



# China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT FROM THE EARLY COLD WAR

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### What was the nature of DPRK-China-Soviet alignment during the early Cold War (1949-1969)?

In the early Cold War, the China-USSR relationship was shaped by its own internal dynamics, including ideological attraction and economic partnership. But the alliance was also a product of its wider context: in the early 1950s, the PRC had no real choice but to pursue a close relationship with the USSR. The nature of the alliance was shaped by necessity as well as affinity.

Understanding the wider regional Asian context is thus critical to understanding what drove the Sino-Soviet relationship. In particular, there are three areas that played a significant role in the demise of the relationship. They are: China's lack of involvement in emergent international institutions, including the UN; emergence of regional institutions hostile to China and the USSR, including SEATO and ASEAN; and the economic and domestic context in China. These three areas are not directly tied to the Sino-Soviet relationship, but they certainly helped shape it.

### What explains the evolution of the relationship?

#### *International institutions*

The PRC continued to be hostile to the United Nations for much of the early Cold War period. This was unsurprising, as the PRC was excluded from the organization while the Republic of China in Taiwan continued to hold the UN seat until 1971. The UN question introduced new tensions into the Moscow-Beijing relationship, since the USSR continued to have permanent standing in the organization. At the Bandung Afro-Asian conference in 1955, for instance, China presented itself as a leader (in competition with India) of an alternative order. Mao's claim to the mantle of non-western leadership, as well as to having more authentic revolutionary credentials than the USSR, frustrated Moscow. The USSR sent observers to Bandung, but it was not a formal participant in the conference. Instead, China and India vied for leadership of the newly-emergent non-aligned group, creating a new arena in which Beijing and Moscow's interests would diverge. While the USSR never ceased supporting the entry of the PRC into the UN, at the height of Sino-Soviet tensions in 1963, it no longer sponsored resolutions demanding Beijing's admission.

The Bandung tensions also happened in the context of two less well-observed phenomena in the region. First, during the high point of the Sino-Soviet alliance, the USSR and PRC were offering support, both rhetorical and substantial, for the anticolonial movements in Malaysia and Vietnam. Initially, their shared purpose in supporting the National Liberation Front in Vietnam united the two powers, but their growing differences eventually led each to try to assert seniority in the relationship with the North Vietnamese, which exacerbated tensions.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the rise of anti-communist partnerships in Asia and the emergence during this period of two new regional security arrangements had negative implications for both major communist powers. SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty Organization) was founded in 1954 with the idea of containing communism in the region, and states such as the Philippines and Thailand were brought in as key Asian parts of the alliance. It operated during the period when both China and the Soviet Union were supplying military equipment and aid to the NLF in Vietnam, and the Sino-Soviet cooperation during that period must be seen in part as a response to Western attempts to contain both powers in Asia.

By the 1960s, however, when key members such as France and Pakistan made it clear that they did not endorse the U.S. policy in Vietnam, SEATO lost its heft as a security organization. (It dissolved itself in 1977.) SEATO's lack of significance coincided with the increasing split between Moscow and Beijing even though both continued to aid the North Vietnamese. ASEAN, meanwhile, was founded in 1967 with a less expansive remit than SEATO, albeit one also shaped by anti-communism. Its less ambitious structure turned out, in practice, to give it greater longevity, but at the time of its foundation, it coexisted with SEATO to create the sense in Beijing and Moscow that Asian regional organizations were being formed with fear of China—and to some extent the USSR—in mind.

