

Research Report

Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why it Matters*

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It would be only a slight exaggeration to suggest that President Richard Nixon's visit to China was the most pivotal moment in the long struggle known as the Cold War. Out of the jaws of humiliation and defeat in Indochina, the Nixon administration succeeded in turning the tables of the global balance of power back on the Soviets, creating a tacit U.S.–China alliance that could not be matched by the USSR. Indeed, while Reagan's defence build-up has received much of the credit for spending the Soviet military-industrial complex into the ground, the vast drain on Soviet resources caused by China's belligerence during the 1970s and 1980s should not be underestimated.¹

A decade after the end of the Cold War, however, the origins of these tectonic geopolitical movements remain difficult to explain. The conventional explanation that emerges from the so-called "realist" school of international relations theory holds that the U.S.–China tacit alliance was the equilibrating response to the USSR's growth in power and consequent assertiveness. Consistent with this interpretation, Henry Kissinger explains his motives in undertaking the secret diplomacy that would lead to the opening to China: "If the Soviet Union was the aggressor [in the Sino-Soviet clashes] ... we had ... an opportunity."²

Newly available testimony from Moscow and Beijing, however, suggests a problem with this interpretation. In particular, this evidence appears to confirm the suspicion among many observers that the Chinese initiated the serious clashes on the Ussuri (Wusuli) River in 1969. The fact that respected PRC historians like Yang Kuisong now describe the event on 2 March 1969 as an ambush (*maifu*), not simply a clash

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1. According to R. Craig Nation, the Far Eastern theatre of operations during this period came to "absorb no less than one-third of Soviet military assets." R. Craig Nation, *Black Earth, Red Star: A History of Soviet Security Policy, 1917–1991* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 267. William E. Odom refers to a "huge Soviet military buildup in the Far East since the 1960s." William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 155. One concrete manifestation of these enormous expenditures is the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) railway, which runs 3,843 km from Lake Baikal to the Pacific. Built essentially between 1974 and 1990 through trackless forests and mountains, this line, which runs 600–800 km north of the famous Trans-Siberian, was meant to provide a war-time alternative to the Trans-Siberian, which lies perilously close to the Chinese border making it nearly impossible to defend.

2. Henry Kissinger, *The White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. 177.

(*chongtu*), suggests that certain revisions to historical texts are now in order.³ This article summarizes the opinions of Russian and Chinese scholars regarding the outbreak of fighting on the Sino-Soviet border in March 1969 and discusses various historical and theoretical implications.⁴

Laying Blame: The Debate and New Perspectives

While some specialists, including a number of sinologists, recognized early on that the Chinese were likely to have been the aggressive party,⁵ other accounts, notably Kissinger's, have sought to portray the Soviets as the instigators. In a rather misleading summary of the issue from his book *Diplomacy*, he writes, "the skirmishes invariably took place near major Soviet supply bases and far from Chinese communications centers – a pattern one would expect only if the Soviet forces were in fact the aggressors."⁶ In 1973, *The China Quarterly* published Neville Maxwell's "The Chinese account of the 1969 fighting at Chenpao."⁷ Complaining that, "as usual, the weight of credence quickly swung against China," Maxwell recounts testimony which claims that the Chinese engaged "only after taking sustained fire from the Russians."⁸

Whichever version is believed, the significance of the fighting on 2 March is not contested. Fatalities in border incidents had been rare, and

3. Yang Kuisong (Institute of Modern History, Beijing), interview with author, Beijing, 19 July 2000. See his recently published English-language narrative: "The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969: from Zhenbao Island to Sino-American rapprochement," *Cold War History*, No. 1 (August 2000), pp. 26–27.

4. This article relies heavily on the opinions expressed by Chinese and Russian scholars during interviews conducted by the author in Moscow during March and May 2000 and in Beijing during July 2000. Until archives and other sources of information on the 1969 crisis are fully accessible to foreign scholars, these opinions represent a second best, but nevertheless an important, source of insight.

5. See, for example, Thomas Robinson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes* (Santa Monica: RAND RM-6171-PR, August 1970), pp. 33–38; Harold C. Hinton, *The Bear at the Gate: Chinese Policymaking Under Soviet Pressure* (Stanford: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1971), p. 24; Allen S. Whiting, *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), p. 239.

6. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 722. The description is misleading, because in the much more detailed description from *The White House Years*, Kissinger employs the same reasoning, but only regarding border incidents in Xinjiang, which occurred months after the first incidents of fighting on the Ussuri. He writes: "Originally, I had accepted the fashionable view that the Chinese were the more militant country. But when I looked at a detailed map and saw that the Sinkiang (Xinjiang) incidents took place only a few miles from a Soviet railhead and several hundred miles from any Chinese railhead, it occurred to me that Chinese military leaders would not have picked such an unpropitious spot to attack. After that, I looked at the problem differently" (p. 177). Therefore, the *Diplomacy* description is misleading, because Kissinger simply extends his logic from the Xinjiang incident to the prior (and one must say, more important) Ussuri incident without any kind of explanation. A recent PRC book on Mao's foreign policy actually cites this passage from Kissinger's book as the primary evidence for China's benign intentions. Gong Li, *Mao Zedong waijiao: fengyun lu* (*Mao Zedong's Foreign Policy: Record of the Storm*) (Zhengzhou: Zhong yuan nongmin chubanshe, 1996), p. 203.

