

The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969

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Abstract

At the height of the Cold War a dispute between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union nearly escalated into an all-out war that could have enveloped the entire globe. A border conflict between the two nations over disputed territories served as a flash point in the Cold War similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Amid growing tensions between the two nations, the border conflict severed ties and shifted the bipolar power paradigm. After severing ties with the Soviet Union, China looked towards rapprochement with United States. The significance of the conflict during the Cold War is far reaching considering the ideological shift that has led China to becoming the global power it is today. Examining what led to the conflict and the conflict itself, various international relations theories can be applied. A theoretical analysis of the conflict supports the successful use of deterrence by each nation and provides evidence to the clash of civilizations theory as causation for the conflict.

Keywords

Deterrence Theory, Clash of Civilizations Theory, Deterrence, China, Russia, The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict of 1969, Conflict Theory, Cold War, International Relations, Soviet Union, USSR, Sino-Soviet, Power Transition Theory, Nuclear Deterrence

1. Introduction

At the height of the Cold War a dispute between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union nearly escalated into an all-out war that could have enveloped the entire globe. A border conflict between the two nations over disputed territories served as a flash point in the Cold War similar to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Amid growing tensions between the two nations, the border conflict severed ties and shifted the bipolar power paradigm. After severing ties with the Soviet Union, China looked towards rapprochement with United States. The

significance of the conflict during the Cold War is far reaching considering the ideological shift that has led China to becoming the global power it is today. Examining what led to the conflict and the conflict itself, various international relations theories can be applied. A theoretical analysis of the conflict supports the successful use of deterrence by each nation and provides evidence to the clash of civilizations theory as causation for the conflict.

The broad application of any singular theory is problematic in that each conflict has various differing components. In debating the relevance of the clash of civilizations, circular arguments with power transition theory can be drawn. The importance of culture or even the definition can be debated. Is culture more important than power in an international dispute? Is power a part of culture? Is a nation acting in its own interest to insist on its cultural superiority? In doing so is the goal greater power? The secondary problem with applying these theories to one conflict is that it does not provide sufficient data or evidence to the success of the theory. By looking at the successful deterrence of both the Soviet Union and China in this conflict, broad support for nuclear deterrence or the lack of it cannot be gleaned.

In order to understand the Sino-Russian border dispute of 1969, one must first understand the history of the border. Russian and Chinese border conflicts first began in the 1600s as both empires sought expansion. The Russians had expanded west from what is now Moscow until they met the Pacific Ocean then began to make their way south into the Amur River basin. The Chinese Empire considered this area to be their land at the time (Maxwell, 2007: p. 230). As the Russians began to set up trading posts and forts in the region, the Chinese eventually realized this was an imperial challenge rather than individual settlers. After clashes in the area in the 1670s and 80s, the Russians “proposed negotiations to delimit a boundary, and the two sides met in August 1689” (Maxwell, 2007: p. 230). With what became known as the “The Treaty of Nerchinsk,” a frontier between the two empires was created, “a separation of sovereignties that was zonal rather than linear” (Maxwell, 2007: p. 231).

Two centuries later in the mid 1800s the Chinese Empire, “was well advanced into its times of troubles, weakened by defeat in the Opium Wars,” (two wars in the 1800s over disputes of China’s sovereignty and British trade in China) (Maxwell, 2007: p. 231). It was at this time that the Russians began to renew their colonization of the Amur River basin. They were met with no resistance and after advancing further into the Chinese territory created by The Treaty of Nerchinsk; the Russians demanded new boundaries be drawn. A weakened China conceded large swathes of land to the Russians and the boundary was drawn separating China and Russia along the Ussuri River in the Treaty of Peking (Figure 1).

