

# *A Rift in Red: Sino-Soviet Split and the Deconstruction of the Cold War Ideological Dichotomy*

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**Abstract:** The bipolar worldview that prevailed in the Cold War era has been dominating people's understanding of the world back then and the world today. The dichotomy between capitalism and communism in the Cold War era does not simply divide the international order into a bipolar world as it seems. The very notion of defining global order by the divergence of ideologies and poles is biased and misleading since it often overlooks the influence of small states and other players that indirectly influence or even challenge the decisions and the authority of great powers. Countries with the same ideology may have conflicts and even develop into direct opposition. Evaluating the incidents in the "communist sphere" of the Cold War, the author speculates that states were orientating based on self-interests instead of ideological coherence. This paper aims to review the process and the causes of the Sino-Soviet Split and its significance to the Cold War specifically on how the incidents between two of the biggest communist nations refreshed people's perception of the Cold War that categorized the world and states into two sides based on ideology similarities and differences among nations.

**Keywords:** International Relations, Sino-Soviet Split, Cold War, Communism

## 1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China was born in 1947 out of the turbulence of history, the 2nd Sino-Japanese War, the Cold War, and the Chinese Civil War. Led by the Chinese Communist Party and the supreme leader Mao, the new nation stood before the bipolar world divided by the "Iron Curtain." The European Imperial Powers were devastated and exhausted economically and politically by the two world wars. Aerial bombardments from both the Axis powers and the Allied powers had destroyed much of critical infrastructures including railroad construction, defense industries, and supply chains and reservations for petroleum, oil, and lubrication. Such devastation led to Europe's reliance on the U.S. for post-war reconstructions and funding, and the Soviet Union, on the contrary, had its economy moderately growing following the 5 Years Plans. In 1948, U.S. President Harry Truman signed the Economic Recovery Act, also known as the Marshall Plan, and a year later in 1949, the Soviet Union established the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance, known as COMECON, which linked Eastern country-blocs economically. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the U.S. were both striving to exert influence globally. However, geopolitically and ideologically speaking, China, another communist state, played a rather nuanced role on the world stage in this era. China was ideologically in accord with the Soviet Union, but the

friendship brought by the ideological resemblance soon plunged, evolving into rivalry; China later re-approached with Soviet Union's major opponent—the United States, the sovereign that represents the “evil” capitalistic society. China, as a prominent actor on the international stage, represents a deviating stance of the global order—it sides with neither capitalist nor communist hegemon; it plays based on its interests and needs. China is not the only one utilizing such a stance—Vietnam is another example—but China is certainly the first to employ it. In the following paragraphs, the author goes through the process of the Sino-Soviet Split in detail following chronological order and analyzes how China steers its policies and decisions on a subtle, sophisticated posture that flexibly benefits itself. The paragraphs will go through 1) The Early Relationship, 2) The Turning Point in 1953, 3) The Exacerbation, and 4) Analysis in order to assess the intact historical events and their influences.

## **2. Early Relationship**

### **2.1. The Wake of the Red Giant**

In the year of 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was established in Shanghai under the support of the Bolsheviks and the Communist International (Comintern). The relationship between Chinese communists and the Soviet Union was strengthened throughout the Second Sino-Japanese War. In 1937, under the temporary alliance between CCP and the Kuomintang (KMT) against the Japanese invasion led by Chiang Kai-Shek, although the Soviet Union was sending aircraft and economic aid to the Republic of China nominally after signing the Sino-Soviet Nonaggression Pact, the war in China did evolve into another chessboard between Soviet Union and the United States with China (latter on the CCP) backed by the Soviet Union and Japan supported by the United States. This proxy opposition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union continued throughout the Chinese Civil War from 1945-1949, ending with the KMT's retreat to Taiwan and Mao's establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, a one-party state ruled by the CCP. In this era, the PRC was under the direct influence of the USSR. The ideological similarity this new nation possesses with the Soviet Union has marked its path toward building a communist society where everyone is equal and also the question of either integrating itself into the communist international order with the Soviet Union as the communist hegemon or establishing its own order in the future.