7. Neville Maxwell, "The Chinese account of the 1969 fighting at Chenpao," *The China Quarterly*, No. 56 (October/December 1973), pp. 730–39.

8. *Ibid.* pp. 734–35.

until 2 March, had not previously been the result of shooting.⁹ In perhaps the most authoritative study of the crisis, written in 1980, Richard Wich observes, “Moscow gave a count of 31 fatalities in the first clash ... One can begin to appreciate the gravity of these events by imagining the effect of a shoot-out between Soviet and American troops in a Berlin crisis in which 31 Americans were killed.”¹⁰ In the end, Wich does conclude that the Chinese had orchestrated the fight on 2 March, basing his analysis on the “significant asymmetry between the Chinese and Soviet [press and propaganda] responses [to the crisis].”¹¹

This evaluation, however, has so far remained controversial and rather tentative. Thus, Thomas Robinson writes in *The Cambridge History of China*: “The essential facts will probably never be known ... Yet the event did occur ... and the entire structure of relations within the Sino-Soviet-American strategic triangle changed accordingly.”¹² Suspicions concerning China’s responsibility for the crisis continue to be voiced in cautious and guarded terminology. For example, Roderick MacFarquhar’s most recent rendition of the period suggests: “It is conceivable that the clash on Zhenbao Island began with an ambush ... [It remains unclear] whether or not this is correct ...”¹³ A study of Chinese foreign policy published in the West as late as 1998 continues to adhere to the view presented by Maxwell in 1973. The authors assert: “The [PLA] General Staff emphasized that ... the border guards ... should not initiate provocation ... In spite of [such] precautions, the incidents of March 1969 brought the two countries ... to the brink of war.”¹⁴ A survey of expert opinion in Moscow and Beijing appears to

9. Border incidents had increased steadily since the early 1960s, reaching a crescendo during the Cultural Revolution. Use of water hoses, ramming of small boats and beatings with sticks became standard operating procedures for Soviet border guards challenged by Chinese citizens and soldiers. Chinese historians view two events in January 1968 as escalating Sino-Soviet hostility. One cites an incident in which four Chinese civilians were apparently run over and killed by a Soviet armoured car. See Li Danhui, “1969 nian Zhong-Su bianjie chongtu: yuanqi he jieguo” (“The causes and consequences of the border conflict between China and the Soviet Union in 1969”) *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, No. 3 (1996), p. 43. Another PRC historian of the Cold War points to a second incident that January wherein 28 Chinese soldiers suffered injuries in beatings by Soviet border guards. See Niu Jun, “1969 nian Zhong-Su bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlue de tiaozheng,” (“The Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969 and the adjustment of China’s diplomatic strategy”), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, No. 1 (1999), p. 71.

10. Richard Wich, *Sino-Soviet Crisis Politics: A Study of Political Change and Communication* (London: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1980), pg. 97.

11. *Ibid.* p. 104.

12. Thomas Robinson, “China confronts the Soviet Union: warfare and diplomacy on China’s Inner Asian Frontiers,” in Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *The Cambridge History of China, Volume 15, The People’s Republic, Part 2: Revolutions within the Chinese Revolution 1966–82* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 254.

13. Roderick MacFarquhar, “The succession to Mao and the end of Maoism, 1969–82,” in Roderick MacFarquhar (ed.), *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 263. Note that some recent histories are less tentative in apportioning blame for the 2 March incident. See, for example, Patrick Tyler, *A Great Wall: Six Presidents and China: An Investigative History* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999), p. 48; or Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 181.

14. Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Chinese Foreign Policy During the Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), p. 87–88.

confirm long-held suspicions that the Chinese were primarily responsible for precipitating the Ussuri clashes.

