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China-Russia Security Cooperation in the 2020s:

THE ROLE OF IDEOLOGY IN SINO-SOVIET AND SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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What was the nature of DPRK-China-Soviet alignment during the early Cold War (1949-1969)? What metrics do you use to assess it?

The Sino-Soviet relationship of the early Cold War (1949–1969) was a deep but tenuous alliance built on three pillars: ideological consonance, mutual threat perceptions, and utilitarian elements, including but not limited to economic cooperation and assistance, domestic political considerations, and personal relationships. The ideological consonance was the bedrock of the alliance on which the mutual threat perceptions and utilitarian elements were based, and from which they largely derived. As this ideological consonance dissolved, however, threat perceptions diverged and the utilitarian elements of the alliance disappeared, particularly in the realm of domestic politics, where political considerations increasingly militated against the alliance rather than supporting it.

How did it change over time? What explains the evolution of the relationship?

In the early years of the Cold War, particularly before the death of Joseph Stalin, these three pillars worked in favor of a strong alignment. Both sides shared a view of the world in which a capitalist/imperialist camp in crisis and on the decline represented a military threat, particularly to communist countries, as it sought to maintain its supremacy and suppress challenges that might arise. This threat perception was built on the foundation of an ideology that saw the world as divided between capitalists and communists, in which both conflict and the eventual decline of capitalism and victory of communism were inevitable. Personal relationships bolstered alignment as well. Despite tense moments between Mao Zedong and Joseph Stalin, Stalin's prestige in the international communist movement meant that alignment with him allowed Mao and the PRC to benefit from his reflected glow.

Between Stalin's death in 1953 and Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956, the alliance reached a high point in terms of utilitarian value. Soviet aid to the industrializing Chinese economy reached its peak, cultural and educational exchanges connected the two peoples, and the two countries complemented each other diplomatically, as evidenced by China's diplomatic re-emergence at Bandung and at the 1954 Geneva Conference that ended the First Indochina War.

Domestic political and international changes, however, soon began to undermine this value. First, in the wake of Stalin's death, the USSR's collective leadership weakened its ability to assert itself within the communist camp. This meant that Chinese leaders were slow to realize that the Soviet Union was significantly diverging from its previous path. In Europe, meanwhile, the Cold War was becoming increasingly stable: Germany was officially divided into two states, NATO and the Warsaw Pact had been formed, and a deal was reached to neutralize Austria. As a result, the center of geopolitical competition to the decolonization in Asia and Africa, and Moscow and Beijing responded to this shift—and the extent of the Western threat—differently.[1]

Chinese leaders were suspicious of Khrushchev's Secret Speech because of its introduction of de-Stalinization and its foreign policy of "Peaceful Coexistence." But the entire communist world had used "peace" as slogan and propaganda tool since the late 1940s, so it was not immediately clear that "Peaceful Coexistence" would have significant practical implications. It soon became clear, however, first when the Soviets showed increasing willingness to engage diplomatically with the West, including Khrushchev's meetings with U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, and then through their reluctance to support armed struggle in places like Algeria. (Beijing, by contrast, aided the Algerian FLN.)

It was difficult for most observers to see this deterioration in relations. Maintaining the optics of the alliance, after all, still had value to both sides. But ideological and international factors consistently pushed Moscow and Beijing apart. When the Soviets adopted a neutral stance in the 1959 Sino-Indian border war, for instance, the Chinese saw it as a violation of the alliance and a potential signal of betrayal in case of full-scale war. The Soviets in turn saw Chinese actions, such as the Second Taiwan Straits Crisis of 1958, as unnecessarily "adventurist" and directed toward enmeshing the USSR in a military struggle not of its own choosing. It became increasingly clear that ideological divergences had military implications that would eventually override the continuing political and diplomatic value of the alliance.

