

# **Origins and Consequences of the Soviet-Chinese Border Conflict of 1969**

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## **Prelude to the Military Clash**

A change for the worse in Soviet-Chinese relations at the end of the 1950s was caused, mainly, by ideological discords between the party leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Communist Party of China (CPC). The main points of contention, where the parties had contrary points of view, were the appraisal of Stalin's legacy, the possibility of peaceful coexistence of the states with different social systems, the problems of war and peace, the economic experiments in China, etc.

While Joseph Stalin, with his absolute authority, was alive, even Mao Zedong did not try to play a more important political role than he already had. Besides this, the Chinese people felt gratitude for Stalin's help in their struggle against the Japanese army and Chiang Kaishek's troops.

But after the death of the Soviet leader and simultaneously with the consolidation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong began to demonstrate China's independence in internal and foreign affairs more than before. Probably, the Chinese leader proceeded from the idea that his country's heavily populated and ancient culture must not play a supporting role to the Soviet Union in any matter. Thus, the Chinese leadership intended to occupy the leading position in the world communist movement, especially in the so-called third-world countries. It is natural

that such a turn was not pleasant to Moscow who wished to remain the sole and supreme authority for all supporters of Marxism-Leninism (socialism).

Concerning the relation to capitalist countries, there was an absolute misunderstanding, too. Mao Zedong considered a third world war as a good phenomenon because he had no doubts about the defeat of imperialism. The death of hundreds of millions of people was considered by the Chinese leader as an inevitable payment for the achievement of a great aim—the victory and affirmation of communism worldwide. Mao Zedong frankly asserted as much in November 1957 when he took part in a ceremonial meeting in connection with the fortieth anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution.

The Soviet leaders had another point of view because many of them had taken part in the Second World War and therefore imagined quite well the range of different disasters if something similar were to be repeated. Thus, the Kremlin was inclined to peaceful coexistence with capitalist encirclement, but Mao Zedong considered such a position as a demonstration of weakness and unscrupulousness. There was a time when Mao even tried to set the Soviet leadership against the US—obviously in hopes of taking a neutral position in case of a serious conflict. But Moscow understood this play and refused to clash with the US.

In 1959, China provoked a conflict with India,<sup>1</sup> but the Soviet leadership took a neutral position. This ignited Mao's anger because the USSR actually demonstrated its unwillingness to help a communist country in a struggle against a capitalist foe and, moreover, even gave India moral support.

A definite role in the break of relations was played by a subjective factor: the impulsive Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, allowed himself not to validate statements to the address of Mao Zedong who painfully perceived any possible criticism. The vain Chinese leader tried to imitate Stalin in many respects, and similar to Stalin, wished to take a position of infallible authority—all-knowing, understanding, and whose every decision is accepted without discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> In that year Chinese troops stifled a rebellion of buddhists in Tibet but India declared their support of the Dalai Lama and even accepted him after he fled China. In September he appealed to the UN to interfere in the conflict. In July 1959 some Indian police officers were captured by the Chinese. Chinese troops began to invade India.

In 1964, a “change of the guard” took place in Moscow’s Kremlin: the removal of Khrushchev was followed by the ascent of a new leader, Leonid Brezhnev. However, this did not lead to the normalization of Soviet-Chinese relations. The main reason seems to have been Mao's unchanged intentions of instigating a confrontation with the USSR. The inertia of this sharp polemic that had developed from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s affected Soviet-Chinese relations.

In particular, Soviet-Chinese border relations became essentially strained.

In accordance with the Treaty of Peking of 1860 (or, more exactly, in accordance with a map of the Russian-Chinese border that was a component of the treaty), the border between Russia (later the USSR) and China was drawn along the Chinese bank of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers and the Kazakevichevo Channel as well. Thus, these rivers and all islands on them belonged to Russia/USSR. It is necessary to note that both the Soviet and Chinese mass media repeatedly reported the existence of a map with a border line (the so-called red line) drawn on it; however, this map was never made public.

In the 1950s, during Soviet-Chinese cooperation and friendship, none of the Chinese leaders expressed opinions about the doubtful tracing (demarcation) of the border line. But after the beginning of the Soviet-Chinese polemic, Beijing recollected the disadvantageous border demarcation and demanded a fair resolution to the problem. The result was an escalation of tension along the border between the USSR and the PRC. In the beginning, there were disputes between Soviet border guards and Chinese citizens, who were inhabitants and so-called *hongweibing* (or “red guards”) sent by Chinese authorities to the river islands to demonstrate their belonging to China. Gradually, the civilians were substituted for military men of the People’s Liberation Army of China (PLA), and verbal skirmishes developed into hand-to-hand fights using sticks, knives, spades, etc. Thus, already at that time, it had become clear that the official authority of China had deliberately aimed to aggravate its relations with the USSR. The numerous intrusions of Chinese citizens onto the Soviet islands at the border rivers resulted in conflicts only. Many former Soviet participants of the events told the author how before the armed clashes, they tried to communicate with these local Chinese inhabitants who demonstratively violated the border and illegally entered Soviet territory. According to their memoirs, the Chinese fishermen and

peasants were not glad to take part in the provocations. They were driven to the river islands by PLA officers, employees of the special services and local CPC functionaries.