Turning to contemporary Russian accounts of the fighting on the Ussuri, a degree of revisionism is discernible. For example, one recent press account is at pains to dispel the Soviet propaganda from the period, which had attempted to convey that the Soviet border guards had easily repulsed the Chinese probes. Rather, this revised narrative paints a picture of near paralysing confusion on the Soviet side, of units committed piece-meal into the fray, and of humiliating losses.¹⁵ Another recent article criticizes the political and military leadership for seeking to defend an island that is unquestionably much closer to the Chinese side of the river.¹⁶ Nevertheless, what is most interesting is that, while from the standpoint of preserving the friendly tone of present-day Chinese–Russian relations it may be “politically correct” to portray the events of 2 March as a misunderstanding,¹⁷ Russian sources, without exception, continue to maintain that the fighting began with a Chinese ambush.¹⁸

One might be tempted to attribute this uniformity of opinion among Russian experts to a nationalist hangover, except that their PRC colleagues are apparently inclined to agree with them. A consensus among Chinese experts concurs that Chinese forces planned and executed an ambush on 2 March 1969.¹⁹ According to Cold War historian Li Danhui, “already in 1968, China began preparations to create a small war on the border.” Li notes that on at least two separate occasions prior to March 1969 Chinese border troops had tried to provoke a similar incident, “but the Soviets, feeling weak, did not accept the Chinese challenge and retreated.”²⁰ Another Cold War historian, Yang Kuisong, seconds this analysis, explaining, “there were already significant preparations in 1968, but the Russians did not come, so the planned ambush was not successful.”²¹

By contrast, Yang notes: “The attack of March 2nd 1969 was completely successful, because the Russians were not at all prepared.” Jiang

15. Nikolai Lobodyuk, “Za tumanami Damanskogo” (“Behind Damansky’s clouds”) *Nezavisimoe Voennoe Obozrenie*, 26 March 1999, p. 3.

16. Vladislav Anikeev, “Bole damanskogo: posleslovie k grustnoy date” (“The Battle of Damansky: afterword to a terrible date”) *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 March 1999, p. 5.

17. One of Russia’s foremost sinologists, Alexei Voskressenski (Moscow State Institute for International Relations), alerted me to this problem, explaining that few Russian researchers now work on this topic, because of its potential for damaging the spirit of the current Sino-Russian rapprochement. Interview with author, Moscow, 20 March 2000. This situation could conceivably change given Putin’s inclination to “lean to one side” since the 11 September attacks.

18. Interviews were conducted with 11 Russian specialists on Sino-Soviet relations. These specialists included sinologists from Moscow’s Institute of the Far East, Cold War historians, and ex-military officers.

19. Seven Chinese specialists were interviewed, including mostly Cold War historians and Russian area specialists. Even Li Jingjie, director of Beijing’s Institute of East European, Russian and Central Asian Studies – a job demanding a certain political sensitivity – concedes that the Chinese at Zhenbao were not only well-prepared but also started the shooting, though he was careful to note that the shooting was in defence of Chinese territory. Li Jingjie, interview with author, Beijing, 17 July 2000.

20. Li Danhui (Modern History Research Centre, Peking University), interview with author, Beijing, 16 July 2000.

21. Yang Kuisong, interview with author, Beijing, 19 July 2000. See also, Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969,” p. 28.

Yi, a specialist on Sino-Russian relations, likewise maintains: "It is clear that Chinese leaders intentionally orchestrated this conflict. [Mao] did not want a war, but he did want a large-scale clash ... Soviet troops were completely unready."²² While Li's written work on the subject is careful to label the incident as a "self-defence counter-attack" (*ziwei fanji*) and also points to preceding border incidents where the Chinese had suffered casualties,²³ she nevertheless rejects any notion that the Soviets provoked the major clash on 2 March: "The Russians are correct to blame Mao ... Brezhnev was even overseas. The Soviets were really panicked [because] they were absolutely unprepared ... It was a complete surprise [to them]."²⁴ Yang's interview with General Chen Xilian, commander of the Shenyang Military Region during the crisis, reveals that the Chinese troops deployed to attack at Zhenbao were an elite unit with special training and equipment.²⁵

These findings differ little from that offered by Russia's premier academic specialist on the Ussuri crisis, who says: "It was a surprise to Moscow ... none of the [border] provocations had ever approached a military clash. We did not expect a conflict and we were entirely unprepared for a serious conflict."²⁶ Archival evidence from this crisis remains limited, although documents from the archive of the former East Germany confirms, "the Soviets were nothing less than stunned over the fact that the Chinese had departed from the long-established practice of resolving border violations short of firefights."²⁷

With PRC specialists now acknowledging that China planned the incident on 2 March, the larger and more difficult question looms: why did China create this bloodbath on the ice of the Ussuri?

To What End?

The discussion in *The Cambridge History of China* posits three categories of plausible explanations for the clashes: local impetus, international pressures and domestic politics.²⁸ Thomas Robinson elucidates the first category as follows: "It is possible that an impatient commander might have taken things into his own hands [or] there is a chance that what happened on 2 March may in reality have been a local firefight between ordinary patrols that happened to meet at [Zhenbao]." Himself somewhat sceptical, he elaborates: "Essentially this is a statistical argu-

22. Jiang Yi (Institute of East European, Russian, and Central Asian Studies, Beijing), interview with author, Beijing, 20 July 2000.

23. See n. 9.

24. Li Danhui, interview with author, Beijing, 16 July 2000.

25. Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969," pp. 28–29.

