

Sino-Soviet Relations in the Early 1950s - Late 1960s

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Abstract: From 1950 to 1960, Sino-Soviet relations transitioned from a close alliance to an eventual split. This change was influenced by various factors, including the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, as well as the Korean War. Despite sharing communist ideologies, the two countries had fundamental differences in their developmental objectives, which led to irreparable divisions and an ultimate severance of ties. Additionally, the personal characteristics of the leaders further exacerbated suspicions and military tensions between the two nations. In the early 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policies were primarily focused on safeguarding its domestic interests. Despite underlying suspicions and compromises, China and the Soviet Union formalized their alliance through the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. China's military involvement in Korea in 1953 further strengthened the relationship, ushering in a 'honeymoon' period for the alliance. However, the CCP harbored a long-term objective of establishing itself as an independent entity free from external control. The underlying motives and imbalances inherent in Soviet aid began to erode the CCP's trust in the USSR. In 1956, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) marked the onset of ideological divergences between the two nations. Subsequent internal conflicts within the socialist bloc and disagreements on how to resolve them prompted China to scrutinize the Soviet Union's true intentions and its 'great power chauvinism.' These evolving dynamics progressively widened the divide between China and the Soviet Union, accentuating pre-existing tensions and eventually culminating in the dissolution of their alliance.

Keywords: Sino-Soviet relations, Cold War, international relations

1. Introduction

The relationship between China and the Soviet Union was highly complex, spanning from the years prior to 1950 through to the end of 1960. The relationship commenced with the gradual establishment of a close alliance in 1950 and progressed toward a systematic dissolution. This evolution was influenced by numerous pivotal events, including the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, the Korean War, the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and the Polish-Hungarian Incident, among others. These events had a significant impact on Sino-Soviet relations, during which the USSR consistently endeavored to manipulate the actions of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) through its soft power. The underlying disparities between China and the USSR—in terms of their developmental goals, primary objectives, and ideological stances—created an unbridgeable chasm in their alliance, ultimately setting the stage

for an inevitable breakup. This article aims to examine the positive and negative consequences of these seminal events, as well as their broader implications for the state of Sino-Soviet relations. Importantly, some of the issues were not superficial but had deeper, irreconcilable roots.

The relationship transitioned from an alliance to a state of mutual suspicion, followed by military friction. At the core of this deterioration were ideological conflicts, further compounded by Mao Zedong's conviction that the Soviets were engaging in revisionism. These ideological rifts were exacerbated by the disparate personalities of the leadership in both countries [1].

2. Establishment of Friendly Relations Between China and the Soviet Union

Before 1950, the Soviet Union had not yet severed ties with the Chinese Nationalist government. The Soviets believed that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was amenable to filling the role of the Chinese government and sought to influence the CCP through soft power, aiming to align them with the Kuomintang (KMT). Through both verbal and non-verbal pressure, the Soviet Union compelled the CCP to participate in the Chungking negotiations as a prerequisite for gaining sovereignty. Stalin harbored skepticism toward the CCP, viewing Mao Zedong as an unreliable and independent force who could potentially become 'the Tito of Asia' [2]. However, in subsequent years, these suspicions waned, due in part to Mao's introduction of a unilateral policy and international situations that favored the CCP. This shift led the Soviets to reconsider, encapsulated in the sentiment that 'a change in Stalin's position, perhaps with the Indians and the British doing us a favor,' was taking place [3].

In 1950, China and the Soviet Union formalized their relationship by signing the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, as well as a Supplementary Agreement. Some scholars argue that this arrangement was beneficial either to China alone or to both parties [4]. However, the negotiation process was far from smooth; both sides continuously amended the treaty. Although these changes were not significant, the difficulty in reaching an agreement underscored the Soviet Union's hesitancy toward the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at the time. Concessions were made by both parties, but these did not resolve underlying issues and instead sowed seeds of future discord. The Soviet Union was keen on preserving its Tsarist Russian interests in China, as stipulated in the Yalta Agreement, while China aimed to regain its sovereignty. The imbalance of power and developmental differences between the two countries contributed to an unequal treaty [4].

