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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

19 January 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Sino-Soviet Relations and the Question of Hostilities

1. Sino-Soviet tension reached a high point during the spring and summer of 1969 following armed clashes on the Ussuri River. It appeared to many at the time that the Soviet Union and China were on the verge of war. Since then tensions have eased. Kosygin conferred with Chou En-lai in Peking in September 1969; propaganda attacks have become generally less bellicose; there have been continual, if unproductive, contacts concerning disputed border territories; ambassadors were exchanged last year (after an interval of almost four years); and last November the two countries signed a protocol which promises to increase the very low level of trade.

2. But all these improvements in the relationship appear to be minor, tentative, and conditional. The basic

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disagreements have not been reconciled, and few if any of the principal Soviet apprehensions about the Chinese have been dissolved. Our examination of the origins of the dispute and the military developments which have accompanied (and contributed to) it suggests that the chances of an outbreak of hostilities have been reduced but have not permanently disappeared.

I. THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

3. The causes of the Sino-Soviet dispute are complex. Some reflect the clash of national interests, compounded by historical and racial enmities, and the distrust of one great power for a neighboring power. These conflicting interests include, for example: the USSR's refusal in the late 1950s to satisfy China's demands for the wherewithal to achieve an early nuclear weapons capability; Peking's refusal to permit the Soviets to establish military facilities in China; Chinese dissatisfaction with the terms of Soviet economic aid and (later) Soviet economic sanctions; Sino-Russian competition for influence elsewhere in East and South Asia; and China's claims to Far Eastern and Central Asian territory ceded to Russia during the 19th century.



4. Ideological factors are also an important source of contention. Mao's challenge to Soviet ideological supremacy, together with differences over strategy for the spread of Communism, have provoked serious disputes between Moscow and Peking and in meetings of the world's Communist Parties. Largely because of ideology, Soviet and Chinese conceptions of each other's motives and behavior tend to become encapsulated in doctrinal formulae. This has made it extremely difficult for the two sides to compromise their quarrels, even on minor issues.

5. The Soviets are acutely suspicious of the Chinese and concerned about Chinese abilities to subvert and damage major Soviet interests throughout the world. They suspect, with some reason, that Peking is trying to stir up further troubles for the USSR in Eastern Europe. They fear that China will seek to act against the USSR in collusion with the United States, West Germany, and Japan. (There are of course, reciprocal fears in Peking.) They are concerned that China will diminish the Soviet role in the Third World and among the "national liberation movements," especially in Asia and among non-whites. And they are anxious about Chinese competition within the international Communist



movement, which the Soviets would like to see restored as an effective instrument of Soviet foreign policy. There are "Maoist" groups in more than 40 countries, by Soviet reckoning, and the Soviets continue to stress to their allies that these groups are not only the apostles of heretical ideology but also the auxiliary detachments of a power hostile to the USSR.

## II. THE MILITARY ASPECT

### Soviet Evaluation of the Chinese Threat

6. At least until the mid-1960s, the Soviet leaders seemed to view their conflict with China as almost exclusively political and ideological. Beyond emphasis on the improvement of border security, they did not seem especially concerned about Chinese military capabilities or interested in the use of their own forces vis-a-vis China, even for essentially political purposes. But, sometime in 1965, soon after the removal of Khrushchev, the Soviet leadership perceived that the Sino-Soviet dispute might come to have a military dimension as well. The Soviets decided to increase substantially their military forces near the Chinese frontier. The reason for this decision is not entirely clear. It may



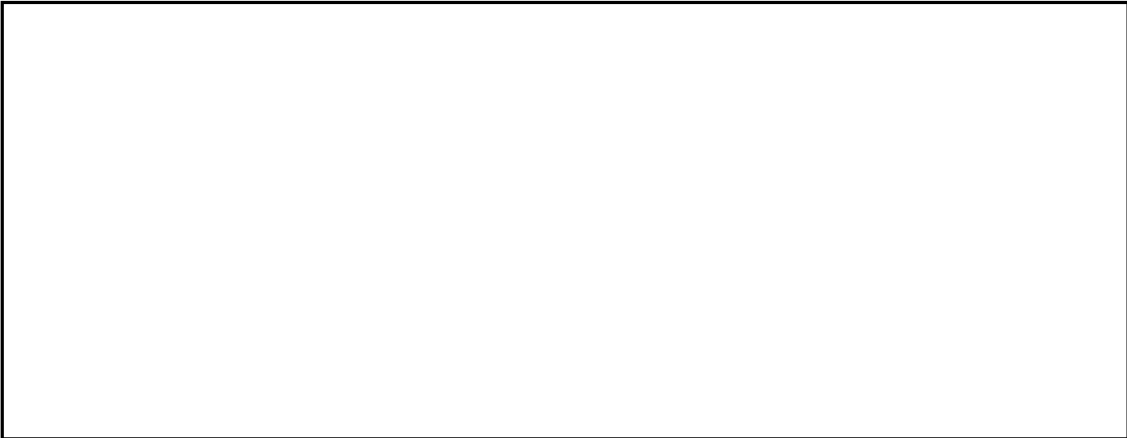
have been based primarily on a rather broad and simple calculation: it is prudent to improve military capabilities vis-a-vis a large, increasingly hostile, and perhaps not altogether rational neighbor. In order to be better able both to protect its own territory and to apply military pressure on Peking, should this prove desirable, Moscow knew that the buildup would require at a minimum the development of a theater force structure as a credible deterrent or as an effective combat force should deterrence fail.