26. Victor Usov (Institute of the Far East, Moscow), interview with author, Moscow, 29 May 2000. For Usov's written work on the 1969 crisis, see his "Tragediya na Ussuri" ("Tragedy on the Ussuri"), *Problemy Dal'nego Vostoka*, No. 3 (1994), pp. 84–93.

27. Christian Ostermann, "East German Documents on the Border Conflict, 1969," on the website of the *Cold War International History Project* at <http://www.seas.gwu.edu/snarchive/CWIHP/BULLETINS/b6-7a13.htm>.

28. Robinson, "China Confronts the Soviet Union" pp. 261–64.

ment and as such cannot be refuted. Some such incidents would have happened eventually.”²⁹

The perspectives presented above should prove sufficient to cast doubt upon this first category of explanation. In the post-Soviet world of Russian scholarship, where harsh critiques of the Soviet government abound, Russian scholars have little incentive to perpetuate a “politically incorrect” interpretation of this event – and yet they all do so.³⁰ But even more persuasive are a significant group of Chinese scholars who blame the 2 March crisis on Beijing, a move that is not without risk in an authoritarian country. At least until archives are fully accessible, it seems appropriate to conclude that the Sino-Soviet clashes did not simply “erupt” on the Ussuri, but rather came as the result of a premeditated act of state violence.

The most frequently cited explanation for China’s aggressive behavior on the Ussuri derives from the most basic principle of international relations theory: the balance of power.³¹ It is argued that Soviet power and aggressive behaviour were on the rise, as demonstrated most clearly by the August 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the articulation of the Brezhnev doctrine. This doctrine, which asserted that the USSR had the right to intervene in other socialist countries to correct political “deviations,” is said to have posed a grave threat to Mao’s regime, which had been an ideological thorn in the Soviet side since the late 1950s. Confronting the growing Soviet menace, so the argument goes, the Chinese were forced to strike pre-emptively in order to show their resolve to resist Soviet aggression.³² This explanation, common in the literature, deserves careful reflection in light of these new perspectives on the Ussuri clashes.³³

When examined more closely, neither the Soviet intervention in

29. *Ibid.* p. 261.

30. See n. 17.

31. The “balance of power” is here understood to mean the tendency of states, when confronted with external threats, to resist coercion by building up their own military capabilities, posturing so as to demonstrate their will to fight, and/or seeking alliance partners. On the abuses and consequent confusion associated with this terminology, see Ernst B. Haas, “The balance of power: prescription, concept, or propaganda,” *World Politics*, No. 5 (July 1953), pp. 442–477.

32. Similarly, Li Danhui sees the 2 March attack as the crucial event in fulfilling Mao’s grand strategic vision of re-establishing relations with the U.S. Li Danhui, “Causes and consequences,” p. 46. Niu Jun, however, has sought to rebut that argument, asserting that the alignment with the U.S. was a result of the clash, rather than a motive for the “counterattack.” Niu Jun, “The Sino-Soviet border conflict,” p. 71. Yang is also deeply sceptical that Mao planned the Ussuri ambush in order to precipitate the rapprochement with America, arguing that only the Nixon administration’s initiatives, coupled with the unprecedented war scare that gripped Beijing during October 1969, compelled Mao seriously to consider turning to the U.S. See Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969,” pp. 41–49.

33. An illustrative example is Kenneth Lieberthal’s suggestion that Mao’s decision to suppress the Red Guards in mid-1968 may be related to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), p. 115. Another work that emphasizes the causal value of the invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Brezhnev Doctrine is Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 216–221.

Czechoslovakia nor the articulation of the “Brezhnev Doctrine” adequately explain China’s premeditated attack on the Ussuri. Competent geostrategists must first intuitively ask: how could a relatively minor event in Central Europe possibly become the basis for Chinese foreign policy? Excluding the Czech perspective, it can be concluded that this was a “minor event” because even the powers that had cause to be concerned, namely the members of NATO, were hardly distracted from their new inclination toward détente with the USSR. There was no fundamental review of NATO strategy based on newly revealed Soviet intentions or capabilities.³⁴ On the contrary, President Lyndon Johnson, while cancelling a planned summit with Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin which was to be announced on the day after the invasion, attempted shortly thereafter to reschedule that same summit, but was refused by the Soviets.³⁵ Nor is the articulation of Brezhnev Doctrine particularly persuasive as an explanation. After all, the Soviet Union had been intervening with a heavy hand in the politics of East European countries since the beginning of the Cold War. Did interventions in East Germany in 1953, and (with Mao’s welcome support) in Hungary and Poland in 1956 leave any room for doubt on this question?³⁶ As the Americans and Europeans recognized, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was not a departure, but rather a reaffirmation of the Cold War status quo. On this question, Western sinologists may have been taken in by Beijing’s propaganda.³⁷