### **2.2. Industrial “Redprints”**

The prominent mission of a new nation is to consolidate its power and establish the basis of its economy. Nine months before the establishment of the PRC, Mao met with Mikoyan, a Politburo member from the Soviet Union, requesting loans, machines, and all sorts of necessities in the name of industrializing and modernizing the new revolutionary China and its economy. This project of the Soviet Union aiding China was later known as the “156 project” [1]. Placing a strong emphasis on mineral and heavy industries development, the 156 project introduced experts, machinery, and loans from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe into China. Along with China's first Five Years' Plan, the 156 project invigorate the Chinese economy after the turmoil of the Civil War and the Second Sino-Japanese War. The economic bonds established between the Soviet Union and China further deepened the diplomatic, political, and economic “friendship” between these two nations. Although the Soviet Union did not subjugate Chinese political agenda and autonomy under the control of the Soviet Union as the Eastern European countries that had Soviet political infiltration in the parties, the project was the manifestation of China's reliance on the Soviet Union to initiate and support its economy, proving that the Soviet Union was capable of influencing China with its industrial, technological advancements.

### 3. Turning Point in 1953

#### 3.1. Red Giants' Involvement in the Korean War

Although China has declared itself as the legitimate descendant of the Chinese civilization that has 3500 years of written history and has influenced Asia throughout history, China's sphere of influence in the region no longer exists after the devastation of the war fought with imperial Japan. Japan has created its own Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a pan-Asian union that imperial Japan once wanted to establish, covering Manchuria, Taiwan, the Indonesia Island chain, and the Korean Peninsula. As this massive imperial empire started to collapse post-World War II, the Korean Civil War started in 1950, when the North Koreans and South Koreans were trying to lay claims over the power vacuum. Following the constant victory of the North Korean People's Army against the Republic of Korea's Army, U.S. President Harry Truman did not stand by. Afraid of the potential ideological domino effect of this war on the nations around, the U.S. pushed a resolution through the United Nations Security Council successfully, recruited an international army that protected the remaining force of the Republic of Korea's Army, and implemented a counterattack. After MacArthur pushed the North Korean army back to the 38th parallel, his decision to cross the parallel and launch a full-scale attack dragged the Chinese into this proxy conflict. Entering North Korea, the UN troops soon took over Pyongyang and then the Yalu River that border with China in October 1950.

Evidence from the manuscript of Zhou En Lai, the first Premier of the People's Republic of China, claims that "China's decision-making at this time was shaped and influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the Soviet Union [2]." Although facing the same enemy, the two Red Giants did not put their trust in each other. The Korean War can be seen as the trigger of the turning point of the Sino-Soviet relationship, for it inflicted pressure on both China and the Soviet Union in different degrees and aspects, making the two supreme leaders, Mao and Stalin, distrust each other. "Stalin initially allowed Kim II Sung to launch the Korean War [3]," but as MacArthur launched a counterattack and the North Korean troops' condition deteriorated, Stalin once thought of giving up support to Korea. However, for China, Korea's stability and ideological resemblance were crucial to China's future development and security. China, agreeing to support the North Koreans, requested the Soviets to provide air support and cover, but Stalin refused [4], leaving China to support North Korea by sending troops exposed to U.S. airstrikes. This war, initially instigated by Stalin, pushed China into a dilemma, considering the fragile Chinese economy that depended on the USSR and the strained Chinese military in the 1950s.

#### 3.2. The Fall of the Giant and the Criticisms

In March of 1953, Stalin died due to a stroke. The next supreme leader of the Soviet Union was Khrushchev, whose political doctrines and proposals directly conflicted with his predecessor and Mao, embodied in his idea—De-Stalinization. His renowned speech "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences" not only harshly criticized his predecessor [5], but it also acted as a criticism of Mao, who also practiced the Cult of Personality domestically in China. Khrushchev also publicly ridiculed Mao for his communist experiment with the People's Commune and The Great Leap Forward, revealing the divergence between these two leaders' interpretations of communist ideologies [6]. Mao, on the other hand, did not stay taciturn. Marking the Soviet Union under Khrushchev's control as a revisionist Soviet, Mao claims that revisionists brought the "trend that distorts, manipulates, and denies the fundamental principles of Marxism and is a manifestation of opportunism," deviating from the true Marxism-Leninism and ideological compromising with the west. As Mao defined the Soviet Union as revisionist, his action marks the opposition between the two communist states and the continuing rivalry relationship between these two nations. The theoretical and ideological

interpretation disagreement will eventually evolve into physical, border, and diplomatic tensions and conflicts in the future. The ideological divergence would impel China to seek maximum flexibility within the USSR order and to establish the Chinese order in the future.