Many researchers consider the border dispute between the USSR and China as the main reason for the bloodshed. They see the sources of this conflict in the imperfection of the border agreements, which were signed in different historical periods by officials of Russia and China. However, it is sufficient only to cast a glance at a map to understand the inconsistency of the given statement. Practically, none of the islands on the Amur and Ussuri Rivers had any important economic or military value, and, therefore, they could not serve as the reason for such serious confrontation. But discussions around the islands suited perfectly the situation where both parties of the conflict spoke about one thing but thought about absolutely another. Moreover, if the disputed islands had not existed at all, Mao Zedong and his colleagues in the Chinese leadership would have found other places for confrontation: to this, they were pushed by these realities that had developed by 1969 in and around China.

## **Who Provoked the Border Conflict in 1969 and Why**

Numerous researchers and authors of the West and the Soviet/Russia argue that conflicts along the Soviet-Chinese border were not a result of any tragic accident as is often presented in modern China. In fact, all bloody battles of 1969 were planned by the top leadership of the PRC, and carefully prepared for by the military command of the PLA. And it is natural to ask—with what purpose?

Of course, the exact answer to this question was known to only one person—Mao Zedong—but there is no possibility of asking him. Nevertheless, it is possible to conjecture about the logic of his reasoning and acts, knowing what occurred after the completion of the fights at the border.

One of the major reasons that Mao made up his mind for open confrontation with the USSR could have been his desire to adjust China's relations with the US. The fact is that by 1969, Soviet-Chinese connections were almost completely destroyed. The USSR did not give China any economic or scientific help, did not send specialists to Chinese

factories, did not supply China with new weapons, etc. But at that time, the Chinese economy could not develop without help from the outside world and risked lagging behind the rest of the world for a long time to come. Thus, China sharply needed a new sponsor to replace the USSR. At that time and under those circumstances, only the US could play such a role, and Mao therefore decided on a rapprochement with America.

Certainly, squabbles between the Soviet and Chinese leaders were an insufficient basis to decide on such an important problem because American politicians might consider the Soviet-Chinese ideological dispute as a temporary quarrel within the communist “family,” and no more than that. Therefore, Mao Zedong needed a more convincing argument to persuade the US of the serious character of the split between the USSR and the PRC. In such a situation, there was nothing better than bloodshed at the border—with numerous victims, but without the risk of it escalating into a large-scale war.

Another possible reason that might give Mao a shove towards conflict at the Soviet-Chinese border was a situation inside China because 1969 was a peak year in the “Cultural Revolution.” The crash of the economy, the degradation of education and culture, catastrophe in the social sphere, full disorder and lawlessness in the country—these and other consequences of Mao’s politics generated doubts concerning the correctness of the chosen way. Having organized the battles at the border, Mao could cast blame for the events in China onto their powerful northern neighbor: how can affairs be well if the country is exposed to external aggression?

It is quite possible that Mao Zedong chose the way of confrontation with the USSR because the ninth Congress of the Communist Party of China, planned for April 1969, could present the chairman of the PRC with unplanned surprises. Among the delegates of the congress, there were different people—veterans of the Communist Party belonging to various inner-party groups, promoted workers of the Cultural Revolution, and a large number of military personnel. There were supporters of the deposed Liu Shaoqi, too, the struggle against whom Mao possibly counted as the main task of the Cultural Revolution. The attitude of Liu Shaoqi and his colleagues to the Soviet Union was absolutely different from Mao Zedong’s. Liu believed that China and the USSR had many common points in their economies, ideologies, and politics and that it was therefore necessary to pay paramount attention to that which consolidated the

Chinese and Soviet peoples instead of that which separated them. Supporters of Liu Shaoqi excluded even the possibility of armed confrontation between the PRC and the USSR, and these moods could somehow be felt at the congress. What had happened at the border silenced all those delegates who counted Mao's policy on confrontation with the Soviet Union and all disagreements with the CPSU and the USSR as erroneous.