7. The Soviets are, of course, especially interested in the long-term implications of the Chinese nuclear and missile programs. We cannot say with confidence how they rate Chinese prospects in these fields. But we can safely assume that the Soviets know as much or more than we do, and that their apprehensions will incline them toward worse case estimating regarding both Chinese intentions and capabilities.\*



\* See Annex for a brief discussion of our current judgments concerning Chinese strategic capabilities.





8. The Soviets are certainly aware of other developments affecting Chinese strategic capabilities. They must be watching the steady if modest production of Chinese TU-16 medium bombers and know that these bombers have already been used to drop nuclear weapons. And there are indications, as plain to the Soviets as to us, that the Chinese may be developing air-to-surface missiles for these bombers. Finally, the Soviets may believe that the Chinese are intent on developing SLBMs; one Soviet specialist on China claims that the Chinese have embarked on a seven year program of building five to eight nuclear powered submarines equipped with ballistic missiles.

9. At a minimum Moscow is concerned that these capabilities will eventually provide China with a credible



deterrent force and that, under its cover, Peking might feel free to pursue, for example, more aggressive ground actions against Soviet or Mongolian territory. As a more remote contingency, the Soviets have to allow for the possibility of a major war between China and the USSR resulting from accident or miscalculation or a deliberate (though perhaps irrational) decision by Peking. And, finally, it does not strain the imagination to assume that Soviet planners have also had to consider the possibility of large-scale warfare deliberately initiated by the USSR itself.

#### Soviet Redeployments in Asia

10. Moscow's apprehensions and evaluations, of the variety and character described above, have been reflected in the USSR's military posture throughout Soviet Asia. The most noticeable changes have occurred in the theater forces, particularly the regular ground force divisions. The number of these divisions located in the present Military Districts bordering China or Mongolia, and in Mongolia itself, has risen from less than 20 in 1965 to more than 40 today.\*

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\* The Military Districts are the Far East, Transbaykal, Siberian, and Central Asian, the last one carved out of the Turkestan MD in 1969 following the Ussuri River clashes. The introduction of Soviet combat units to Mongolia began in late 1966 or early 1967. Over the last year or so the Chinese have moved five field armies, of two or three divisions each, generally northward. But the Chinese ground forces remain generally well back from the Soviet and Mongolian borders, whereas most of the 40 plus Soviet divisions are relatively close to the frontier.

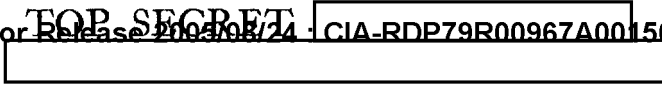


The process was accelerated after the Ussuri River clashes in 1969 and at present none of the more than 40 MRBM or IRBM sites once located along the Sinkiang or Manchurian borders are believed to remain. At the same time, Strategic Rocket Forces headquarters were pulled back and were reconstituted at Chita, which is heavily defended by Soviet theater forces. In a similar move, also during 1969, the headquarters of the Soviet Far East Long Range Air Army completed a relocation from Blagoveshchensk, less than five miles from the Manchurian border, to Irkutsk, well back from the border.

### III. THE QUESTION OF SOVIET-INITIATED MILITARY ACTION

13. During the summer of 1969 a number of Soviet officials in a variety of places intimated that the USSR was preparing to attack China. Presumably the Soviets intended these ominous hints to reach the Chinese and hoped that this would increase pressure on the Chinese to negotiate and help to force the Chinese into a suspension of armed provocations along the border. If so, this maneuver achieved its purposes.

14. But it is also possible that Moscow was seriously considering drastic military options. Some Soviet leaders,





especially after the Ussuri incidents, may have felt that it was necessary to "teach the Chinese a lesson" and that only force could do the job. Perhaps some also hoped that the Mao-Lin regime could not survive a military defeat at the hands of Soviet forces and that its successor would be more "realistic" vis-a-vis the USSR, or at least less troublesome. Some in Moscow may also have argued that a successful campaign against China would demonstrate the might of the Soviet armed forces throughout the world -- and have useful political side effects -- and help the perhaps sagging domestic prestige of the Soviet leadership.