## **4. Exacerbation**

### **4.1. The Hungarians and the Aggressor**

Denouncing the crimes of Stalin, Khrushchev's speech had agitated the communist world. Starting from Poland, where a workers' uprising for political reforms was ruthlessly suppressed by the military, nearby communist countries' unrest was also growing. Hungary, as well as other communist blocs in Eastern Europe, were resentful of the corrupting Soviet economic models that resulted in resource mismanagements, causing shortages in supply; the cumbersome war debts that COMECON imposed upon the communist blocs, which once accounted for between 19 to 22 percent of the national annual income; and the domestic hyperinflation due to post-war depreciation of Hungarian currency. Thus, it can be concluded that the Soviet's economic system, unlike the West, was exploitative and egocentric to the benefit of the Soviet Union. Supporting the Poles and demanding domestic reforms, the workers and intellectuals in Hungary sought to alter the declining trend of the Hungarian economy and the repressive government through civil disobedience and attempted to transform the movement from civil unrest to a revolution. However, "the revolution did not have much time to develop; the Hungarian Workers Party was quickly dissolved and replaced by Hungarian Socialist Workers Party [7]," a party led by the Soviet's puppet—Janos Kadar. Later on, the Soviet Union launched an attack on Budapest and controlled Czepele, the stronghold of the resisting working class. This suppression probably left an aggressive impression of the Soviet Union on China, leading to Mao's precaution against a potential invasion from the Soviet Union that resembled this revolution.

### **4.2. The Moscow Summit**

In 1960, Moscow hosted a meeting, inviting delegates from 81 communist states' countries, to discuss "the character of our epoch, problems of war and peace, paths of transition to Socialism, and unity of the international communist movement and rules which regulate the relations among fraternal parties [8]." The meeting, in fact, was an attempt from the Soviet Union to reaffirm its influence over the communist order it had established, and especially over China in order to prevent large-scale defiance of communist states against the Soviet Union. As the Soviet Union "insist that [China] must accept democratic centralism and stop factionalism within the international communist movement [8]," the Chinese rebutted with charges of "opportunist and revisionist" against the Soviet Union within the meeting, which displayed a distinct divergence in ideological interpretation and Chinese direct challenge to the authority of the communist international society. This robust summit also manifested China's long-term ambition of assuming the Soviet Union's role of being the communist hegemony as China rejected Polycentrism, the advocacy of the existence of multiple guiding ideological authorities in the Communist international order. The summit's attempt to subjugate China under the Soviet's control implanted the notion of forestalling and deterring the Soviet Union in Mao's mind before the Soviet Union could launch invasion an resembling Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

### **4.3. Uprisings, Turmoil, and Border Clashes**

Border disputes between the Soviet Union and China have long been an issue since the 19th century "unequal treaties," called by the Chinese side, which transferred the ownership of outer Manchuria to Russia. After China regained Outer Manchuria, it also laid claim over islands in the three rivers that flow through the Sino-Soviet border in Manchuria, namely the Argun River, the Amur River,

and the Ussuri River. The occupation of the islands on these three islands was not attributed to any intention of evoking warfare. Inversely, the action was an act to prevent potential war between the two communist countries by deterrence.

Prior to the border conflicts, in 1968, the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia to intervene in Czechoslovakia's process of democratization, which was an ideological threat to the Soviet Union's influence over the Eastern European communist state bloc, also known as the Prague Spring. In fact, the Invasion of Czechoslovakia was the embodiment of Brezhnev's Doctrine, which stated that "[communist blocs] cannot depart from Marxism-Leninism principles...Czechoslovakia's detachment from the socialist community would have come into conflict with its own vital interests and would have been detrimental to the other socialist states [9]." Mao interpreted this doctrine as a statement that claimed the Soviet Union's right to overthrow any communist governments that were diverging from the Soviet interpretation of communist ideology, which is, as Mao comprehended, a direct threat to China's sovereignty. Thus, Mao initiated a massive scale of propaganda in China, accusing the Soviets as "imperialistic" and "revisionist." Afraid of the Soviet Union using Brezhnev's Doctrine as an ideological justification for an invasion, Mao's decision to invade Zhenbao island and other islands such as Tielieketi was a deterrence to the Soviet Union. According to Arkady Shevchenko [10], "The Politburo was terrified that the Chinese might make a mass intrusion into Soviet territory." Although the Soviet Union possessed nuclear weapons, the massive population of Chinese and the expanse Sino-Soviet border would certainly create a troublesome conflict for the Soviet Union. Thus, the Zhenbao island disputes can be seen as a small-scale deterrence or warning sign that China addressed to Soviet Union in regard to its self-assertion over Czechoslovakia.

