

When World's Divide: China, Russia, and the U.S.-led World Order

A Historical Understanding of the Sino-Soviet Split and its Impact on American Grand Strategy

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As China rises, Russia resurges, and the United States declines, it is clear that the balance of power is shifting. However, this is not the first-time major shifts between these three countries altered the arrangement of the world order. The Sino-Soviet split marked a paradigm shift in Cold War relations, one that brought China outside the Soviet sphere of influence and into a drastically different role from an American foreign policy perspective. This paper seeks to explore the topic further by begging the question: What effect, if any, did the shifts in international relations caused by the Sino-soviet split have on the global balance of power, particularly between the U.S. and China? It argues that the effects were significant, even if indirect. The Sino-Soviet split created the circumstances allowing for China to rise, the opportunity to shield their true motives and exploit the divide between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. to great advantage. The norms and doctrines created during this time far outlived the Cold War, propelling the relationship between the U.S. and China to where it is today. While it was America who most overtly sought to take advantage of this event, it was China who did so most effectively.

The American century and the legacy of civilizational achievement defining it is a major focal point of international relations and political science today. Never before has one nation become so powerful, dominating the world to such a tremendous extent. The might of Rome, Great Britain and even the Red Juggernaut of Soviet Russia look comparatively anemic next to the sheer dominance of American power during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, most prominently during the 1980s and 1990s. The U.S., at its peak, developed military technology decades ahead of any other country due to massive spending sprees in the

Reagan and W. Bush administrations that, as the latter President would put it, allowed America to “skip a generation”¹ in military technology. America is also the only nation to send a man to the moon, was once home to nearly all of the world’s tallest buildings and has been a consistent world leader in key fields like medical research, computers, and nuclear power.

However, in recent years, America’s dominance has become less absolute, notably due to the rise of China. China’s rapid economic growth, as well as massive strides in military technology, science, industrial capacity and high-tech industry, have made America’s dominance increasingly contested.

As China becomes more assertive and willing to challenge the U.S. and other countries directly and coercively, its ascent to superpower status is reshaping the geopolitical environment and arguably constitutes a major challenge to the status quo of an American led rules-based system.

Before giving Beijing too much credit, it is important to consider one caveat. Their rise likely would not have been possible without the United States' help or, if it was, it would have taken longer, and China would have faced many of the same obstacles that other countries have in their own development. Through trade, normalization of relations, and refusal to respond to the Chinese government's transgressions in trade and intellectual property, the U.S. gave China many of the tools it needed to develop at such a rapid pace. In hindsight, this may seem obvious, but one must not forget that when America started taking major steps to build Chinese power, the Cold War's main threat came not from Beijing but Moscow. One of the most critical events that led to the status quo between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China is the Sino-Soviet split. This marked a paradigm shift in the Cold War that, due to responses of U.S. policymakers, ended up making China's first steps towards superpower status possible.

The Cold War and the Global Balance of Power

The relationship between the U.S.S.R. and the People's Republic of China underwent significant change throughout the early half of the Cold War. In 1949, when the Chinese communist party first came to power, the two forged a partnership against

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the U.S. and its allies. By 1969, however, relations between the two countries were extremely hostile, reaching a boiling point with a short-lived border conflict. These events played a major role in shaping the thinking of U.S. leaders and military strategists. China and Russia have been America's main rivals in the struggle for global dominance since the end of World War II. The objectives of U.S. grand strategy

have thus focused heavily on managing the challenges arising from both countries in a way that is favorable to achieve American foreign policy goals.

The Soviet Union and communist China were initially allies as part of the Eastern communist bloc. Though the two had earlier conflict, the fault lines of the cold war had been clearly drawn and, at least initially, transcended regional ones. Against the U.S., both nations were on the same side when the ideologies of authoritarian socialism and liberal capitalism were competing for world dominance. Though China was not yet the juggernaut it is now, it was nonetheless an important ideological center of the communist world. The U.S. and the West were very worried about the implications of Sino-Soviet relations. An alliance between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, then fresh out of a Marxist revolution that put Mao Zedong in power, was viewed as a grave threat by the U.S. and its allies. Geographic location and ideological commonalities were important factors contributing to this belief. As Raymond Aron wrote in his book *Century of Total War*, "Russia has in fact nearly achieved the 'world island' which [Halford] Mackinder considered the necessary and almost sufficient condition for universal empire."² Relations between China and the Soviet Union at their most friendly point consolidated the communist centers of the world into one swath of land with influence spanning from East Asia to Europe.