The same analyses have also argued that the Soviet military build-up east of Lake Baikal after 1965 posed a fundamental threat to China, at a time when Chinese military resources were being concentrated in the south in case the U.S. chose to escalate the Vietnam War further. In particular, they note the provocative defence agreement signed between the USSR and Mongolia in January 1966, which allowed for the stationing of Soviet troops in Mongolia. According to Robinson: “By November 1967, several [Soviet] divisions were occupying permanent bases in Mongolia. The magnitude of this buildup upset the military balance. The Chinese did their best to redeploy forces in response and

34. NATO-Warsaw Pact relations could not be described as entering a crisis in the wake of the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, Kissinger explains, “The Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 ... ironically opened the door for [German Chancellor Willy] Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*, [which argued that] ... unification should be sought through German rapprochement with the Communist world.” Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, p. 734.

35. Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1985), pp. 7–8, 113. Richard Crockatt writes of the impact of the Soviet invasion: “Rather than reversing the trend towards East-West détente, after a ‘decent interval’ it was resumed, and at a swifter pace.” See his *The Fifty Years War: The United States and Soviet Union in World Politics, 1941–91* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 212.

36. On Chinese support for these Soviet interventions, see Hemen Ray, *China and Eastern Europe* (New Delhi: Radiant, 1988), pp. 9–14.

37. A plausible counterargument holds that Mao was particularly attuned to developments in the Communist world, no matter how small the country. Concerning China’s extensive relationship with Albania, for example, see Elez Biberaj, *Albania and China: A Study of an Unequal Alliance* (Boulder: Westview, 1986). Despite the evident ideological threat posed by reform Communists to Mao’s own regime, the Chinese leaders may still have seen parallels between the Czech and Chinese situations.

several divisions went to the Soviet-Mongolian border from Fukien province.”³⁸ Figures presented in Robinson’s own analysis, however, do not bear out this conclusion. By these figures, Chinese forces positioned in border provinces, a total of 47 divisions, outnumber Soviet forces stationed in Soviet Central Asia and the Far East, totalling only 22, by a ratio of more than two to one (see Table 1).³⁹ Of course such estimates are a crude measure of military power, especially given Soviet technological superiority.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the Chinese enjoyed advantages such as much shorter, interior lines of supply. In retrospect, the fundamental strategic vulnerability of the Russian Far East in this period becomes clear when it is realized that by the mid-1970s, thanks to a “startlingly swift, broad, and deep ... [Soviet] force augmentation,” the Soviets deployed more than 50 divisions on the Chinese border at a high level of readiness.⁴¹ Between 1969 and 1972, the Soviets added 18–20 divisions to their forces in the Russian Far East, while the Chinese only added two in the region of the Sino-Soviet border during this same period (see Table 1). This asymmetry demonstrates which side was more anxious about the military balance in the wake of the Ussuri crisis. Apparently caught by surprise in 1969 and facing a daunting strategic problem, the Soviet high command attempted, at great expense, to create a self-sustaining fighting force on the Chinese flank. Such a force did not exist in the late 1960s, prior to the Ussuri clashes. Thus, Zhou Enlai is said to have surmised during the crisis: “It [is] impossible for the Soviets to launch a large-scale invasion of China in the near future, as they still

38. Robinson, *Cambridge History of China*, p. 257. With respect to Soviet forces in Mongolia, Lowell Dittmer makes the unattributed claim that by early 1967, the USSR had stationed nearly 100,000 troops there. Lowell Dittmer, *Sino-Soviet Normalization and Its International Implications, 1945–90* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), p. 188. In light of estimates by London’s Institute of Strategic Studies (ISS), such numbers appear to represent a considerable exaggeration. ISS estimates put two Soviet divisions in Mongolia before the 1969 clashes and three after. Fully-manned Soviet divisions varied in strength from 7,000 to 10,500 men depending on their type. *The Military Balance, 1968–69* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1968), p. 6; and *The Military Balance, 1970–71* (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1970), p. 7. Alan Lawrance implies that the Soviets based “nearly 40” Soviet divisions on China’s border by 1965–66. In support of this “fact,” he cites ISS data, which however, do not contain any such numbers, as demonstrated above. See Alan Lawrance, *China Under Communism* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 84, 146.

39. Robinson, *Cambridge History of China*, p. 299. Moreover, Robinson observes that the 15 Soviet divisions in the Soviet Far East were “understrength formations” (p. 291). The Soviet figure is for 1968–69. The Chinese figure is taken from 1969–70, because no figure is given for prior years. ISS figures suggest that China had 46 divisions along the Soviet border in 1968–69, however, it adds that China probably possessed 10–15 additional divisions of border troops. *The Military Balance, 1968–69* (London: Institute of Strategic Studies, 1968), pp. 10–11. Also note that Chinese infantry divisions are larger than their Soviet equivalents by 2–4,000 men. *The Military Balance, 1972–73* (London: Institute of Strategic Studies, 1972), p. vii.