In 1919 after the Russian revolution, “the commissar for foreign affairs, Leo Karakhan, announced the Soviet government’s unilateral and unconditional renunciation of all the Tsars’ territorial seizures in China” (Maxwell, 2007: p. 234). This move was very popular amongst Chinese revolutionaries including Mao

MANCHURIA–U.S.S.R BOUNDARY

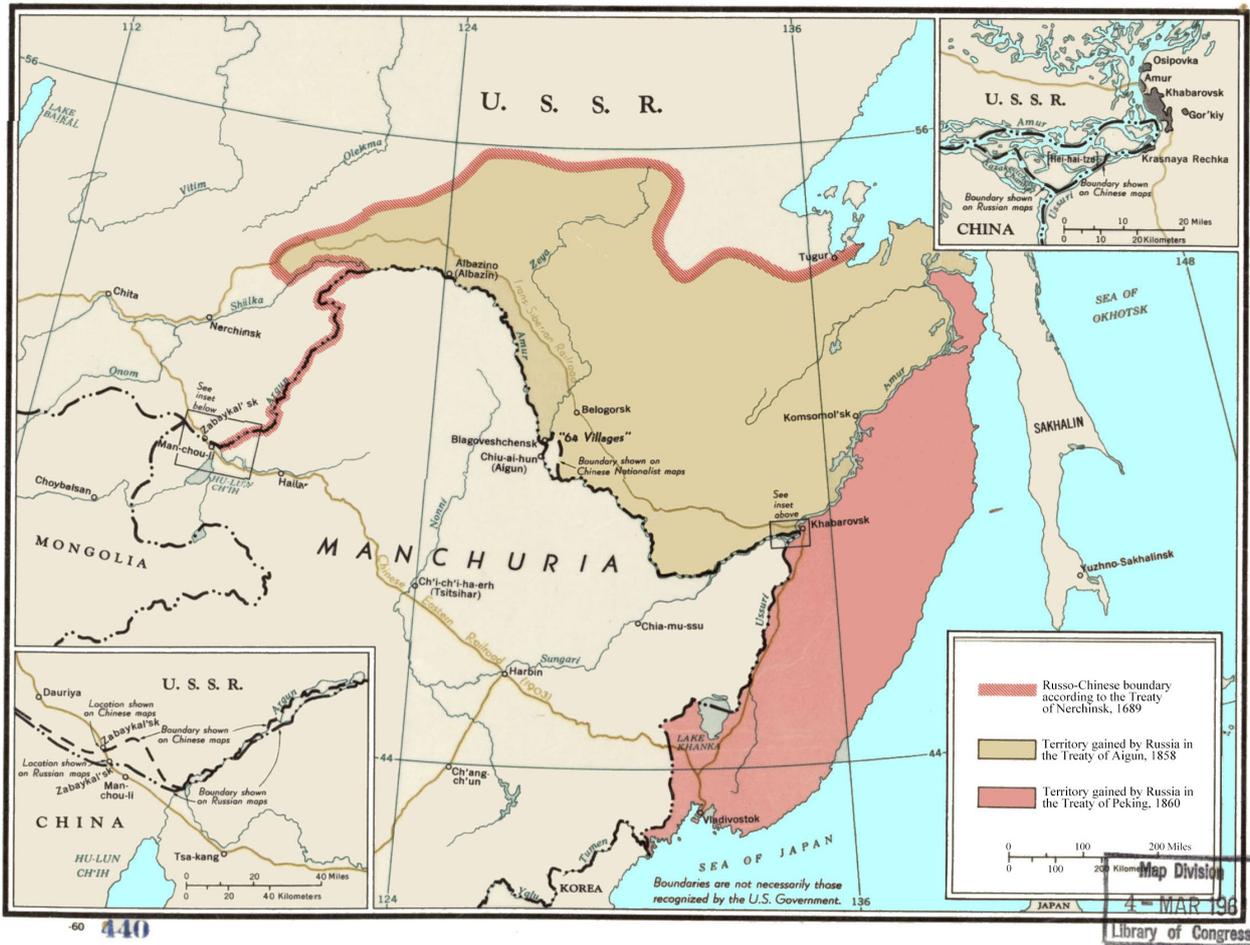


Figure 1. The above map shows the region gained by the Russians in the mid 1800s and the newly drawn border along the Ussuri River.