The Hidden Divide, Splitting the Communist World

Despite the surface level appearance of a monolithic communist bloc, not all was what it seemed between the U.S.S.R. and the People's Republic of China. Before long, the alliance began to unravel. China realized that the type of relationship they had with the Soviet Union could not be maintained indefinitely if China were to reach its true ambitions. For a country that for thousands of years had prided itself on being the "Middle-Kingdom," believing that it is the center of the universe,⁴ acceptance of a subservient role to the Soviet Union in the communist world was out of the question. Even as early as 1950, China viewed the Soviet Union with suspicion. Beijing emphasized its refusal to become a subservient nation of the Soviet Union and

dismissed assertions that China was becoming this as “fabrications” by U.S. “Imperialists.”³ However, it also reflected some of the hidden divisions between the world’s two communist giants. The discreet nature of China’s expressions and behavior were of strategic necessity to limit the risk of conflict and stick to a long-term economic and military strategy, not of actual limitations on China’s willingness to attempt to reshape the world order in its favor.

China had long attempted to accelerate its development with ambitions of attaining greater national power. Mao Zedong, wanting to spread his own ideology, saw opportunity in the Soviet Union. Soviet assistance to China was “the largest foreign development venture in the socialist camp ever,”⁷ with Chinese and Soviet documents counting between 304 and 360 civilian and military projects for which China received Soviet Assistance⁷. However, Moscow soon became aware of the fact that Beijing had ambitions far beyond human development. Eventually, the Soviets grew distrustful of Mao, increasingly viewing him as a competitor.

Relations grew progressively worse. Before long, the Soviet Union and China fought a border conflict in 1969, and the Soviets, realizing their mistake of aiding Chinese development and military projects, ceased supporting them. The Chinese, however, were determined to adapt. It was towards the end of this struggle that China saw shifts in the balance of power in the world as the communist block fractured and transitioned towards the United States. The perfect storm had been created for the U.S. to open up to China, or rather, for China to open up to the U.S.

A Clash of Perceptions and Triangular Diplomacy

The changes to the security environment and global order that developed in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split had major strategic implications, presenting risk and opportunity for both the U.S. and the Chinese. The U.S.S.R. was undoubtedly the loser of this outcome, as it was now effectively faced with a two-front cold war where it competed with China for dominance of the Eastern bloc as well as with the U.S. for world domination. However, the end of Chinese partnership with the Soviets also transformed the relationship between the U.S. and China. This

had everything to do with how each nation perceived the strategic environment at the time, as well as one another’s behavior. Overall, there were two competing strategies: the American strategy to maintain its perceived advantage and the Chinese counterstrategy to transform this advantage into the downfall of

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American hegemony. The two clashed, resulting in a relationship between the two countries that was one may consider a hostile friendship or benevolent rivalry.

The Sino-Soviet split was a major driving force behind President Richard Nixon’s visit to China and the subsequent movement on the path towards eventual diplomatic normalization. The U.S. saw an opportunity to deal a major strategic blow to the Soviet Union by partnering with China. Due to the fears of a communist world island, the United States pursued a triangular diplomacy strategy. As Nixon’s Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in his book *World Order*, this strategy maintained the goal of balancing “China against the Soviet Union from a position in which America was closer to each Communist giant than they were to each other.”² The Nixon administration viewed this as a successful exploitation of the recession of communist solidarity across the Asian continent and the Pacific region.

Meanwhile, China was exercising its own form of triangular diplomacy. While the United States made a theoretically sound move, there was one key mistake made that the Soviets did not make: underestimating the Chinese. This was, in fact, characteristic of China’s schemes at work. Chinese military strategy is based heavily on tactics of deception, asymmetric warfare, psychological operations and strategic patience. In the *Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote that “all warfare is based on deception.”⁵ It is advantageous to appear strong when weak, weak when strong, and to keep the enemy complacent about his position. Chinese strategy has developed, adapted, and applied this

wisdom to the modern era. China's deceptive strategy can be described as "to get someone to do something for himself that he thinks is in his own interests, but which is actually in your interests, is the essence of strategy, according to Mao."¹²

China was able to use the U.S. strategy against the Soviet Union to its own advantage and further develop national power by exploiting its position as a country that the U.S. government viewed as at risk of Soviet aggression. Establishing ties with the U.S. on China's terms was made far easier by America's willingness to support any nation who opposed the Soviets. Other Eastern bloc countries made this observation as well, noting that "Peking capitalizes on the contradictions of the world, thus trying to obtain support for at least some aspects of its policy or of its overall stand while avoiding the danger of being involved in a conflict."⁹ Additionally, Czech radio broadcasts suggested that China was intentionally fanning communist disunity, with its slogans being nothing more than a mask for nationalist and