40. Other analyses note that the PLA during this period suffered from serious deficiencies in training, discipline and morale, because of disruptions associated with the Cultural Revolution. See, for example, Gurtov and Hwang, *China Under Threat*, p. 187. As for the Soviet advantage in armour, Chinese accounts suggest that Soviet tanks and armoured personnel vehicles were effectively neutralized during the Ussuri clashes. Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969” p. 27.

41. Robinson, *Cambridge History of China*, pp. 291–92.

Table 1: Soviet and Chinese Force Dispositions, 1969–1976 (divisions)

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Eastern Europe</i> | <i>European USSR</i> | <i>Central USSR</i> | <i>South USSR</i> | <i>Soviet Far East</i> |
|-------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| 1968–69 | – | – | – | – | 22 |
| 1969–70 | 32 | 60 | 8 | 19 | 28 |
| 1970–71 | 31 | 60 | 8 | 21 | 37 |
| 1971–72 | 31 | 60 | 8 | 21 | 40 |
| 1972–73 | 31 | 60 | 8 | 21 | 44 |
| 1973–74 | 31 | 60 | 5 | 23 | 45 |
| 1974–75 | 31 | 63 | 5 | 23 | 45 |
| 1975–76 | 31 | 63 | 6 | 23 | 43 |

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Fujian</i> | <i>Wuhan</i> | <i>Hainan</i> | <i>South- west</i> | <i>Tibet</i> | <i>North- east</i> | <i>Lanzhou</i> | <i>Xinjiang</i> | <i>Sino-Soviet border total</i> |
|-------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|------------------------|--------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1969–70 | 28 | 25 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 32 | 11 | 4 | 47 |
| 1970–71 | 28 | 25 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 32 | 11 | 4 | 47 |
| 1971–72 | 28 | 25 | 3 | 12 | 3 | 33 | 11 | 5 | 49 |
| 1972–73 | 25 | 17 | 3 | 12 | 8 | 40 | 15 | 10 | 65 |
| 1973–74 | 20 | 17 | 3 | 12 | 8 | 45 | 15 | 10 | 70 |
| 1974–75 | 25 | 17 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 50 | 15 | 8 | 73 |
| 1975–76 | 25 | 18 | 3 | 12 | 6 | 55 | 15 | 8 | 78 |

Notes:

Robinson does not provide a further breakdown of Soviet forces in 1968–69. The figure of 22 divisions based in the Soviet Far East for that year actually incorporates 7 divisions based in Central Asia – the remaining 15 were stationed in the Far East. PLA data are not given for that year. The critical “Sino-Soviet border total” column is simply the total of the north-east, Lanzhou and Xinjiang. The comparable Soviet figure would include the Soviet Far East and some of the forces from South USSR

Source:

Robinson, “China confronts the Soviet Union,” p. 299.

had a long way to go before they could turn the relatively undeveloped Soviet Far East into the bases for attacking China.”⁴²

Indeed, Chinese and Russian experts agree that, except in the arena of nuclear weapons,⁴³ the PLA enjoyed a substantial advantage over the Soviets during the late 1960s. Yang explains: “... [Mao] felt that China had the advantage. China had many more soldiers, [such that] if they had broken through, the Russians would not have been able to rectify the situation.”⁴⁴ Yang’s interview with General Chen yields that during the 2

42. Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969,” p. 31.

43. It is plausible that the asymmetry of nuclear capabilities introduced extreme instability into the relationship. Thus, PRC nuclear weapons expert Shen Dingli explains, “since Russia was far advanced [in nuclear weapons development] and China had just started, the relationship, therefore, experienced a period of nuclear instability.” Shen Dingli (Fudan University) interview with author, 27 July 2000, Shanghai. Faced with this nuclear threat, the Chinese may have sought to remind the Russians of their conventional superiority. This explanation faces the difficulty, however, that Russian nuclear threats did not precede, but rather followed in the wake of the Zhenbao fighting.

44. Yang Kuisong, interview with author, Beijing, 19 July 2000.

March engagement, superior Chinese numbers were decisive. Thus, Chen testified, “[the Soviets] actually were hopelessly outnumbered by us.”⁴⁵ Jiang contends, “[Mao] made very exact calculations that the USSR did not have adequate [military] preparations [or] numbers ... to carry out a serious war with China ... so he was willing to take the risk.”⁴⁶ Also, recall Li’s assertion that Soviet forces were “absolutely unprepared.”⁴⁷ Russian appraisals are similar. Victor Gobarev, a former colonel in Soviet military intelligence, who specializes on the Sino-Soviet conflict, contends: “According to all estimates ... the Chinese possessed colossal manpower superiority ... [Soviet] troop levels reached the capacity needed to repulse the Chinese on a conventional level only in the mid-1970s ... In 1969, the Soviets were not ready.”⁴⁸ This appraisal is independently confirmed by a second Russian ex-military intelligence officer, Vitaly Shlykov, who presided over the Soviet military’s office of foreign estimates during the 1970s. Shlykov observes, “Soviet military leaders felt very insecure in the 1960s, because of the manpower disparities, which were only rectified by the build-up in the 1970s.”⁴⁹ In sum, neither Soviet action against Czechoslovakia, nor the Brezhnev Doctrine, nor the augmentation of Soviet forces in Siberia after 1965, can persuasively explain the Chinese attack on 2 March 1969.