#### *Economic context*

The presence of Soviet economic advisers in the early PRC and the dependency, at least in the initial period of Mao's rule, on Soviet loans are also important context for understanding the Sino-Soviet dynamic. Before 1949, there was little ambiguity in the Nationalist government in China about its desire to work with the United States on trade, which gave the USSR reasons for concern: the Nationalist government was frequently lobbied by Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov to align further with Moscow's interests. Since a weak postwar China could not possibly deal with a hostile Stalin on its borders, the Nationalists thus regarded the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance

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<sup>1</sup> See Westad, O.A., Jian, C., Tonnesson, S., Tungand, Nguyen Vu and Hershberg, J (1998) *77 conversations between Chinese and foreign leaders on the wars in Indochina, 1964-1977*. Cold War International History Project working paper, Westad, O. A., Cheng, J, Tonnesson, S, Vu Tung, Ngugen and Hershberg, J (eds.) (No.22). Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, USA.

in August 1945 as an unfortunate necessity. It was also seen as a ceiling, not a floor, when it came to Sino-Soviet cooperation.

All this was swept away in 1949, however, when economic integration with the USSR became hugely important to Mao's China. China was quickly included in a new international socialist economic system that was linked to the emergence of a bloc that stretched from Eastern Europe all the way to East Asia. The level of change needed to accommodate this economic engagement should not be underestimated.

But the Sino-Soviet economic relationship was not without friction. Mao was deeply resentful of what he regarded as ungenerous initial loans from Stalin in the early 1950s. And the PRC looked for ways to diversify away from the dominance of the Soviet economy. Japan, for instance, became a significant trade partner, albeit one that was not recognized formally until 1971.

#### *Domestic society*

The Sino-Soviet interaction also has to be understood in the context of much wider social fear about the outcome of a potential Third World War. That particular ecology of social unease sits alongside the better-known aspects of Chinese domestic politics in the 1950s and 1960s when there was a constant series of campaigns (Anti-Rightist Campaign, Great Leap Forward, Socialist Education Campaign, and finally the Cultural Revolution) that resulted in the radicalization of much of society. The CCP was concerned about social disorder during this time but was also able to use popular rumors about the emergent Cold War to shape perceptions of why their regime had to act with force. For instance, there was the rumor, not without foundation, that Chiang Kai-shek would return to the mainland in a new war. Previous work, such as the research of Chen Jian, has shown convincingly that China's entry into the Korean War was accompanied by increasingly intense and radicalized domestic politics, which were further influenced by the closeness of the PRC to Stalin's USSR. But less attention has been paid to the wider social context of uncertainty and potential turmoil within China during those years, in part because access to archives with appropriate data has not been possible until recently.

Domestic society was heavily influenced by widespread and often wild ideas about the atomic bomb: domestic intelligence sources suggested that the wider population was aware of the destructive power of atomic weapons and had built that understanding into their explanation of the turbulent times that they lived in. Forthcoming work shows how comprehensively local society in China was shaped by rumors of coming war and apocalyptic disaster during those years, and how aware the CCP was of that turbulence below the surface.

## What are the implications for scholars as well as U.S./allied policymakers?

Do these contextual factors relating to the rise and fall of the Sino-Soviet alliance have significance for the current partnership between the two? Some aspects of geopolitics have of course changed. There is less obvious Russian involvement in Asia, and China is now a much more powerful regional and global actor. But domestic politics still matter in both: while elites in the two countries currently cooperate well, there are issues that suggest significant differences remain between the two. For instance, at the start of the Ukraine War in 2022, the scholar Hu Wei wrote an essay, later censored, that warned China against getting too close to Russia. This suggests that there is unease under the surface of a full-scale cooperation between the two sides.

Perhaps the most important shift has been the way that China uses international networks and institutions in the region: its dominance in geoeconomics and regional trade agreements (e.g., RCEP) gives it agency it did not have during the alliance with the USSR, and enables it to dictate certain economic terms to Russia, for example on oil purchases. It may be that China's growing presence eventually causes friction with Russia; for instance in the Arctic, China would like to have more influence but Russia is wary of allowing in new actors. But a warmer American posture toward Russia is unlikely to detach Moscow from Beijing in the way that Nixon's rapprochement accomplished during the 1960s. Rather, under those circumstances, Russia is likely to use the opportunity to deepen its connections with China in the knowledge that the United States will not push back against it.

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