Zedong. However, at the time, the counter revolutionaries controlled much of the newly formed Soviet Union. The Soviet government did not have the authority to make such a proclamation. Shortly afterwards the Soviets revoked the declaration to return this land to China and, “for the Chinese, the boundary became the physical incarnation of China’s failure to fend off the predations of European civilization, while for the Russians their expanded boundary enshrined their country’s great power status. Thus the border became a potent but antipodal symbol for both countries—for one it represented failure, for the other, success” (Maxwell, 2007: p. 234).

After World War II the Soviet Union emerged along with the United States as bi-polar global hegemony. China’s communist party sought to control its nation and, “the overriding priority was to nourish and strengthen alliance with the USSR, the only potential source of the economic assistance and political alliance China desperately needed” (Maxwell, 2007: p. 235). Eventually it became a priority for the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to establish clear borders with neighboring countries and many borders were not clearly delineated (Maxwell, 2007:

p. 235). The countries with which it sought to peacefully create borders were the Soviet Union, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Mongolia.

In 1959 the Chinese and India had a border dispute and the Soviet Union sided with India on this matter (Kuisong, 2000: p. 23). After this the relationship between Moscow and Beijing began to deteriorate. Through out the early 1960's as friction between the two nations intensified, the dispute over borders became focused on the area along the Ussuri River, especially on two small islands lying on the Ussuri River, Zhenboa and Qiliqin. By the late 1960s the Soviet military had cut off Chinese use of the river completely. The Chinese and Soviets both began to place troops on each side of the river in order to assert their claim (Maxwell, 2007: p. 244). Each nation had orders to maintain control of the river and use any force short of gunfire. In January 1968, a Soviet armored vehicle on Qiligin Island killed four Chinese civilians; afterwards Mao Zedong sent more troops to the region and prepared for the next Soviet advancement.

The Soviet Union and China both placed more troops along the riverbanks and in 1969 on Zhenboa Island fighting broke out. After two skirmishes on Zhenboa Island the Chinese army had won the battle and shifted a power structure of Russia imposing will on China that had existed for 100 years (Maxwell, 2007: p. 249). Russia continued to concentrate forces along the Ussuri River near Zhenboa Island while seeking out diplomatic talks with Beijing. On the western border near Mongolia, the Soviet Union engaged in small border fights with Chinese military. Fighting increased and intensified and eventually Moscow conveyed the message that, "it was ready to launch war with China that could begin with a nuclear strike" (Maxwell, 2007: p. 249).

In August of 1969, Soviet officials met with U.S. State Department representatives to gauge the United States' potential reaction to a strike against a Chinese nuclear facility (Kuisong, 2000: p. 34). The possibility of total war between China and the Soviet Union became imminent. Once Mao Zedong heard news that Moscow had been inquiring about global reaction to a nuclear strike a meeting was called and in September of 1969 talks between the two nations began. No agreement was reached but the dispute, "relaxed into an uneasy and protracted stalemate" (Maxwell, 2007: p. 250). While no formal settlement was reached until 1991 the border dispute of 1969 between China and the Soviet nearly erupted into a nuclear conflict and possibly WWII.

2. Clash of Civilizations Theory

The relationship between China and Russia had been one-sided for 100 years with Russia being the dominant power. Leading into the 1960s, as the relationship between China and the Soviet Union weakened, a new dynamic between the two countries emerged. China saw Soviet expansion and imperialism as a threat to their understanding of Marxism and their sovereignty (Chan, 1999: p. 205). The perceived Soviet desire to control its allies instilled a fear in Chinese leadership and created a cultural rift at the prospect of Soviet superiority (Luthi, 2010:

p. 3). At the heart of their ideological differences were both matters of national self-interest and understanding of Marxism-Leninism.

It can be postulated that both the Soviet Union and the Chinese communists, “believed that they were working toward the realization of the communist dream” (Luthi, 2010: p. 9). However, both nations held different understandings of the correct implementation of Marxist principles, providing considerable opportunity for disagreement over policies. Mao Zedong and his comrades held the belief that the United States was an inherently aggressive imperialistic state and could not reconcile with the Soviet policy of peaceful coexistence with the United States (Luthi, 2010: p. 10).