A third set of explanations concern Chinese domestic politics. Links between Beijing’s gambit on the Ussuri, on the one hand, and the close of the most intense phase of China’s Cultural Revolution, on the other, have been posited. Robinson suggests: “By late 1968 and early 1969, the Cultural Revolution had reached an impasse ... [to] break the impasse would require a sudden and spectacular move. Drawing Soviet blood would provide the necessary popular enthusiasm and overcome bureaucratic foot-dragging.”⁵⁰ Addressing bewildered Qinghua and Peking University students after authorizing security forces and workers to quell their radicalism on the night of 28 July 1968, Mao confessed, “the black hand is nobody else but me.” He went on to explain his frustration with the progress of the Cultural Revolution to date: “Yes, you are struggling, but it is armed struggle. The people are not happy. The workers are not happy. The peasants are not happy. Peking residents are not happy. The students in your school are also not happy ... Can you unite the whole

45. Yang Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969,” p. 29.

46. Jiang Yi, interview with author, Beijing, 20 July 2000.

47. Li Danhui, interview with author, Beijing, 16 July 2000.

48. Victor Gobarev (Science Applications International Corporation, Washington D.C.), interview with author, Washington, D.C., 4 November 1999. Also see his “Soviet policy toward China: developing nuclear weapons 1949–69,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, No. 12 (December 1999), pp. 1–54.

49. Vitaly Shlykov (Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Moscow), interview with author, Moscow, 16 March 2000. Usov also testifies to the weakness of Soviet forces prior to the crisis: “Travelling to the border in 1971, I was told that only after the crisis did they begin to build up border defences, arming [the troops] better ... events showed that readiness needed to be increased.” Victor Usov, interview with author, Moscow, 29 May 2000.

50. Robinson, “China confronts the Soviet Union,” p. 262.

country this way?"⁵¹ Archival evidence unearthed by Yang Kuisong reveals Mao's reaction to the Sino-Soviet clashes: "We should let [the Soviets] in, which will help us in our mobilization."⁵²

Class warfare had destroyed the fabric of Chinese society and Mao looked to an old formula for unity: the struggle against imperialism. Li Danhui concludes: "Mao wanted to use the event to unite the Party at the Ninth Congress and [also] the country [as a whole]. This was foreign-domestic policy." Yang concludes: "The [Sino-Soviet] military clashes were primarily the result of Mao Zedong's domestic mobilization strategies, connected to his worries about the development of the Cultural Revolution."⁵³ The political purpose of the military conflict was, he continues, "the mobilization of the Chinese Party and people on his terms."⁵⁴ Similarly, Niu Jun observes: "Of course, it cannot be denied that [the limited attack against the Soviets] and China's internal political situation were closely linked."⁵⁵

Millions of ordinary Chinese citizens were eventually involved in the mass campaign to prepare for the coming war, for example by digging air raid shelters.⁵⁶ If, as historian John Fairbank observes, Mao was at this time attempting "to put a new state together,"⁵⁷ then he appears to have moved with an intuitive understanding of Charles Tilly's famous dictum that "war [makes] the state."⁵⁸

A second domestic political explanation attributes the Chinese ambush to factional struggles in Beijing and volatile civil-military relations. Robinson explains: "Lin [Biao] certainly had plenty of reason to [try to] enhance his own authority. He was Mao's anointed successor, but had hardly generated the kind of support that would have seen him through the dangers of the immediate succession period."⁵⁹ MacFarquhar also suggests that the ambush might have been ordered by a renegade Lin in order "to impress upon delegates to the CCP's Ninth Congress, the importance of the heroic PLA ..."⁶⁰ One Chinese specialist also cites this possibility.⁶¹ The argument that the ambush was some kind of precursor

51. Quoted in Harry Harding, "The Chinese state in crisis, 1966-69," in Roderick MacFarquhar (ed.), *The Politics of China: The Eras of Mao and Deng* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 219. The swirling Cultural Revolution could not be shut down overnight. Harding describes the situation in April 1969, after the Ussuri clashes: "The outlines of post-Cultural Revolution policy were undecided; power was divided among groups with noticeably different interests; and the structure of the Party and state was vague and uninstitutionalized" (p. 230).