To consolidate the necessary impression, Mao made sure that one of the main participants of the clash at the border, Commander Sun Yuguo, had the right to speak at the congress. Sun Yuguo burst out with a faithful speech and after that, rushed, with loud shouts to shake the hands of the Chinese leadership—Mao Zedong, Lin Biao, Zhou Enlai, Jiang Qing, and others. During this procedure, all delegates of the congress welcomed the “hero” with an ovation.<sup>2</sup> As for Mao, he sat in his place and ominously grinned—as if he had assessed the show at its true value.

Mao Zedong always felt he was a positive force in conditions of struggle (against Japanese troops, Chiang Kaishek, “Soviet revisionists,” Liu Shaoqi, etc.), but constantly failed to improve the daily economic conditions of the Chinese people. Unlike Stalin, who was both a revolutionary and an economist, Mao Zedong was a revolutionary only. Therefore, the creation of any conflicts or collisions was the know-how without which Mao felt himself to be unnecessary and superfluous in life.

Events in Czechoslovakia (CSSR) in August 1968 might be one more reason. As is known, the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies of this country was argued for by the necessity to defend the achievements of socialism. In reality, the main question that all events developed around was most likely another; it was a question about the results of the Second World War because one of the last was an agreement regarding Soviet domination in Czechoslovakia. There was a moment when leaders of the

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<sup>2</sup> Today, Sun Yuguo lives in Shenyang City. All attempts of the author to contact him and ask some questions failed: former commander Sun refuses even to remember the events of March 1969 and his role in them. Moreover, he does not wish to discuss the subject with journalists of the Chinese mass media. The last circumstance will be understood by those investigators who studied the events at the border in detail: Sun Yuguo was indeed the Chinese military commander who ordered the sudden shooting of a group of Soviet border guards patrolling a part of the border. For this “heroic” act, Sun Yuguo received the title, “Hero of the PLA,” was elected at the ninth Congress of CPC, and made use of different privileges all his life.

USSR lost trust in their comrades in Prague and took all affairs into their own hands. It is important to notice that the sudden military invasion of the CSSR happened only after a wide propaganda campaign during which Soviet newspapers and TV channels inspired the idea that the problems in Czechoslovakia endangered socialism. Approximately the same expressions were being used by the Soviet mass media in their information about the situation in China. In such a case, Mao Zedong might find definite analogies and come to the conclusion that the same scenario might occur in China. If so, Mao simply anticipated such a turn of events and demonstrated to the Kremlin the readiness of the Chinese to fight until the last soldier. Of course, anyone can ask whether Mao saw the principal difference between the CSSR and China, and whether he understood that the military invasion of the PRC did not make any sense—above all, for territorial and demographic reasons. Besides this, there was the possibility that a restricted border conflict would develop into a full-scale war, threatening world catastrophe because both the USSR and China possessed nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup>

The personal qualities of the Chinese leader quite possibly played a definite role.<sup>4</sup> Everybody who was closely acquainted with Mao Zedong noticed his deep knowledge of Chinese history and literature, his adherence and love to everything Chinese. Possibly, centuries of humiliation and oppression of the Chinese people constantly aroused in Mao a keen feeling of vengeance, and this feeling appeared in a very unusual way. The negative qualities of Mao—love of power, vanity, and scornful relations with others—developed in the same way.

As for the Soviet leaders, none of them was interested in aggravating relations with China—anyway, no documents or personal memoirs of former Soviet high-ranking officials that testify to the contrary have been found. Moscow did not assume that there was any possibility of armed conflict at the border, even theoretically. Political departments of the

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<sup>3</sup> Not long ago, it became known that the Soviet minister of defense marshal, Andrei Grechko, offered to Soviet leaders at the top level to destroy Chinese nuclear facilities. According to his opinion, it would result in the cessation of Chinese provocations at the border. The probability of such development of events was not unthinkable, but Beijing stopped hostile activity at the Soviet-Chinese border and the worst did not happen.

<sup>4</sup> A former chief of the Soviet special service (KGB), Vladimir Kriuchkov, mentioned it in his memoirs. See Vladimir Kriuchkov, *Lichnoe Delo* (Moscow: Eksmo; Algorithm-Kniga, 2003, 480).

Soviet border troops explained that consideration of relations with China demanded the class point of view and use of the principle of proletarian internationalism. It was said, too, that the USSR disagreed with the politics of the Chinese leaders but that the Chinese People's Republic was a socialist country with a socialist method of production. And though the Chinese comrades made serious political mistakes, sooner or later the right line would win. Such was the logic of historical development and the determining tendency.