The Supplementary Agreement, later dissolved, further highlighted the existing sovereignty and territorial issues between the Soviet Union and the CCP. A fundamental disagreement existed in the interpretation and pursuit of certain terms. The Soviet Union advocated for unity and downplayed the importance of sovereignty, whereas the Chinese were not in favor of forming a single entity with the Soviet Union. The term 'alliance' in the treaty was included at the insistence of the Soviets, but it did not signify that the Chinese believed they would integrate entirely with the Soviet Union. This divergence in perspectives, coupled with the Soviet Union's misjudgment and lack of understanding of Chinese intentions, revealed that China's accomplishments had, in fact, built some level of confidence within the Soviet Union regarding the CCP. Nevertheless, the Sino-Soviet alliance was fundamentally unstable, primarily because the Soviet Union aimed to control the CCP, widening the rift until it became irreparable.

The year 1953 was pivotal for Sino-Soviet relations. The Korean War served as a high point in the 'honeymoon period' between the two countries, marked by joint efforts against U.S. imperialism and enhanced military cooperation. Mao Zedong's decision to deploy troops to Korea not only dispelled Stalin's earlier suspicions about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) but also fortified the political and economic foundations of the tenuous alliance [5]. This development was followed by various forms of Soviet aid. Therefore, China's military involvement in the Korean War was a significant factor in strengthening Sino-Soviet relations, as it led to the stabilization of the situation in China and attracted technical, economic, and military support from the Soviet Union. However, the aid provided

did not entirely meet the CCP's expectations in certain instances, and the inherent inequality within these assistance programs generated dissatisfaction within the CCP.

3. Rift in Sino-Soviet Relations

Between 1950 and 1959, Sino-Soviet relations saw a deepening of friendship and cooperation. The Soviet Union dispatched numerous experts to China and provided economic assistance, ostensibly reflecting a strong camaraderie between the two nations. While the Soviet Union viewed this as an exercise of its prestige and soft power, it also benefitted China by disseminating knowledge and elevating educational standards. However, the relationship between these experts and China's upper echelons remained somewhat strained. The experts often imposed Soviet-centric perspectives, neglecting local Chinese conditions, which led some Chinese political figures to become overly reliant on the Soviet Union [4]. This engendered a gradual erosion of the Chinese party's independent control, prompting the central government to advise that while the Soviet Union could be studied, it should not be idolized [6]. This led to a progressive distancing between China and the Soviet Union, as China sought to avoid becoming a Soviet satellite state.

In 1956, the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) marked a significant shift in the party's leadership under Khrushchev. During this congress, Khrushchev presented a secret report, 'On the Cult of the Individual and its Consequences,' in which he criticized Stalin's actions, particularly the cult of personality and the Great Purges. This move led to a growing rift between China and the Soviet Union, as it signaled Khrushchev's inclination to deviate from Stalinist principles [7]. Scholars from both countries have divergent views on Khrushchev's actions: some believe he was factually grounded, while others argue that he negated the achievements of the October Revolution and deviated from the Marxist-Leninist path [8]. In Mao's eyes, Khrushchev could not measure up to Stalin. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) disagreed with Khrushchev's complete repudiation of Stalin, asserting that while it was appropriate to critique the cult of personality, Stalin's merits should not be entirely dismissed. This discord further fractured the unity within the socialist camp.

In 1956, the Polish-Hungarian Incident emerged as a repercussion of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Poland sought to carve out a new path for communism, prompting Soviet attempts at intervention. However, Poland successfully resisted these efforts. This development influenced Hungary, which similarly desired a new course for communism. Yet, unlike Poland, Hungary faced two forceful military interventions and crackdowns by the Soviet Union, leading to resignations among the ruling Hungarian party and a rapid decline in its authority. Ultimately, a truce was reached, and a multi-party coalition government was formed. The New York Herald Tribune suggested that 'Soviet restraint in Poland [was] due to ties with China' [9].

