# THE SINO-SOVIET BORDER DISPUTE IN THE 1970'S

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## CHAPTER TWO: FRONTIER CONFRONTATION IN THE 1970s

Entering the 1970s, the most striking feature of the Sino-Soviet boundary dispute has been frontier confrontation. Having accelerated in the latter half of the 1960s, this confrontation was in full swing in the past decade. Military buildup[1] and border incidents,[2] two expressions of this confrontation, have testified to the fact that the Sino-Soviet border is not only a sensitive weather-vane reflecting the boundary policies of the two countries, but also one of the most heavily guarded lines in the world.

Military strength, undeniably, plays an active role in quarrels of a territorial nature; it can be a factor of crucial importance in dictating the behaviour of the adversaries involved. The stronger party, in order to have its own will to prevail, seldom fails to exploit any imbalance of strength. In a sense, the military might of a particular country could be the very corner-stone of its foreign policy, especially in regard to boundary disputes.

Throughout the 1970s, while Sino-Soviet border negotiations remained stalemated, a rapid buildup of military forces along the frontier regions of the two countries took place, bringing with it a substantial threat to the national security of the weaker party. Against this background, border incidents, which were still frequent and sometimes bloody, appear to have constituted another dimension for assessing the kinds of boundary policies the two adversaries pursued.

In this chapter, an attempt will be made, first, to gauge the degree of the military buildup along the Sino-Soviet frontier and the impact it had on the frontier considerations of the two sides. Secondly, an effort will be made to record and analyze border incidents that have been documented by the two governments. It is hoped that such an examination and analysis might provide some answers for the following questions. How strong is the military presence along the Sino-Soviet Border? How frequent and on what scale were the border incidents that occurred? Is there an organic link between military strength and the frontier incidents? What part did military capability play in the overall boundary dispute between the PRC and the USSR? Is there any pattern which emerges?

### Military Buildup Along The Sino-Soviet Frontier

In the 1950s, the boundary between the PRC and the USSR appeared one of the quiet frontiers of the world, though Beijing and Moscow obviously failed to clarify their border line. "The traditional, i.e., long-term disposition of Soviet and Chinese forces along the border was roughly balanced in numbers of men."[3] In the eastern sector of the frontier, the Chinese had an edge, while in the western section the Soviets had an obvious advantage.

In the beginning of the 1960s, as we have seen, border incidents became a



common phenomenon while the general relations between the PRC and the USSR deteriorated rapidly. Nevertheless, it was not until the Ili incident of April 1962 that both Beijing and Moscow apparently began to reinforce their garrisons in the border areas.[4] In the ensuing years, further reinforcements of China's Xinjiang region and the Soviet Far East were reported, but the military disposition on both sides remained defense-oriented. The Chinese kept about twenty-four divisions in the military districts adjoining the border, in addition to some units of border guards. The Soviets only maintained some twelve to fourteen regular divisions, apart from their border guards. Since "China traditionally presented no significant strategic threat, having been either weak, friendly, or neutral,"[5] it was believed that only about two-thirds of these Soviets divisions were first-class, or in combat-readiness, while the remainder belonged to a lower category or were not fully manned.

The failure of the 1964 border talks between the PRC and the USSR, which apparently guaranteed a gloomy future for the boundary dispute, undoubtedly caused great concern in both countries. This seems to have been an important turning point in the development of a large-scale military buildup along the border. In the latter half of the 1960s, "both states began to bring their existing forces to a higher state of readiness, to equip them with better and more weaponry, and to augment their numbers, if only marginally. The Soviets seem to have been the more active party in this process."[6] As K.G. Lieberthal pointed out,

> since 1966...Moscow has made a series of major decisions to prolong, broaden, and make more permanent the size and nature of the Soviet military presence along its border with China.[7]

In 1966, reports appeared of the transfer of highly trained Soviet forces from East Europe to the Soviet Far East. These troops were provided with the latest equipment such as missiles, and surface-to-surface nuclear tipped rockets.

Another major aspect of the Soviet move was the Kremlin's decision to station strong military units on Mongolian soil whose border with China the Soviets had pledged to protect. From 1967 on, divisions of Soviet troops, supplemented by tank and missile units, began taking permanent bases along the Sino-Mongolian boundary, only a few hundred kilometres away from China's capital, Beijing.[8]

Nevertheless, it was not until after the bloody incidents over the Chenpao (Damansky) Island in the spring of 1969 that both China and the Soviet Union significantly increased their military strength — armored formations, rocket troops, missiles, nuclear weapons, and air power — along their border as well as along the 2,500-mile frontier between China and the People's Republic of Mongolia. By the end of 1969, the Kremlin was believed to have augmented its troops to the area east of Lake Baikal from

fifteen divisions to twenty-one divisions, including some eight tank divisions.[9] By 1971, Soviet regular combat forces along the Sino-Soviet border had increased to about thirty divisions, of which three were in Mongolia.[10] In addition to long-range and intermediate-range strategic nuclear strike forces, the Soviet Union has now deployed many hundreds of tactical nuclear missiles and rockets along the eastern sector of the Sino-Soviet boundary. One type of such weapon systems is the solid-fuel mobile nuclear missile known as Scaleboard.[11] This system is mounted on a tank chassis, and has a range of about eight hundred kilometres, carrying a nuclear warhead of over one megaton, the equivalent of a million tons of TNT.