The clash of civilizations theory argues that principal conflicts between nations are determined by cultural differences (Huntington, 1993). In agreement with Huntington, Mingjiang Li, a political scientist at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, states, “when ideological differences exist between two countries, political leaders in one country are likely to regard the ideological and political orientation of the other country as a challenge and even a threat to their own domestic ideological and political program and goals” (Xi, 2014: p. 260). Specifically in reference to the burgeoning conflict between China and the Soviet Union, Li uses documents from the Chinese Foreign Ministry archive to illustrate the cultural and ideological differences that lead to hostility (Xi, 2014: p. 261).

Leading up to the border conflict in 1969 it was the cultural differences between China and the Soviet Union that caused a strain in their relationship. Beyond foreign policy, disputes of economic policy between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China began in the 1950’s. As China was faced with economic troubles, Mao proposed a series of highly ideological solutions with which the Soviets disagreed. Eventually the Soviet Union pulled its specialists out of Beijing after, “antagonistic ideological campaigns,” by the Chinese (Luthi, 2010: p. 11).

Ideological differences in the communist model played a role in the deteriorating relationship between the Soviet Union and China. Each nation began to have separate interests, leading to open disputes and eventually military conflict. The Sino-Soviet conflict fits Huntington’s model of the clash of civilizations. Firstly, two, “civilizations struggle ... over the control of territory.” Secondly, “states from different civilizations compete for relative military and economic power ... and competitively promote their particular political and religious values” (Huntington, 1993: p. 29). It began in the 1950’s but the ideological differences between the Soviet Union and China eventually manifested itself in the form of the Sino-Soviet border conflict. The open military fighting finally severed ties between the two nations after years of conflicting policies and ideologies.

3. Deterrence Theory

In 1969 China and the Soviet Union’s border conflicts caused significant changes

to the relationship between the two nations without a large-scale military engagement. At the time China's nuclear capabilities were significantly behind the Soviet Union yet both nations never engaged in a large-scale conflict. China was the initial instigator, but as the border skirmishes continued both nations essentially became defenders in the conflict. According to Huth, "a policy of deterrence seeks to convince an adversary by the threat of military retaliation that the costs of resorting to the use of military force to achieve foreign policy objectives will outweigh the benefits," (Huth, 1988: p. 2). In the case of the Sino-Soviet border conflicts, both nations were able to deter one another from escalation due to the threat of each nation's military capability.

During the border conflict the Soviet Union threatened to attack Chinese nuclear sites, "despite the fact that the Soviet Union was an early contributor to the Chinese nuclear program" (Rajagopalan, 2000: p. 10). Inversely, regardless of China's technologically inferior capabilities, the Soviet Union's unwillingness to attack Chinese nuclear sites suggests, "that even the rudimentary deterrent capabilities of the Chinese strategic forces were a sufficient deterrent," (Rajagopalan, 2000: p. 12). While the Soviet Union was a super power along with the United States, China was a burgeoning power on a global scale at the time. In order for deterrence to be successful, the military capabilities of the defender must be able to deny an attacker decisive victory (Huth, 1988: p. 2). At different times during the border conflict each nation attacked on a small scale and was rebuffed; yet neither side was willing to escalate the conflict for fear of reprisal.

Typically state actors evaluate immediate military capabilities when determining whether or not an attack can be successful, and are less likely to be swayed by long-term balance of forces (Huth, 1988). At the time of the conflict the Chinese military was extremely large and Mao Zedong's military philosophy emphasized the power of man over weapons. Any large-scale conflict would result in ground warfare along the border of China and the Soviet Union. This possibly could have resulted in the loss of strategic Soviet locations. Any reticence on China's part could be attributed to their fear of nuclear retaliation. The Soviet Union's nuclear capabilities were at an advantage where China could not secure second-strike ability.