#### **4.4. Re-approachment with the U.S.**

From Mao's view, the Soviet Union was entering an offensive manner in 1968 and the U.S. was in a relatively defensive manner as Nixon and Kissinger sought to alleviate trade controls between the U.S. and China. For Mao, the Soviet Union was a larger threat to China than the U.S. was at the time due to geopolitical tension. For the Nixon administration, China, a nation that had gained nuclear weapons in 1964, could become a strategic ally in Asia, checking the Soviet Union. This officially turned the tide of the Cold War for this event broke the bipolar world order shaped by the USSR and the U.S. Not necessarily representing the exacerbation of the Sino-Soviet relationship, the establishment of constant diplomatic relationship between China and the U.S., and the gaining of the seat in the Security Council were, however, signs of Soviet's loss of influence over China, and China's will to establish a relationship with the U.S. to counter the USSR.

### **5. Analysis of the Divergence of Communism Interpretation and Its Influence on the Cold War**

Every sovereign has its own "philosophy", or in other words, a system of theories that serve as a parameter to justify its existence and anchor its position in the international society relative to other nations and to distinguish itself from other states. Recalling the arms race between European imperial powers and the alliance system created by Otto Von Bismarck, the "philosophy of sovereigns," in this era was featured with two core values: nationalism and balance of power. Nationalism not only serves as a philosophical basis for a nation's state-building and institutional establishment, but it also formulates the foreign policies of this nation. For example, navigated by Otto Von Bismarck, German nationalism facilitated the Unification of Germany. Meanwhile, nationalism also set the tone of Germany's foreign policy toward France. This helped the Germans to identify their identity relative to the French in this multipolar era. Similar to the Cold War era, the "philosophy" shifted from nationalism that defines a nation in terms of ethnicity, language, or culture—some sort of shared



heritage—to the ideological dichotomy between Communism and Capitalism. This rather implastic, monotonous parameter of a nation's philosophy was utilized by the Bolsheviks to overthrow the Tsar and establish its institutions, facilitating its state-building process as a justification. In the Cold War era, Communism served as an orientation for foreign policies, or more precisely, the foreign influence of the Soviet Union. Designed by the Soviet Union, communism, or communists, had become a collective philosophical basis or identity for the subjects under the USSR's sphere of influence. As Hartmann noted in his lecture: Crankshaw thinks that "Russians prioritize communists before Russians as their identity, and they impose communists' identity among the states under their influence; but the Chinese prioritize Chinese before communists as their identity [11]." Thus, the argument here is that: China's divergence from the Soviet Union's communist doctrine marks the denial of the communist order that serves the interests of the USSR and the denial of a bipolar dichotomy of the world.

Overviewing the course of the Sino-Soviet Split, one can extract how the People's Republic of China, derived from the CCP, was born as a Soviet-influenced party, and then gradually retrieved its identity as Chinese and pursued its interests. In Section 2.1, it was explained that the CCP's establishment was based on Bolshevik and Comintern support. Having no real political or military power, the CCP was subjugated under the KMT. Although not necessarily gaining statehood in the early years, CCP was later utilized by the Soviet Union as a countering deputy against the U.S.-backed-KMT. However, after the CCP won the civil war against the KMT, controlling the mainland, it started to develop its political agenda that helped China to initiate its post-war reconstructions and economy, meanwhile reducing reliance on the Soviet Union, which was manifested in the 156 project and the attainment of the atomic bomb in 1964. The Korean War, which featured Mao and Stalin's mistrust, further demonstrated the idea that China was on a parallel level with the Soviet Union, having the capacity to ask for air cover and prioritize its interest and security regarding the bordered war. Later on, as the relationship between China and the USSR deteriorated, the ideological resemblance diverged into antithetic interpretations that served their own national interests.

"The Cold War, from an American intellectual point of view, would probably weigh ideology more than national interests [11]," Professor Carleton said. However, the Sino-Soviet Split had denied this very notion, at least for the communist order that the Soviets built.

## 6. Conclusion

Overviewing the course of Sino-Soviet relations' establishment and exacerbation, the paper evaluates how the international order has broken the bipolar worldview defined by ideological adversaries. CCP's interpretation of the communist doctrine is substantially a challenge to the USSR's interpretation of the communist doctrine. This, along with other political unrest in the communist states in this era, suggests that ideology is a mere instrument that justifies the interest-orientated actions of a state actor in the international society. While great powers such as the US and the USSR took a leading role in utilizing ideology to exert their global influence, relatively weak actors or small actors either took such instruments to align themselves with great power for security, support, or other benefits; or interpret and adapt the ideology to justify their challenge to the traditional authorities or to further expand their power and influence. The paper attempted to include academic sources and documents from the Chinese, Russian, and the Western world point of view. However, it is limited in terms of developing a comprehensive argument and explaining the "Cold War mentality" and the "bipolarity of the Cold War" in detail. These two concepts could be further discussed and utilized as foils to compare China's strategic and unique leverage in changing these two concepts.

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