

What were the consequences of the Sino-Soviet split for the Cold War?

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15 March 2016

The Sino-Soviet split was a period of worsening relations between the USSR and the People's Republic of China, ostensibly over disagreements in their interpretation and implementation of Marxist theory. As such, it can be seen to have had consequences in four main spheres: firstly, on Soviet and Chinese foreign policy towards one another; secondly, on Soviet and Chinese domestic policy; thirdly, on their foreign policy towards the USA and its allies; finally, on their foreign policy towards the global south. Naturally, there was overlap between these spheres; foreign interventions in the global south affected relations between the USSR and China and with the USA, while the domestic situation in each influenced and was influenced by its foreign policy. In particular, this essay will show that the split began a significant new phase of the Cold War, one of multipolar rather than bipolar international relations, and that this had long-term negative effects on the international socialist movement; indeed, it has been argued that the Sino-Soviet split was the 'beginning of the end' of the Cold War.¹

The Sino-Soviet split was not a single event, but a process, starting in the late 1950s and culminating in the late 1960s with the border conflict over Zhēnbǎo / Damanskiy Island. Some accounts trace the origins of the dispute to the 'Secret Speech' by Nikita Khrushchëv at the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. This speech, an extensive criticism of Khrushchëv's predecessor Stalin, could also be interpreted as a (perhaps inadvertent) criticism of Khrushchëv's opposite number in the People's Republic of China, Máo Zédōng, who was following the political and economic blueprint laid out by Stalin.² More

¹Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2009).

²Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton:

broadly, the split can be seen as a result of the divergent national interests of the two states, with antecedents dating back to the Chinese Civil War.

The significance of the Sino-Soviet split for foreign policy can be found in the shift in international power relations it entailed. Where before the world had been bipolar — capitalism on one side, with the United States at the forefront; socialism on the other, led by the USSR — now it was multipolar. Socialist states who failed to see eye-to-eye with Moscow, such as Albania, could realign themselves with Beijing. Furthermore, revolutionary movements, particularly in the global south, could find themselves an ally in Beijing. This in turn influenced Soviet willingness to support revolutionary movements, since undue reticence would have threatened to allow China to overtake the USSR as the centre of gravity of the socialist world. Movements in southern and central Africa, along with Palestine and south-east Asia, all received economic or military support from China during the 1960s and 1970s.³

The domestic policies of both the USSR and China influenced one another reciprocally during the period of the split. In the period after the Secret Speech, the Soviet Union cracked down on left-wing, liberal, and nationalist dissidents in Hungary and Poland, with the encouragement of China, which regarded the uprisings as anti-Communist reaction and therefore as a confirmation of Máo's political theories about class struggle.⁴ Subsequently, China embarked upon a policy of political liberalization known as the 'Hundred Flowers' campaign. The failure of this campaign, Lüthi argues, was interpreted as a judgement against de-Stalinization and, along with the weak Soviet response to the Hungarian crisis, prompted a return in Chinese policy to what Lüthi terms 'revolutionary Stalinism', which is to say, policies resembling those of the USSR in the late 1920s and early 1930s.⁵

These 'revolutionary' policies operated in both the domestic sphere and in the sphere of foreign policy, and contrasted to the bureaucratic policies to which the USSR had transitioned since the 1930s. China's argument was that Soviet policies were an abandonment of the 'correct' socialist policies

Princeton University Press, 2008) <<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400837625>>.

³Howard R. Balloch, 'Chinese Support for Revolutionary Movements in the Third World, 1965-1971' (unpublished Master's Thesis, McGill University, 1974) <<https://escholarship.mcgill.ca/concern/theses/cv43nz5o6?locale=en>>.

⁴Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998); Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

⁵Lüthi.

which it had previously followed; in the 'Great Leap Forward' of the late 1950s it attempted to replicate these policies in a Chinese context, then in the 1960s the Cultural Revolution attempted to halt and reverse a shift towards bureaucratization as had been seen in the Soviet Union.

Sino-Soviet relations, as previously discussed, had begun declining since the mid-1950s, from a high point after the Korean War. Beyond the disagreements over domestic policy, China was critical of the Russian policy of peaceful co-existence with capitalist states, arguing that this was an abandonment of the fundamental anti-imperialism of Leninism.