The Soviet ideologists believed that in the modern world, the socialist countries would fight only against hostile imperialistic encirclement. It was considered as an obvious fact that socialist countries would never attack first but would be only forced to beat off the aggression of imperialists. As to the possibility of war or military conflict inside the socialist camp, such ideas were not discussed because of their absolute impossibility and even absurdity.

At closed party meetings and conferences, the personal activity of Mao Zedong was being analyzed and valued. The CPSU members said that Mao had digressed from the principles of Marxism-Leninism but, nevertheless, was a communist. One of the main reasons for Mao's politics was the personal character of the Chinese leader and even his age (as they said, Mao had simply become senile).

Some Soviet citizens in confidential conversations with each other expressed the opinion that "our leaders are 'good,' too," and the squabble between Moscow and Beijing was the result of mutual ambitions. With definite humor, the subject of the dispute was determined: Soviet and Chinese "comrades" could not discover who among them had a better understanding of Marx's and Lenin's works.

Some Russian researchers have begun to discuss the subject of the possible interest of the Soviet generals and directors of military industry in a conflict at the border. But all known facts demand that similar "innovative" hypotheses be recognized as idle conjectures because there are no data that confirm them. It is just such a case when some unscrupulous researchers try to attract attention to themselves, even at the loss of their own reputation. Unfortunately, there are such persons in current Russian political and literary society who are very free and irresponsible with reference to facts. For example, the well-known writer Aleksandr Prokhanov taking part in a show at Russian TV International in January 2006 asserted, when asked about the culprits of the armed conflict



at Damanskii (Zhenbao) Island, that “both parties attacked each other.” After this, Prokhanov said that a confrontation with China was in the interests of Soviet leadership because the situation demanded it. (Unfortunately, Prokhanov did not explain what he meant by his comment that the situation demanded armed conflict against the Chinese.) The first statement sounds strange because it is very difficult to imagine how both parties of the conflict might attack each other—simultaneously? The second phrase (about Soviet leadership’s “interests”) is a typical example of conjecture, without any consideration of fact and great pretensions to the sensational. It is very difficult to understand Prokhanov’s position in any given case because he was the first Soviet journalist to visit the battlefield and should therefore know who the initiator and provocateur of the bloodshed was.

The Soviet economy was always on a war footing and was therefore never in need of money for its own existence and development. Moreover, in this period, the war in Vietnam reached its apogee, and this factor was a sufficient stimulus for strengthening of Soviet defensive capabilities. Thus, the Soviet directors of military industry had no reasons to request additional budgetary injections.

Of course, the events at the border could have been used by the leadership of the CPSU and the USSR to put things in the socialist camp in order. But that was absolutely another subject and had nothing to do with revealing the originators of the Soviet-Chinese border tragedy in 1969.

## **How the River Islands became Chinese**

A detailed discussion about the circumstances of the battles between Soviet and Chinese troops is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, the author advises readers who are interested in the subject to read such works where military aspects are investigated with special care. There, one can find important official documents, too.<sup>5</sup> The main events that

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<sup>5</sup> Dmitri Ryabushkin, *Mify Damanskogo* (Moscow: AST, 2004), 396; Vitalii Bubenin, *Krovavyy sneg Damanskogo: sobytiia 1966–1969 gg.* (Moscow: Granitsa; Kuchkovo Pole, 2004), 192; Andrei Musalov, *Damanskii and Zhalanashkol’: sovetsko-kitaiskii vooruzhennyi konflikt 1969 goda*, Eksprint: Fond voennogo iskusstva (Moscow: Eksprint, 2005), 40.

defined the character of the Soviet-Chinese conflict at the border are the focus.

The first and the bloodiest clash took place on Damanskii (Zhenbao) Island on the Ussuri River. There, on the nights of March 1–2, 1969, a specially trained squad of PLA (about three hundred soldiers and officers) organized an ambush. On the morning of March 2, 1969, a group of thirty Chinese military units, headed by the already-mentioned Sun Yuguo, demonstratively violated the border and after that, lured a group of Soviet border guards into a trap for a sudden ambush. The Chinese attack was exceptionally cruel, and the battle was very fierce. Although Chinese troops had full superiority in their quantity of soldiers and weapons, the Soviet border guards succeeded in not only inflicting serious casualties but also beating back the Chinese provocateurs out of Soviet territory.

The Chinese command did not reconcile itself to the defeat and made a new attempt to capture Damanskii Island on March 15, 1969. At that time, the Chinese sent a regiment into the battle. Attacks by Chinese infantry were supported by artillery fire.