52. Yang Kuisong "The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969" p. 30.

53. *Ibid.* p. 22.

54. *Ibid.* p. 30.

55. Niu Jun, "The Sino-Soviet border conflict," p. 71.

56. Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969," p. 41.

57. John K. Fairbank, *China: A New History* (London: Belknap, 1992), p. 395.

58. Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the history of European state-making," in Charles Tilly (ed.), *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975) p. 26.

59. Robinson, "China confronts the Soviet Union," p. 262.

60. MacFarquhar, "Succession to Mao," p. 263.

61. Jiang Yi, interview with author, Beijing, 20 July 2000.

for Lin's alleged 1971 military coup against Mao, however, remains tenuous.⁶²

That there were undercurrents of disenchantment among senior officers during the Cultural Revolution is clear given the removal of Luo Ruiqing in 1966 and the appearance of the "February Adverse Current" in 1967. But a risky military initiative designed to bolster its own power is doubtful due to the fact that military power would inevitably increase, because it was the only institution in Chinese politics at this time that was still relatively intact. Fairbank explains: "Military dominance in 1969 was ensured by the low quality of party and government officials brought into power ..."⁶³ Ultimately, it may be true, as MacFarquhar suggests, that the Soviet menace helped to justify the military's expanded role in society. But this could only be a side-benefit, rather than a primary motive for such a risky course. Here, it is useful to recall Samuel Huntington's characterization of the military mind as "cautious." In his classic treatise on civil-military relations, he argues: "The military man normally opposes reckless, aggressive, belligerent action ... War at any time is an intensification of the threats to the military security of the state, and generally war should not be resorted to except as a final recourse, and only when the outcome is a virtual certainty. This latter condition is seldom met."⁶⁴ Expanded military power in the polity was never in doubt; there was no alternative.

Implications

Academia has paid insufficient attention to revelations emerging from the new Cold War history.⁶⁵ In this case, a long-held suspicion has received substantial confirmation, creating the basis for a re-evaluation of conventional explanations. A clear consensus has emerged not only among Russian scholars, but also surprisingly among their Chinese counterparts, that the Ussuri fighting of early March 1969 was instigated by the Chinese. The perspectives presented above help to dispel myths, which had previously blamed Soviet aggressiveness or local circumstances for the clashes. While many sinologists doubted these myths, they nevertheless flourished in a political atmosphere in which both Chinese and American governments had embarked on a politically awkward rapprochement.⁶⁶

62. Recent scholarship questions the historical validity of the official PRC version of Lin Biao's "coup attempt" in September 1971. See, for example, Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, *The Tragedy of Lin Biao* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995). From the perspective of the PRC leadership, perpetuating the rumor that Lin Biao might have been behind the March 1969 border clashes serves the dual purpose of sparing Mao or Zhou from responsibility, in addition to reaffirming Lin's guilt in the alleged coup attempt of 1971.

63. Fairbank, *China: A New History*, p. 395.

64. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: the Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1959), p. 69.

65. See William Wohlforth, "A certain idea of science: how international relations theory avoids the new Cold War history," *Journal of Cold War History*, No. 1 (1999), pp. 39–60.

66. For example, it is not difficult to see how Kissinger's opening to China might be tainted by the perception that China was the aggressor on the Ussuri.

Having rejected local initiative as a cause of the border crisis, two explanations for this crucial Cold War event are plausible. Consistent with balance of power reasoning, many analysts have pointed to the mounting Soviet threat to explain Chinese aggressiveness. But as noted above, the threat of a “Czech-style” Soviet invasion in the late 1960s was minimal, because it is now evident that the Soviets did not possess local conventional superiority over Chinese forces at this time. Some sinologists, in suggesting that the Cultural Revolution had to be brought to a close because of Mao’s need to mobilize against the mounting Soviet threat, may have fallen prey to the “chicken and egg” problem.⁶⁷ Nor can the huge subsequent Soviet build-up, which eventually did prompt the U.S.–China rapprochement, explain the border crisis that preceded it. Here, the sequence of events helps to clarify the direction of causation.

The chaotic violence of the Cultural Revolution provided plenty of evidence of its own inherent failure. Li’s characterization of the Chinese ambush as “foreign-domestic policy” seems particularly appropriate. Thus, the second explanation for China’s aggressive behaviour, Mao’s need for an external threat, is most convincing. This case, therefore, may provide important evidence for the so-called “diversionary” theory of conflict, wherein leaders create international conflicts to divert public attention from domestic troubles.

Based on evidence available at present, Mao appears to have acted on Chinese local military superiority to satisfy domestic political imperatives in 1969. The largely detrimental consequences, including the severe Soviet threats that developed subsequently, seem not to have been foreseen by Beijing. Though China has changed considerably since the era of Mao, the combination of domestic political imperatives and growing local military superiority in the Taiwan Straits could also lead to dire miscalculations.

67. See n. 33.