

THE SINO-SOVIET BORDER DISPUTE IN THE 1970's

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opt for a harder line toward the PRC."⁵³ But essence, the Chinese appeared not to have given up their conviction that it was primarily the aggressive border policy of the USSR that led to the frontier unrest. The Wusuli/Ussuri incident of May 1978 was yet another manifestation of this fact.⁵⁴

The Wusuli/Ussuri Incident of May, 1978

The Wusuli/Ussuri incident of May 9, 1978, involved eighteen Soviet armed motorboats, another military helicopter and about thirty Soviet troops, who had penetrated as far as four kilometres into China's side of the border in the lower part of the Wusuli/Ussuri River.

The incident became public on May 11, 1978, when the Chinese delivered a note of protest to the Soviet Government. In the note, it was disclosed that about thirty Soviet troops crossed the Wusuli/Ussuri on the morning of May 9, and landed on the Chinese bank of the river;

They chased and tried to round up Chinese inhabitants, shooting continually and wounding a number of them.⁵⁵

The Chinese pointed out that

The above-mentioned atrocities of the Soviet troops constitute an organized military provocation against China occurring at a time when the Sino-Soviet boundary negotiations have just resumed...The Chinese Government hereby lodges a strong protest with the Soviet Government against this and demands that the Soviet side make an apology, punish the culprits who created this incident of bloodshed and guarantee that no similar incident will occur in future.⁵⁶

The next day, the fact that an incident had occurred was confirmed by the Soviets. In their responding note, the Soviets, while admitting that their troops had crossed the boundary illegally, described the incident somewhat differently. It was asserted that

On the night of May 8, 1978, while searching for a dangerous armed criminal, a group of Soviet naval border guards, mistaking the Chinese bank for the Soviet Krestovsky Islands, landed on and went a short distance into Chinese territory. The Soviet servicemen took no actions with respect to Chinese residents but, realizing that they had inadvertently entered Chinese territory, left immediately.⁵⁷

Regardless of the reliability of the Soviet statement, it was rather an unusual approach for the Kremlin to acknowledge that the incident was initiated by the Soviet side, and for it to express its regrets. Why did Moscow act this way on this occasion? The question as to whether or not the incident itself, and the subsequent Soviet admission, was part of the Kremlin's design to put more pressure on the Chinese at the negotiating table has remained unanswered so far, but that was exactly what the Chinese suspected at the

time. No matter what the Soviet intention was, the Kremlin's excuse of "inadvertent entry" was apparently unacceptable in Beijing.

Five days later, Yu Zhan, Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister, summoned the Soviet Ambassador, V.S. Tolstikov, and stated that China "cannot agree to the Soviet distortion of the facts for self-justification."⁵⁸ In order to verify the event, Yu Zhan delivered another note to the Soviet side containing a quite detailed record of the incident. It was revealed that:

A Soviet helicopter intruded into China's airspace around 7 o'clock local time on the morning of May 9 and kept circling the area for reconnaissance till after 11 o'clock. At the same time, 18 Soviet military boats intruded into China's waters, and about 30 fully armed Soviet troops equipped with walkie-talkies landed on the Chinese bank and did not embark and leave until 10:30.⁵⁹

Yu Zhan emphasized that:

the Soviet troops shot at more than 30 Chinese inhabitants, firing more than 100 rounds of ammunition, and wounded a number of them.⁶⁰

Therefore, the incident was obviously

a military provocation organized by the Soviet side, a bloody incident created by Soviet troops, and a demonstration of the Soviet policy of hostility to China and of threat or use of force against China.⁶¹

The Soviets, however, did not respond to Yu Zhan's May 17th statement, and the episode passed from the scene quietly. Whether or not the Wusuli/Ussuri incident was actually designed to exert more pressure on the Chinese only the Soviets themselves could tell. But, in view of their absolute military preponderance along the border, the Soviet intrusion seems to have left such an impression. This strong impression, nevertheless, almost became a conviction in the summer of 1979 when another bloody incident occurred in the western section of the Sino-Soviet boundary.

The Tersadi Incident of July 16, 1979

The border clash of July 16, 1979, took place in the Tersadi area, Tacheng County, Xinjiang Uigur Autonomous Region, involving shooting, wounding, and killing. The two casualties were Chinese, and both of them fell into the hands of the Soviets. Immediately after the incident, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Chinese Embassy in Moscow of the following:

four armed Chinese servicemen violated the USSR's border and intruded into Soviet territory for a distance of one kilometre; as a result of a clash with a Soviet border detail, one of the Chinese violators...was killed, and a second was wounded and is now undergoing treatment in the USSR.⁶²

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