The nuclear advantage of the Soviet Union in the conflict illustrates, "the uselessness of nuclear superiority or the implications of nuclear inferiority" (Rajagopalan, 2000: p. 13). China's ability to deter the Soviet Union despite its technological deficiency suggests that a nuclear threat can be mitigated with a sufficient military apparatus. The threat of nuclear war in itself is a sufficient deterrent due to a, "combination of salient political, military, and ethical questions about the immediate and long-term consequences" (Huth, 1988: p. 7). A nuclear attack could be met with global outrage on ethical grounds or potentially spark a third world war. The Soviet Union was aware of the consequences of a potential nuclear conflict and was uneasy about China as an emerging power (Rajagopalan, 2000: p. 10).

The Sino-Soviet border conflicts provide support to a case where deterrence was successful. Like the Cuban Missile Crisis, a large-scale conflict was averted due to the threat of escalation by both China and the Soviet Union. The threat of a nuclear strike by the Soviet Union and a massive ground invasion by the Chinese intimate that each nation was able to deter the other. While China was first to attack, resulting Soviet advancements on Zhenboa Island and along the Ussuri River essentially made both nations defenders. In what amounted to a chicken game where neither nation ever began to drive towards the other for fear the other wouldn't swerve.

Deterrence theory and clash of civilizations theory independently tell an incomplete story of the Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969. Complicated international relations can hardly be summarized through a single lens, and gaining perspective on a historical event with significant international ramifications requires a broader perspective. In applying deterrence theory to the border conflict we do not examine causation but rather the individual conflict itself. A strong case could be made for both successful nuclear deterrence as well as the unreliability of nuclear superiority as a deterrent. In the case of the border conflict, the Soviet Union had the clear superiority in nuclear capability and in military technology. However, China's main deterrent was its overwhelming ground force. An additional problem with this specific case is that military conflict did in fact break out although the fighting was limited to small border skirmishes.

Deterrence theories can illustrate the decision apparatus within the conflict by each nation, but to understand the conflict requires more information. With the application of the clash of civilizations theory a further understanding as to the conflicts cause can be illustrated. In this context the border dispute was more than a short conflict over lines, but a cultural and ideological rift between two Cold War allies. At the beginning the alliance between the two nations was, "hailed by its creators as unbreakable and eternal" (Li, 2011: p. 387). The eventual split is considered to be an ideological one by many historians and political scientists, supporting the clash of civilizations theory. However, similar to deterrence theory, this approach has its problems. While ideological and cultural differences certainly played a role in the Sino-Soviet split, some argue that it was a struggle over power and an imbalance of power that led to hostilities. Sergei Radchenko argues that, "the intrinsic inequality of the Sino-Soviet Alliance ... brought it to ruin" (Thornton, 2009: p. 1047).

The line of thinking that the conflict was caused by a power struggle gives credence to the application of the power transition theory. When one nation begins to challenge the hegemony of another and the status quo, conflict erupts (Houweling & Siccama, 1988). In following this argument a circle can be drawn back to the debate of ideological differences. China would not be acting in its self-interest to maintain the status quo: a power balance favoring the Soviet Union. In seeking a more even balance of power, China would be ideologically opposed to Soviet authority and a more even power structure would serve as a de-

terrent in conflict.

4. Conclusion

The Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969 provides support for both deterrence theory and the clash of civilizations theory. The conflict brings to question the reliability of nuclear deterrence while both supporting its efficacy and challenging its practice in conflict. China was able to deter the Soviet Union due to its non-nuclear military capabilities, yet it was the Soviets nuclear advantage that caused Mao to fear full-scale conflict. The emerging ideological differences between China and the Soviet Union leading up to the border conflict contribute to the clash of civilizations theory. However, the argument that cultural differences are the main cause of conflict between nations is problematic due to its far-reaching and difficult definition. The clash of civilizations theory in this case can be augmented by power transition theory. Historical data from the Sino-Soviet border conflict provides support for both the application of deterrence theory and the clash of civilization theory but in doing so challenges both theories.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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