The battle proceeded, with variable success, all day and ended only when the Soviet generals made up their mind to use massed artillery fire on the massed formations of Chinese reserves. The Chinese troops lost a huge number of soldiers and guns and halted their attempts to capture Damanskii. In the following days and nights, there were some fights of reconnaissance groups on the island. These fights resulted in victims for both parties; however, large-scale battles did not resume.

In the summer of 1969, the Chinese made an attempt to occupy Kirkinskii (Qiliqin) Island, which is located three kilometers north of Damanskii. With this purpose, the military men of PLA carried out different work on the equipment of gun positions and command points in the spring and summer of 1969. The Soviet officials limited themselves by protests but the Chinese ignored them. The Chinese command sent two companies to occupy the prepared positions on the island on July 20, 1969. However, violators of the border failed; intensive fire from Soviet machine guns and mortars forced them to flee.

Local skirmishes took place at other sections of the Soviet-Chinese border. An important detail is that in all conflicts, only the Chinese were the provocateurs and violators of the border. As to the Soviet border troops, they only defended their own territory from invasion and

occupation.<sup>6</sup> And every time, the Chinese were defeated. But ultimately, the fate of the islands on the Amur and Ussuri Rivers was resolved by politicians, not by soldiers. How did it happen? It seems the events surrounding Damanskii and Kirkinskii are the most instructive in this respect.

As a result of the March fights, the Chinese troops were defeated and driven out of Soviet territory. On the Soviet bank of the Ussuri River, units of the 135th Motorized Rifle Division arranged positions to stop possible provocations initiated by Chinese troops. But at that time, the Soviet border guards did not patrol Damanskii Island because the ice on the river had begun to melt and carrying detachments to the island was complicated. The Soviet command decided to organize a fire covering of the island. It meant that groups of snipers and machine gunners would open fire as soon as any Chinese tried to land on Damanskii.<sup>7</sup> The participants in these events recollect nowadays that shooting frequently took place at night, lighted by powerful projectors. The Chinese officials repeatedly protested because, as they said, the bullets flew toward Chinese territory, but these protests had no practical consequences. At the same time, Soviet diplomats tried to adjust the dialogue between Moscow and Beijing.

Soviet prime minister Aleksei Kosygin already tried to communicate by telephone with Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai on March 21, 1969. But an operator of the special communication service in Beijing refused to connect him with the Chinese leadership and said that leaders of the PRC had no subjects to discuss with “Soviet revisionists.”<sup>8</sup> All attempts by the Soviet leadership to arrange diplomatic contacts with Beijing failed.

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<sup>6</sup> Some foreign investigators of the events cannot agree with this fact because they think that in any conflict, both parties are guilty. But this point of view reflects only the political prejudice of its bearers because the experience of all conflicts demonstrates the presence of both an aggressor and a defender. In all clashes at the Soviet-Chinese border, the Soviet border guards were just defenders of the territory of the USSR. As for the responsibility for aggravation of Soviet-Chinese relations, both Soviet and Chinese leaders no doubt bore it.

<sup>7</sup> The Soviets shot those Chinese soldiers who tried to pull out a Soviet tank T-62, too. The tank (board number 545) was blown up on a Chinese mine during the battle on March 15, 1969 and, after unsuccessful attempts of the Soviet military to tow it to the Soviet bank of the river or to destroy it, it fell through the Ussuri ice.

<sup>8</sup> Many historians mention this episode, but none of them pays attention to an obvious circumstance: an ordinary operator could not independently decide such an important

Later on, Moscow repeatedly did its utmost to resume dialogue with Beijing. However, the Chinese were unwilling to negotiate. At the same time, Moscow warned the leaders of the PRC about its responsibility in case provocations at the border continued. It became clear soon enough what these warnings meant.

In the region of Zhalanashkol Lake (Kazakh SSR), one more clash between Soviet border guards and a special squad of PLA occurred on August 13, 1969. The Chinese tried to occupy positions in Soviet territory but were discovered and attacked by the local Soviet border guards. During this short fight, the Chinese were surrounded and then utterly defeated. This clash and its results made a serious impression on the leadership in Beijing: after the battle, the Chinese stopped any provocations at the Soviet-Chinese border.

A Soviet delegation, headed by Kosygin, arrived at the capital of Vietnam, Hanoi, for participation in mourning activities in connection with the death of the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh on September 6, 1969. Since there was a Chinese delegation headed by Li Xiannian at the same place, the Soviet prime minister decided to use this opportunity to make contact with Beijing. Vietnamese diplomats played the role of mediators in this cause.

Li Xiannian received information about Kosygin's desire to make a stop at Beijing at the end of the mourning activities and discuss the situation with the Chinese leadership. Immediately, Li Xiannian sent a message with this news to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

Having considered the Soviet offer, Mao agreed. However, he put forward a condition: the meeting should be of an informal character and take place outside the Chinese capital. Beijing Airport was chosen as the best place.