On the Chinese side, reinforcement of their military position also took place but not on a similar scale. The disastrous "Cultural Revolution," launched in 1966, was followed by years of internal turmoil, making progress in production and technological innovation almost entirely impossible. The People's Liberation Army (the PLA) was called on to share civil administration duties for the sake of keeping public order. In 1976, when the "Cultural Revolution" officially ended, the country's economy had been brought to the verge of total collapse. The bitter relationship with the Soviet Union had long since cut off China's only channel of armament importation. The Chinese had to rely mainly on weaponry acquired in the 1950s and on the few additional items they could produce themselves.

In spite of the lack of adequate equipment, the Chinese tried, however, to augment the numbers of troops in their frontier military districts, especially after March, 1969. By the end of that year, the Chinese were believed to have deployed about 28 regular divisions in their Beijing and Shenyang Military Districts, scattered through the entire area from Beijing north to the eastern sector of the Sino-Soviet boundary.[12] Only four regular divisions were positioned in Xinjiang. After the Soviet Union signed a twenty-year defense pact with Mongolia in January 1966, and especially after Soviet crack troops moved into Mongolia with missile capability, the Chinese increasingly felt the growing magnitude of the direct menace to their capital, Beijing. By 1970, the PRC had apparently increased its troops in Inner Mongolia to four regular divisions, in addition to border guards.[13] In late 1970, another four divisions were reportedly added to the Beijing-Shenyang Military Districts, bringing the total of Chinese troops to about thirty-two divisions in these two districts.[14] In short, by the beginning of the 1970s, the Chinese were believed to have disposed some forty regular divisions in the military districts adjacent to the Soviet Union. On the other side of the border, the Soviet Union was estimated to have deployed some thirty regular divisions.

Although the Soviets were outnumbered in terms of manpower, Moscow enjoyed an absolute supremacy over Beijing in terms of nuclear strike



capability. Chinese sources indicate that "Between 1965 and 1972...the Soviet Union deployed 150 new intercontinental missiles each year."[15] In addition to those in Siberia, many of the Soviet ICBMs based in Europe could be targeted against major centres in China. Furthermore, medium-range nuclear missiles, too, had been placed by the Soviets not only along the Sino-Soviet border, but also the Sino-Mongolian boundary.[16] Immediately after the Chenpao incidents of 1969, the Kremlin more than once made it clear to Beijing that the USSR would definitely go to nuclear weapons in the event of a full-scale Sino-Soviet war.[17]

In contrast, China's limited nuclear devices appear to have been quite vulnerable. Though it was estimated in 1972 that the PRC had the capability to produce about 300 Hiroshima-sized (20 kilotons) nuclear bombs or warheads,[18] its striking capabilities were greatly limited by its outdated delivery systems. Apart from some Soviet-built TU-16, TU-4 and IL-28 Light bombers, the PRC had no other bombers able to carry its nuclear warheads. Although China had reportedly deployed about twenty operational nuclear-tipped missiles of medium-range (up to 1,000 miles) in northwestern and northeastern regions it seems clear that they in no way could counter-balance the Soviet might.[19]

In the early 1970s, therefore, the odds in this frontier confrontation appear to have greatly favoured the Soviet Union. The Chinese repeatedly suggested, a mutual reduction of both parties' military presence in the regions concerned. They explained that they had no intention of resolving the border dispute through the use or threat of force, nor had they the ability to do so. The Soviets might, at the time, not have felt any threat from China militarily, but they may have seen in China's immense population a real potential threat, should the Chinese continue to hold to their position with regard to the boundary dispute. Therefore, the Kremlin appears to have felt that the best way to win the dispute was to maintain a strong military presence in the area to back their position at the negotiating table. As a result, over the rest of the decade, the military buildup continued both quantitatively and qualitatively while border negotiations were stalemated. The sharp imbalance of military capabilities became an increasingly serious problem to the Chinese.