15. While Soviet propaganda during 1969 may have been intended primarily to alarm the Chinese (and in this way to encourage them to enter into negotiations), the tone and character of Soviet commentaries was also consonant with the notion that Moscow was considering major military action. Soviet media devoted considerable attention to the outbreak of large-scale warfare between Russian and Japanese forces along the Sino-Soviet border prior to World War II. Articles and broadcasts also emphasized the oppression of minority peoples in China's border regions, suggesting that rebellion by these peoples would be justified and hinting that it might

be supported by Moscow. Finally, and perhaps most telling, Soviet propaganda addressed to domestic audiences reached shrill and alarmist heights and began to create among the public -- whether deliberately or not -- something akin to war fever.

16. A Soviet military attack on China could have assumed several forms, either singly or in combination. One possibility, for example, would have been a non-nuclear ground offensive with relatively limited aims, such as the occupation of all or parts of Sinkiang or Inner Mongolia. It might have begun under the guise of a punitive cross-border raid or a campaign to "liberate" minorities in China. Another possibility would have been a larger ground attack, perhaps to seize Peking, in order to install a pro-Soviet regime there. The Soviets would have recognized that an effort of this scale might necessitate the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Still another possibility would have been one or several conventional air strikes on Chinese nuclear and missile installations.

17. But if the Soviets were actually considering one or another military move against China in 1969, they obviously concluded that the rather considerable disadvantages of such

action outweighed the complex of rather uncertain advantages. Short of an effort to conquer China completely (an option which was probably never seriously contemplated), the Soviets could not have been certain of their ability to control either the nature or the duration of the conflict. No matter how successful a conventional Soviet attack might have been initially, Moscow would have had to reckon with the possibility that Peking would be both able and determined to wage a protracted conventional campaign against Soviet forces. It could not have been certain that the Mao regime would be overthrown, though it could have been sure that, in general, Chinese hostility toward the USSR would be greatly increased. And it would even have had to face the possibility of nuclear retaliation; it is conceivable that, using their TU-16 (Badger) aircraft, the Chinese could have struck, say, Vladivostok or Khabarovsk with a nuclear weapon with a yield in the megaton range.

18. Though a Sino-Soviet war might have in this way become a nuclear conflict, it does not seem likely that Moscow would have been the first to use nuclear weapons. The Soviets seem to understand that they might pay a heavy price indeed if they were the first to violate the nuclear truce of

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the past quarter century. They apparently are aware that this might fundamentally alter world opinion toward the Soviet Union and lead to basic shifts in the foreign policies of major states. They would, in addition, fear that the US might feel less inhibited about using its own nuclear weapons, say in Vietnam. And they would fear that their action would encourage a number of other countries -- including India, West Germany, and Japan -- to acquire their own nuclear capabilities.

19. Whatever the form a Soviet attack on China might have taken, a major concern of the Soviets would have been the effects of their action on their policies elsewhere in the world. Moscow has invested a great deal in its campaign to project an image of peace and reason, especially in Western Europe, and has long sought to convince Third World states that the USSR is the protector of the downtrodden and the non-white. A blow against China would have jeopardized both these efforts. Possible effects on US policy -- could the US in some way take significant advantage of a Sino-Soviet conflict? -- would also have been a major Soviet concern, particularly if the USSR had found itself more or less continuously engaged in China against an enemy which simply would not quit.

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IV. PROSPECTS FOR "PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE"

20. In August 1969 Soviet Party chief Leonid Brezhnev suggested in the propaganda journal Problems of Peace and Socialism that Moscow expected a long period of tension in Sino-Soviet relations rather than an early outbreak of hostilities. The very character of the collegium in Moscow might have predisposed it toward a policy of prudence -- in this case, continual improvement in Soviet military defenses against China, plus inconclusive bilateral discussions -- rather than toward a sudden irreversible act. In any case, the dominant notes struck by most Soviet spokesmen publicly and privately since that time have been patience, Soviet friendship with the Chinese people during this temporary period of misrule by Mao, and the likely pragmatism of the post-Mao regime.

21. There is evidence, however, of abiding anxiety among China watchers in Moscow, however. Some fear that the men who come to power in China after Mao will be "super-Maoists", inclined to "radical solutions" in the face of China's insoluble internal problems. The implication that they draw from this is that China would become more aggressive toward the USSR, more willing to collaborate with Soviet

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enemies, more of a military threat along the border, and, as its nuclear and missile forces are strengthened, more of a strategic threat in general.

22. Given the present Soviet leadership, we believe that the considerations prevailing in 1969 -- i.e. those which argued against drastic military action -- will prevail for some time. But China will stay very much on the Soviet mind. New crises could erupt. Unless there is some significant easing of tensions after Mao goes -- which is certainly not out of the question -- the possibility of active hostilities will survive for many years. Basically, then, we view the Soviet approach to China in terms of a problem acknowledged rather than a problem solved.

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