After this, an annoying blunder complicated the agreement; the Chinese embassy in Hanoi received an answer from Beijing on the morning of September 10, but Kosygin had already departed for Moscow through India.

Feeling their own responsibility for the possible failure of negotiations for a silly technical reason, the Chinese leadership displayed persistence. Firstly, the Soviet ambassador in Vietnam was informed

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question. It is clear that he only fulfilled a direct order of somebody within the Chinese leadership.

about its consent to negotiate (again through the Vietnamese diplomats). Secondly, the Chinese leadership informed the chargé d'affaires of the USSR in China, Aleksei Elizavetin, about Zhou Enlai's consent to meet at Beijing Airport.

Being guided by the interests of the affair, Kosygin immediately took off from Tashkent for Beijing.

The negotiations at Beijing Airport, with Kosygin and Zhou Enlai, took place on September 11, 1969. From the Soviet side, there were the secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Konstantin Katushev, and the vice president of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Iasnov. The Chinese party was represented by assistants of Prime Minister Li Xiannian and Xie Fuzhi. The meeting proceeded for three and a half hours.

During the conversation, Kosygin emphasized the necessity of a prompt settlement of all disagreements that had accumulated between the two countries. Zhou Enlai did not object; however, he laid stress on a decision on the border question. Zhou Enlai declared that "China has no territorial claims concerning the Soviet Union" and recognizes the existing border. At the same time, he raised the question of, as he expressed it, the "disputed lots," i.e., those territories that formerly belonged to China but were now under Soviet control in accordance with the so-called unequal agreements. However, the members of the Soviet delegation evaded any discussion of the question in such wording, otherwise an impression could have been created that Kosygin and his colleagues recognized the deficiency of all agreements concerning the border. (It might create a basis for further discussion of the problem that would be advantageous to the Chinese.) Therefore, Kosygin limited the discussion with a remark that experts should work in this area.

The main result of the discussion was the arrangement regarding the cessation of any hostile actions at the Soviet-Chinese border and keeping the Soviet and Chinese troops in the positions they were in at the moment of the negotiations.

The wording that "the troops will stay where they have stayed until now" was offered by Zhou Enlai, and Kosygin immediately agreed with it. And at that moment, Damanskii and Kirkinskii became de facto Chinese islands.

Such an unexpected conclusion may be explained by the fact that on September 10, 1969, the Soviet border guards received an order to stop

shooting at those Chinese who tried to penetrate the river islands. After this, the Chinese landed on Damanskii and Kirkinskii.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, on the day of the negotiations in Beijing, only the Chinese were at Damanskii and Kirkinskii. This meant that Kosygin's consent to the wording that "the troops will stay where they have stayed until now" assumed surrender of the islands to China.

In connection with these events, there are, at a minimum, two questions:

1. Did the Soviet leader know about the Chinese presence on the islands on the day of the negotiations?
2. If so, why did he agree to Zhou Enlai's offer?

The answer to the first question is: he knew. And the order to cease fire was given to create a favorable background for the beginning of negotiations. The Soviet leadership knew that the Chinese would land on Damanskii and deliberately agreed with it.

The answer to the second question is: they decided, in the Kremlin, that sooner or later the new border line would be drawn along the main waterways of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers. It meant that Damanskii and Kirkinskii would become Chinese islands. And if this was going to happen, there was no necessity to fight, all the more so because these islands had no economic or military value.

A governmental delegation of the USSR headed by the first assistant of Minister of Foreign Affairs Vasilii Kuznetsov arrived in Beijing on October 19, 1969. The aim of the visit was the renewal of negotiations on the border question.

Unfortunately, tensions in Soviet-Chinese relations did not weaken. The fact is that the most powerful groups in the Beijing leadership were those that considered any steps taken by Moscow as an act of perfidy. They followed such logic analyzing the behavior of Kosygin during discussions at Beijing Airport. As for Mao Zedong, he considered all peaceful initiatives of Moscow as a screen for preparing a sudden military blow against China. From his point of view, the fact that no top-level

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<sup>9</sup> The quickness that was demonstrated by the Chinese during this action might testify to the possible contact between Soviet and Chinese diplomats (or other officials) and informing the latter about the decision to stop shooting.

Soviet official met Kosygin at Moscow Airport after returning from Beijing demonstrated the Kremlin's attitude to the results of the negotiations.

