure of Soviet diplomacy. Soviet officials sensed that, in the realignment of forces, the United States and PRC had ended up in a closer relationship with each other than either had with Moscow—they had built a "quasi-alliance." That, in addition to an open military conflict with Vietnam, showed that the border talks had outlived their usefulness. The realignment of forces was complete, and talks no longer played an important role.

The negotiations lasted for nine years but did not result in the signing of either a status quo agreement or a treaty on the non-use of force. Although the talks did not secure a breakthrough on the border issue, they did help to prevent a military conflict. They also became an instrument that Beijing and Moscow could use to reshape the balance of power in the world. From triangular diplomacy propelled by Washington to the "horizontal line" envisioned by Beijing to the selective détente sought by Moscow, all three sides were engaged in a prolonged attempt to secure better relations with at least one of their counterparts. The border talks helped them implement their respective policies.

166. Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, pp. 119–123; and Hyer, *The Pragmatic Dragon*, pp. 38–39.