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chauvinistic tendencies.⁶

The opportunity presented by the Sino-Soviet split and the U.S. response allowed China to contend simultaneously with two objectives without dragging itself into a geopolitical quagmire, as was the case with the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, the U.S. America became more active in balancing relations with both sides, whereas China was able to avoid needing to use its own resources at all. China played nice with the U.S. to gain support. In reality, however, China had ambitions at least as dangerous as the Soviet Union when it came to U.S. interests. The only constraint was the capability to act on them, which was far more limited and the ultimate source of America's willingness to help. Yet even as Nixon was negotiating what he thought was a path to peace, the Chinese communists were positioning themselves to use this as an opportunity to take down the U.S. Behind the scenes, China believed that the policies of "Imperialist Chieftain" Nixon were signs of U.S. weakness and aggression.¹⁰

China's Ambitions of Global Hegemony: Aided by the U.S.

The shift in relations between the U.S. and China caused by the Sino-Soviet split set the stage for the entanglement of economic relations, construction of norms against anti-China policy, and massive transfer of military and technological know-how to China by the United States. Learning from mistakes with the Soviet Union, China was careful to be portrayed as a benevolent country that was a victim of Western imperialism and willing to reform to meet American demands. Washington accepted this narrative without much resistance.

Seeking to maximize the potential of having China as a military counterweight to the Soviet Union, the United States approved the transfer of sensitive military technologies to China. Boeing 707s with attendant aeronautical technology, a sophisticated ground station designed to send and receive signals via satellite and the transfer of "Spey" aircraft engines were all examples of how the U.S. accelerated the growth of Chinese strategic industries in order to challenge the Soviet Union.¹¹ The close relations between U.S. and China during this time were critical in the development of normalized trade relations. The norms and customs of pro-China economic policies paved the way for later steps such as China's entrance into the World Trade Organization, which is largely what allowed China's economic growth and ability to access other country's markets to reach the extent familiar today. The permissive system of economic relations this created allowed China to erect one-sided trade barriers, finance military buildup, and enact aggressive policies through its trade surplus with the United States. Norms and perceptions, in a general sense, played a key part in what was to come after the end of the Cold War and not just when it comes to trade. A stance towards China that was soft, at least comparatively, on other issues like territory and military capabilities were maintained by a relationship created by Cold War doctrine and perceptions. The direction of U.S. policy toward China during the Cold War had too much momentum to be turned back easily.

A Historical Take on the World of Today

Nonetheless, it is important to consider there

were other factors that led to the establishment and continuation of the status quo relationship with China. China's ascension to superpower status at the fastest rate in history was a result of Chinese strategic brilliance and the U.S.'s complacency. Had the Sino-Soviet split not been exploited in the way it was, the outcome could have been quite different. However, it is undeniable that the Sino-Soviet split helped form the circumstances that allowed for this chain of events to unfold so spectacularly and so rapidly. America's fixation on containing the Soviet threat helped ensure that China's early intentions remained unrecognized and created some assumptions and tendencies that China could exploit for personal gain. The Sino-Soviet split did not cause the U.S. to decline, but it gave policymakers tunnel vision to what the world's threat environment looked like. This notion has prevailed due to the perception that the fall of the Soviet Union was a harbinger of peace – the “end of history” as some American-centric ideologues would say. Nonetheless, the problem America has with perception versus reality is clearly demonstrated in the events of this part of history, as are the doctrinal and cultural differences between the U.S. and China. The Sino-Soviet split altered the course of human history in a way few other developments have.

When reflecting back on U.S. policy of the era and contemplating whether it was a success or a mistake, the final implications in the long-term hinge on whether accepting major steps toward Chinese hegemony was really worth containing the Soviet Union. Whether China is as big a threat than the Soviet Union was, and whether the Soviet Union could have become more of a problem had it survived, are still worthy topics for discussion over foreign policy and history. Discussion over alternate timelines is mere speculation; either the rise of China was inevitable, or the U.S. made a serious miscalculation on the grand strategic level in handling the Sino-Soviet split.

Concluding Thoughts

What effect, if any, did the shifts in international relations caused by the Sino-Soviet split have on the global balance of power? Clearly, it did have effects that were indirect but substantial on the balance of power in the world. The Sino-Soviet split contributed to the circumstances that shifted what the Chinese would call shi (roughly translated as the

propensity of things to happen)¹² in Beijing's favor. Implications beyond the present day are subject to speculation, and alternative interpretations of history are bound to exist. Nonetheless, looking back at the time period defined by the Sino-Soviet split is useful for understanding the world today. While the period of the Cold War is long gone, the concepts, norms, and behaviors it created echo throughout the ages and persist to this day. When it comes to the decisions U.S. leaders make in the future, it would serve them well to keep the past in mind.

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