At the same time, a new rise in military psychosis in China did not promote a détente in its relations with the USSR. Nevertheless, Chinese provocations at the border stopped. Chinese leaders possibly came to the conclusion that all tasks were fulfilled already and new clashes at the border might have dangerous and unpredictable consequences.<sup>10</sup>

After this, boundary negotiations began. They took place alternately in Moscow and Beijing. Top-level Soviet officials actually presented Damanskii and Kirkinskii to China, but the presence of the Chinese military on the islands caused protests. Such protests and demands to leave the islands were declared from time to time, for example, on November 3, 1969, December 30, 1969, February 12–13, 1970, and on April 1, 1970. It is difficult to tell what aim was pursued by Moscow, but each Soviet demarche caused only a flash of emotions. The Soviet participants of the negotiations accused the Chinese of infringing on the agreements, of landing on the islands at night, etc. The Chinese participants were indignant at the similar treatment of the events because the Chinese border guards had landed on Damanskii and Kirkinskii openly, at the moment when the Soviets had stopped shooting.

The next twenty years did not bring any essential shifts in the negotiating process although discussions on the border question proceeded. Finally, these negotiations became a formal and even ritual procedure because neither the Soviet nor the Chinese diplomats made concessions and, at the same time, did not interrupt their own participation in the discussions. The first results appeared only at the end of the 1980s.

In Moscow, an "Agreement between the USSR and the PRC on the Soviet-Chinese State border at its Eastern Part" was signed on May 16, 1991. In accordance with this document, the border on the rivers was drawn along the main waterway or the middle line (it depended on whether the river is navigable or non-navigable). There was also an

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<sup>10</sup> Some Chinese sources state that Chinese minister of defence Lin Biao visited that place opposite Damanskii Island where infantry of the PLA was hit by Soviet artillery during the battle on March 15, 1969. Lin Biao studied the results of that blow and, it is claimed, said: "It was enough to test Russian patience."

arrangement about the creation of a demarcation commission in the text of the agreement.

On February 13, 1992, after the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Supreme Soviet ratified the agreement, and the head of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, signed this decision. The Chinese did the same in Beijing on February 25, 1992. In Beijing, an exchange of ratification instruments took place on March 16, 1992. Thus, the agreement came into force, and the actual belonging of Damanskii and Kirkinskii to China became a legally faultless fact on March 16. Demarcation of the border that followed only confirmed it.

## **Consequences of the Soviet-Chinese Border Conflict of 1969**

Strengthening of military power by both the USSR and the PRC became a direct result of the conflicts along the Soviet-Chinese border. First of all, it was expressed in the movement of additional military units and formations along the border zone as well as the formation of new divisions and armies at the place of the events. According to some sources, in the Soviet Far East, in Mongolia and Central Asia, about 25 percent of all armed forces of the USSR was concentrated for several years after the battle. Besides this, along the border, the mass construction of powerful protective structures was begun (so-called fortified areas). Obviously, after clashes at the border, the Soviet leadership seriously assimilated an outlook of large-scale war with China. As for China, it is not even necessary to mention the military psychosis that reigned there at that time.

Any economic and cultural cooperation between the PRC and the USSR practically came to a complete stop, and trade relations were reduced to a minimum. Those former Soviet citizens who remember the end of the 1960s and the beginning of 1970s can confirm the fact of the disappearance of traditional Chinese exports that were very popular in the Soviet Union (clothes and fabrics, porcelain and fountain pens, lanterns and thermoses, etc.).

The most important political consequence of the fights at the border was the change of the position that the PRC had secured in the world arena. Before March 1969, only two players dominated in world politics—the US and the USSR. Now, after demonstrating readiness for open military conflict against the mighty Soviet Union, China



unexpectedly broke into the sphere of the direct interests of the superpowers. And they had already been forced to recognize the presence of the PRC while considering the most important political questions.

A visit by US president Richard Nixon to Beijing in February 1972 demonstrated how exactly and correctly Mao Zedong had foreseen all consequences of the border confrontation. In any case, the clashes along the border made just the impression on the US administration that Mao had hoped for.

At the same time, Mao Zedong and his follower Deng Xiaoping were unable to create a united anti-Soviet front together with Western countries and Japan. That fact can be explained by the pragmatism that traditionally dominated the politics of the US, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe. Leaders of these countries realized that the motives of Mao Zedong were guided by the intention to worsen Soviet-Chinese relations. To push off the Soviet Union and the West, and to sit out somewhere far from the battle—this was the idea the Chinese leader thought about, smiling to Nixon and other foreign visitors. Of course, Western leaders were not admirers of Communist ideology, but this fact did not prevent them from understanding a simple truth: it is better to have normal relations with the USSR and, simultaneously, to counteract the expansion of the Soviet influence in the world, than to be at enmity with the Soviet Union. Thus, Mao Zedong was unable to become like the wise monkey from the old Chinese parable who observed a fight between two tigers from the top of the mountain. Contrary to intentions, Mao took on the role of one of the tigers, having given the US an opportunity to observe the fight from a safe distance.