According to British sources, by the end of 1979 the Kremlin had augmented the numbers of its modernized regular troops to forty-six divisions along the border, including six tank divisions.[20] Japan's White Paper on Defense of 1980 estimated that the USSR had placed one fourth of its ground forces along the Sino-Soviet frontier, of which about thirty-four divisions or 350,000 regulars were located in the area from Lake Baikal to Vladivostok.[21] Chinese sources indicate that, in addition to Soviet regular divisions, the Soviet Union had also built up numerous missile units and air-force bases. Therefore, the total accountable number of Soviet forces in the

armaments predominate, the military dispositions on the Chinese side of the border, which were obviously defensive in nature, could generate no real threat to the Soviets. On the other hand, however, the USSR has acquired an absolute military preponderance, with threatening offensive capabilities. As K.G. Lieberthal pointed out in 1978 that

> it can be said with confidence that over the past eight years the USSR has developed a capacity — either independently or in league with states it has cultivated — to menace China from the east and south as well as from the north. While the major land threat remains concentrated in China's north, naval and missile assaults can now be launched from around the eastern and southern peripheries. Thus, Moscow has combined its diplomatic overtures to Peking with highly visible and clearly threatening actions to bring military force to bear in this relationship.[36]

Against this background, a close examination of the border incidents which took place in the 1970s will lead to a clearer understanding of the respective boundary policies pursued by the two great adversaries.

## Border Incidents in the 1970s

After the series of armed clashes in the spring of 1969, both the Chinese and the Soviets seem to have realized that such large scale frontier strife, if continued, could eventually bring the two countries to a general war which neither side could possibly afford. It seems, therefore, that their common desire of averting war led to the meeting between the late Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai and Soviet Premier A. Kosygin at an airport near Beijing on September 11, 1969. Apart from reaching an understanding on the resumption of border talks, the two Premiers also agreed, as was recently disclosed, that "China and the Soviet Union should not go to war over the boundary question."[38] They also consented to the disengagement of troops of both countries in the disputed areas.[39] As a result, during the following months, border incidents were almost eliminated.

Moscow, however, subsequently refused to recognize and implement the disengagement agreement, or the plan of withdrawing the troops of both parties from all the disputed areas. Therefore, further frontier strife appeared inevitable, especially in view of the lack of success of the border talks, and the increasing military buildup along the border.

According to various sources, in the past decade, minor incidents, which were recorded but not made public by the authorities concerned, could amount to as many as hundreds of cases annually.[40] In the eastern section of the boundary, the Soviets still claimed that the border line should run along the Chinese banks of the Heilong/Amur and Wusuli/Ussuri Rivers. They tried, as they did in the latter half of the 1960s, to restrain the Chinese



farmers from carrying out production on the islands which were situated on the Chinese side of the main channels.[41] Nevertheless, incidents were also frequent in the western sector of the boundary where more than fifteen pieces of disputed territory were located.[42] The unique character of these frontier clashes is that they tend to have inseparable links with the strength of each side's military position, as well as with their approach to the settlement of the boundary dispute as a whole. This assumption will become clear when we examine the three major incidents that have been made public by both sides, namely the helicopter incident of 1974, the Wusuli/Ussuri clash of 1978, and the Tersadi incident of 1979.

## The Helicopter Incident of 1974-75

The helicopter incident was sparked, on March 14, 1974, when a Soviet military helicopter, carrying three service men on board, crossed the Sino-Soviet boundary in the western sector of the Sino-Soviet border. It flew 70 kilometres deep into China's Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region, and made landings several times in Habahe County. The Chinese frontier guards and the militia forces eventually succeeded in capturing both the helicopter and its crew.[43]

The event was not made public until a week later, when the Telegraphic Agency of the Soviet Union (*TASS*) bluntly charged Beijing with acting contrary to international practice by holding the Soviet crew and the aircraft. Moscow asserted that the crew was on a "first aid" mission, sent to pick up a "seriously ill service man."[44] The helicopter "encountered difficult meteorological conditions, lost its bearings and, having used up its fuel supply, made a forced landing near the border in CPR* territory."[45] Moscow also declared that the crew "reported the actual situation by radio to their airport," and that the USSR had informed the PRC of the incident as early as March 15, 1974.[46]

Beijing, on the other hand, apparently did not trust the Soviet explanation, and reacted strongly. On March 23, the Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yu Zhan, summoned. V.S. Tolstikov, the Soviet Ambassador in Beijing, and personally delivered a note of protest to the Government of the USSR. According to the Chinese note, the seized helicopter was an MI-4 armed reconnaissance craft, and

> thorough investigations by the Chinese side established that the helicopter carried neither medical personnel on a "first aid" mission, nor any medicine or medical equipment; instead, it carried arms and ammunition and reconnaissance equipment.[47]

Beijing also revealed that

> Documents found on board and the activities of the three military personnel prove that they were instructed to carry out a "special