The period of the Vietnam war in particular can demonstrate the differing and contradictory attitudes to foreign policy. While both China and the USSR broadly agreed on the goal of a unified socialist state in Vietnam, their differing policies to the rest of the world, and towards the United States in particular, led to strategic differences in Vietnam. By the mid-1960s the USSR had become increasingly willing to support anti-imperialist movements in the Third World. This was a point of pride for Brezhnev in particular, especially with regard to Vietnam itself. However, this support led to a conflict of interests for the USSR. On the one hand was the desire for geopolitical influence in southeast Asia, a region for which the USSR was in competition with China. On the other hand, the Soviets were well aware of the American interest in the region; *realpolitik* required that the local conflict not become more widespread. The solution was that the war had to be ended as soon as possible with the best possible outcome for the Vietnamese socialists. China, however, disagreed; its revolutionary attitude made it less averse to allowing the war to escalate beyond Vietnam, in the hope that revolutionary movements elsewhere could be inspired by its success (a policy echoing that of Lenin after the revolution of 1917, who hoped to inspire further revolutions in Germany and elsewhere in Europe). However, China repeatedly made it clear to the USA that its stance was purely defensive and would not enter the conflict itself unless the USA initiated hostilities. China thus began significant military defence projects during this period; these had the dual purpose of defending against both the USA and Soviet Union.⁶

A distinct feature of international relations during the 1970s was the thawing of relations between the United States and both the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union. In particular, the PRC was able to join the United Nations in 1971, replacing the Republic of China (Taiwan) in that body, and then to fully normalize diplomatic relations with the United

⁶Radchenko.

States in 1979, again at the expense of Taiwan. During the same period, the Soviet Union entered into talks on nuclear disarmament and international co-operation with the United States, including the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). With the shift from a bipolar world system (the United States on one side, the Soviet Union and China on the other) to a multipolar one, it was necessary for all parties, from a perspective of *realpolitik*, to minimize the number of potential adversaries. This is especially significant for the Soviet Union, who at the time shared a land border of several thousand kilometres with China (from Afghanistan to Manchuria, interrupted only by Mongolia, a Soviet satellite state). A significant part of the remainder of its border was shared with American allies (Turkey and Iran in particular). The shift in Sino-Soviet relations meant that the Soviet Union's entire Asian border (excluding Mongolia) was threatened, and given the infeasibility of defending such a massive area, reducing tensions with its neighbours was an obvious choice (it also made intervention in Afghanistan particularly inviting during the 1970s). For China, as mentioned, its program of industrialization and militarization produced defenses which could be pointed equally at the Soviet Union and the United States, but *détente* with the United States had the added advantage of international recognition and participation in the United Nations.

The Sino-Soviet split introduced complications between the Soviet Union and the Third World, by shifting the centre of gravity away from it and thus left it less able to influence other states. A particular example of this is Cuba. While in the first half of the century the Soviet Union's status as the only established and stable socialist state, and thus ostensibly *primus inter pares* of the Comintern, had given it significant influence over socialists outside its borders, in the second half of the century and after the establishment of several other socialist states, paradoxically the Soviet Union's influence was relatively reduced. Although it retained control over the states in its immediate sphere of influence, more and more socialist parties and states were able to operate independently, in particular with the support of China. China's willingness to operate independently of Moscow laid the groundwork for this, from the Korean War onwards, and with the widening of the split these opportunities grew larger.

A particularly significant case of a state operating independently of the USSR is that of Cuba. While Cuban-Soviet relations were never as difficult as Sino-Soviet ones, Cuba also demonstrated an unwillingness to follow Soviet orders blindly. In part this mirrored China's own independence of

spirit, rooted in a belief in the necessity of spreading revolution. Cubans described themselves, when sending medics to Algeria in 1963, as “like a beggar offering his help” — believing that their own limited means did not absolve themselves of a responsibility to aid.⁷ Nor were Cuban interventions limited to medical assistance; it sent weapons to Algeria in 1961, then more in 1963 along with troops. It was also training guerrillas elsewhere in Latin America, a source of tension with both the United States and Soviet Union. This tension with the Soviet Union, however, was directly related and proportional to the tension with the United States, and Cuban interventions in Africa, outside of the American sphere of influence, brought less conflict with Moscow.

As mentioned, it has been argued that the Split led to the end of the Cold War.⁸ Lessening Soviet influence during the 1960s and 1970s led to an expansion of assistance to newly-established socialist (or ostensibly socialist) regimes and movements, including in Ethiopia and Afghanistan. This led it into an increasingly tenuous attempt to maintain these regimes in power, with arms and military training among other things. In Afghanistan this situation escalated into open military conflict. The Soviet Union, attempting to maintain its position of influence, was unwilling to disengage from the conflict at first, which then dragged out for the next decade. In turn, this conflict led to an unwillingness on the part of senior Soviet officials to become engaged further in the affairs of other states. Not only did this lead to a decrease in foreign interventions, but it laid the groundwork for Gorbachëv’s rise to power and the internal reforms that he spearheaded.

Overall it can be seen that to a great extent the Sino-Soviet split and its subsequent political and military conflicts were driven, to a significant extent, by *realpolitik*; although both sides claimed to be acting based on differing interpretations of the same underlying political principles that meant the opposing side was necessarily betraying their cause, both sides were equally happy to take pragmatic approaches towards international relations in terms of *détente* with the United States and in their relations with the Third World. The subsequent competition between the socialist states for geopolitical influence over one another led to a splintering of the international socialist movement and ultimately to the overreaching in Afghanistan that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

⁷*The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, ed. by Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 331 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521837200>>.

⁸Radchenko.

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