The Chinese leaders also failed in their attempts to split the socialist commonwealth; only Albania, earlier completely making common cause with Beijing, completely supported China. The other socialist countries either supported Moscow or took a neutral position.

It is necessary to mention one more important circumstance that has received almost no attention, which is the question of the attitude of present Russian and Chinese officials to the events of 1969. Basically, the positions of Moscow and Beijing are rather similar: to try to break off events that have occurred, and if this is not possible, to reduce any discussion on the border conflict to a set of banalities. Of course, there are definite distinctions. In Russia, nobody forbids journalists, cinematographers, or historians from engaging in given problems. For

example, popular Russian TV channels repeatedly aired the film “Damanskii Island, 1969” that had been created by “Galakon” Film Studio (Moscow) in 2004. It is significant that the first airing of the film took place on February 23, 2004, on the so-called Defender of the Fatherland Day. In 2005 and 2006, some Russian and Ukrainian channels aired the film again (At the same time, the main historical journal of the Russian Ministry of Defense, the *Military-Historical Journal*, refused to publish any articles about the Soviet-Chinese border conflict of 1969 because its editorial board considered this subject too taboo).

Every year, Soviet veterans of the Damanskii Island conflict take part in memorial ceremonies in the Far East region, Siberia, and Moscow. Every year, Russian newspapers and TV news outlets report it widely.

As for China, the theme of the Soviet-Chinese border conflict is practically closed. The Chinese mass media only thoughtlessly repeat everything that comes down “from the top,” which, as a matter of fact, does not differ from the propaganda clichés of the Cultural Revolution. Similarly, Chinese newspapers in 1969 said, and modern Chinese propaganda obstinately repeats, that the Soviet border guards attacked the Chinese first, and the Chinese only acted defensively. Meanwhile, the fact of the beforehand planned Chinese attack is confirmed by not only the Soviet/Russian materials, but also by the works of Western researchers who have little sympathy for the USSR. Moreover, some Chinese historians are already agreeing that bloodshed on Damanskii was prepared and carried out by the Chinese.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the current Chinese position on the subject looks especially false and cynical.

Here is a typical detail: it is almost impossible to find any Chinese participants of the events. And those who are found categorically refuse to answer any questions about their participation in the fights along the border. Chinese historians refuse to cooperate on the given theme, too—even in such cases when very interesting and exclusive documents are offered for joint investigation (the author of this article has a very rich experience in such contacts with Chinese historians). The reason for this is clear: the Chinese—especially the participants of the clash—know that they organized and carried out the bloodshed along the border. Some Chinese participants of the battle may fear that detailed consideration of

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<sup>11</sup> Lyle J. Goldstein, “Research Report Returns to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why it Matters,” *China Quarterly*, no. 168 (December 2001): 985–997.

their personal actions during the conflict would result in accusations of war crimes.

The majority of the documents on the conflict of 1969 remain hidden in secret archives in Russia and China. However, the people who wrote all these papers are still alive. They and their memoirs are a “delayed-action bomb” which at careless handling could do much harm to Russian-Chinese relations.<sup>12</sup> It sounds important for the leaders of Russia and China to treat the events of 1969 prudently and to calm down this painful question. Such settlement must not be reduced by mutual expressions of regret and the same mutual nonadmissions in the future. The bloodshed of 1969 was prepared and carried out by the authorities of China.

Sincere Soviet-Chinese friendship perished thirty-seven years ago on the little Damanskii Island on the Ussuri River. From that old history, different lessons were learnt, and many people had a chance for reflection—politicians and militants, diplomats and weapon designers, scientists and writers. But if to speak only about interstate borders, the following lasting lesson has to be acquired: a party in a more advantageous position, thanks to historical circumstances, ought to aspire to fair boundary settlement. To understand neighbors and simultaneously maintain national interests—this is the real test for the politicians engaged in the question of boundary delimitation.

\* This work reflects only the personal point of view of the author and does not reflect the position of any state or public organization.

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<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, a purely emotional aspect of the secret materials of the Soviet medical commission that inspected the bodies of perished Soviet border guards is the most dangerous. It follows from the document that nineteen wounded border guards in a helpless condition were brutally finished off by the Chinese. The text of that paper is so awful that its publication in the Russian mass media may result in an irrational hatred of all citizens of China.