During this period, the interests of both China and the Soviet Union were implicated. Generally aiming to preserve the socialist camp—common ground for both nations—China hoped the Soviet Union would mend its relations with Poland. However, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) increasingly felt that the Soviet Union had committed multiple errors in resolving the Polish-Hungarian situation. Despite differences in how to unite the socialist camp, the CCP played a crucial role in helping the USSR navigate the crises in both Poland and Hungary. The 1957 Moscow Conference further highlighted diverging perspectives. While the conference aimed to harmonize views, it became a battleground for leadership within socialist construction. The Chinese and Soviet sides had differing opinions on the subject, resulting in numerous revisions to the Chinese draft before it was eventually accepted.

Though China signed the Moscow Declaration with the aim of protecting the socialist camp as a whole, it maintained distinct viewpoints, which the Soviet Union found displeasing. This marked the onset of political differences between the two nations. On the surface, the countries demonstrated

cooperation through regional projects, yet discontent arose over Soviet proposals for military cooperation, such as a joint fleet and radio funding. The CCP's heightened sensitivity to its sovereignty in military matters became increasingly evident, laying the groundwork for future border issues, given the CCP's military sensitivities.

4. Formal Split in Sino-Soviet Relations

In 1958, amid the Taiwan Strait Crisis, the Soviet Union perceived that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had deviated from the terms of the Moscow Declaration. Khrushchev publicly criticized China's Great Leap Forward and the People's Communalization Movement—initiatives that the CCP took great pride in—during his discussions with Poland. He argued that China's developmental approach did not align with Soviet expectations [10]. This stance provoked significant resentment from the Chinese side and further strained Sino-Soviet relations.

The rift between the two nations became definitive in 1959, marked by disagreements over Taiwan, border issues, and the Great Leap Forward [2]. Soft power played a nuanced role in these dynamics, both overtly and subtly [11]. Soft power can emanate from disparities in developmental stages, thus engendering hierarchical relationships. While power can also be derived from supply and demand relationships, it tends to wane once these dynamics change. The decline in the Soviet Union's soft power was also linked to its diminishing prestige. Great power chauvinism is untenable without the supporting framework of soft power to persuade the subordinate entity to stay aligned. Soviet scholars have posited that Stalin served as the central gravitational force in Soviet politics, likening him to the sun around which the entire Soviet political universe revolved. A key aspect of the inequality between the two nations lies in their differing perceptions of equality: while the Soviet Union viewed the relationship as equal, China did not share this perspective. The two sides also diverged in their assessment of what was beneficial or detrimental for the other, further complicating their relationship.

5. Conclusion

In the early 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initially adopted a one-sided policy to secure its domestic interests and those of the party. This policy emerged partly from the hesitancy to form an alliance based on shared ideologies. Though this resulted in a brief dependence on the Soviet Union, the underlying disparities between the two nations could not be overlooked. The CCP harbored aspirations for independence and autonomy, which only became overt when the Soviet Union attempted military intervention in China.

Before 1950, relations between China and the Soviet Union were tenuous. The CCP sought Soviet support independently. In 1950, both nations set aside their previous differences and signed the Sino-Soviet Friendship and Alliance Mutual Assistance Treaty amidst mutual suspicion. This act served as a temporary bridge over the existing rift. In 1953, China's involvement in the Korean War further solidified the Soviet Union's trust, prompting a steady stream of Soviet supplies to China. However, the true intentions of the Soviet Union became increasingly apparent as the relationship's inherent inequality emerged. For instance, Soviet technological, economic, and military assistance imposed an undue burden on China, eroding the CCP's confidence in the alliance.

The Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956 marked a pivotal moment and heralded the beginning of the ideological split between the CCP and the USSR. Post-1956, differences in problem-solving approaches within the socialist camp prompted China to reassess the nature and intentions of the Soviet Union. China became increasingly aware of the Soviet Union's 'great-power chauvinism' and began to reconsider the feasibility of cooperation. This led to an awakening sense of sovereignty on the Chinese side and signaled that Sino-Soviet relations were nearing a breaking point.

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