In 1960, when the Soviet Union withdrew its economic advisers from the PRC, the Sino-Soviet Split began to become more public. Still, however, the two sides spent the next three years sorting out what that would mean in terms of military implications and domestic politics. Representatives of the two countries were turning communist and communist-aligned venues—including Communist Party Congresses of various countries, meetings of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization, and meetings of the World Peace Organization—into forums for confrontation and competition. They were also competing for the allegiance of third countries such as Cuba, North Vietnam, Algeria, Indonesia,

[1] For example, the Chinese leadership sent the Soviets a secret brief disagreeing with their analysis of the Western threat and the doctrine of peaceful coexistence according to Karen Brutents, deputy director of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party. See Karen Brutents, *Tridtsat' Let' na Staroi Ploshchadi* [Thirty Years on Old Square], (Moscow: Mezhdurandnye Otnosheniia, 1998), p.140.

and many others. Although both sides nurtured some hope of military cooperation in places like Cuba, Vietnam, and the Congo, each side perceived the lack of coordination from the other as betrayal, thus crystallizing the practical implications of the ideological division.

In the realm of domestic politics, with Soviet economic aid to China now cut off and China mired in the Great Leap Forward Famine, China's new promotion of self-reliance and Mao's political retreat set the stage for the eventual use of Soviet "revisionism" as a domestic political cudgel that would come into play during the subsequent Cultural Revolution. In Moscow, this period saw the height of Khruschev's ascendancy, which likewise would lead to the connection of domestic leadership struggles with the Sino-Soviet Split only later at the time of his removal in October 1964.

At the height of the Sino-Soviet Split (1963–1969), this open competition escalated from ideological disavowal and diplomatic confrontation to military clashes along their shared border, culminating in battles along the Ussuri River in March 1969 and a Soviet proposal to the United States to preemptively destroy China's nuclear capability. The stakes of the ideological divergence had become clear and undeniable, turning the two states into diplomatic rivals as well as military enemies, and making the ideological disagreements a useful tool for combatting domestic political rivals. Mao, for instance, used charges of "revisionism" and sympathy for the Soviet Union as a tool for combatting his perceived domestic enemies and renewing large-scale revolutionary violence during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Despite this, both sides did attempt to coordinate on aid to North Vietnam, a tense process due to obvious mistrust but logistical necessity, which nevertheless was successful enough to sustain Hanoi's war effort.[2]

Ideology is key to understanding the dynamics of the Sino-Soviet relationship in this period. It both provided the epistemic basis for other issues and provided the key source of both domestic and international political legitimacy. Similar to the position of the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of communist revolution only permitted a single definitive authority, and since both Moscow and Beijing claimed this position, ideological divergence made their positions irreconcilable.

I have defined ideology elsewhere as a "systematically simplified method for understanding reality that facilitates judgment and action." This means, for example, that it shaped perceptions in Moscow and Beijing of the military threat from the West, the role of the Algerian FLN in the global revolutionary process, or even what a "revisionist" was and what sort of threat he or she could pose. Ideology served as a basis of political legitimacy both for domestic political actors (e.g. Mao versus Liu Shaoqi or Peng Zhen, and Khrushchev versus Malenkov or Molotov), as well as internationally, where both

[2] See Friedman, *Shadow Cold War,* pp.164-170.

Moscow and Beijing claimed the mantle of the leader of the world revolution, which allowed them to punch above their economic and even military weight.

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

As far as the implications of this analysis for the contemporary Sino-Russian relationship, I would point to four:

1) The importance of examining peripheral diplomatic activities (e.g. interactions in NGOs, secondary international organizations, peripheral countries, etc.). Just as Sino-Soviet tensions played out in places like the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization or the corridors of power in Jakarta before they were openly fighting on the world stage, Sino-Russian interactions in venues such as the Arctic Council or the World Health Organization can tell us a lot about the true state of the relationship.
2) External threats can bring them together, but not necessarily. It depends upon the level of ideological consonance, which impacts threat perception, a factor that also depends upon no. 3, below.
3) Personal relationships between leaders matter, given their outsized influence over the ideologies of their states.
4) And finally, the "global chorus" matters, because neither country truly sees itself as a rogue state.

Questions for further historical investigation:

1) To what extent did the Chinese from 1953–1956 really believe in the stability of the alliance? How stable was it at its peak?
2) How much did the alliance actually increase their potential fighting capability in a hypothetical military confrontation with the West? Were they much more powerful together than they would have been apart?
3) How much did they trust each other at the peak? How much intelligence activity was conducted against one another? Did they steal economic and/or military secrets?

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