

Restoring Chaos to History: Sino-Soviet-American Relations, 1969*

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Abstract

Sino-Soviet-American relations during 1969 followed a chaotic course. Scholars have asserted in the past that the Sino-Soviet border conflict in March led to Sino-American rapprochement in December. However, evidence from China, the former socialist world and the United States undermines the interpretation of a purposeful and planned policy of any of the three actors to the others. None had a formulated policy or strategy in place. China lacked the governmental ability to chart a clear course, the United States underwent a presidential transition, and neither it nor the Soviet Union had meaningful diplomatic relations with the People's Republic. In this context, the border clashes, intended by China to reassert territorial claims on a small island, led to a complex web of actions and interactions between the three countries that was based on mutual misunderstanding, lack of communication, exaggerated threat perceptions and improvised decision making. Thus the outcome at the end of the year, the start of a friendly relationship between Beijing and Washington, was by no means the result of well-formulated and implemented policies.

Keywords: China; United States; Soviet Union; nuclear; territory/border

Transformations in Sino-Soviet-American relations in the late 1960s and early 1970s changed the dynamics of the Cold War. Washington sought relaxation with Beijing to pressure Moscow on arms limitations; the Chinese sought rapprochement with the Americans for strategic reasons; and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) and the United States saw the People's Republic of China (PRC) rise to equal status. According to conventional wisdom, the Sino-Soviet border clashes on 2 and 15 March at the disputed Zhenbao 珍宝 Island on an isolated stretch of the Ussuri River were the central events in 1969.¹ President Richard M. Nixon's national security adviser Henry Kissinger

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¹ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals mention a third clash, two days after the second: *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2006), p. 310.

asserted that the USSR started the clashes with the unintended result of providing an opening for US rapprochement with China.² Philip Short argued that Chairman Mao Zedong instigated them to seek rapprochement with the United States and to balance the Soviet Union.³ As asserted by Lyle Goldstein and M. Taylor Fravel, the evidence points towards Chinese aggressiveness on 2 March and a Soviet counter attack on the 15th. Both identified various possible explanations: a Chinese reaction to the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968, the Soviet militarization of the Chinese border, or Mao's creation of a limited foreign policy crisis to forge national unity.⁴

But how do the March clashes fit into Sino-Soviet-American relations? On the basis of Chinese evidence, Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals have recently moved away from linear explanations,⁵ a finding which this article supports. The outcome at the end of 1969 was not predetermined by intentions at the beginning of the year, as each of the three countries involved had *neither* detailed policies towards the other two *nor* the institutional or political capabilities to pursue any. Documentation from China, Russia, the United States and Europe reveals that all three sides sent out contradictory signals throughout the year that tended to confuse at least one of the other two.

Domestic Constraints on Foreign Policy

Before analysing the events that shaped Sino-Soviet-American relations in 1969, it is necessary to explore the conditions under which the three countries shaped their foreign policy. The Cultural Revolution had destroyed the institutional tools China needed to pursue any meaningful foreign policy. The country's leadership had fragmented into roughly three groups competing for power, with the supreme leader Mao as ultimate arbiter.⁶ The two radical factions around his wife Jiang Qing and defence minister Lin Biao faced a group of moderate leaders around Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, including the four marshals Chen Yi 陈毅, Nie Rongzhen 聂荣臻, Ye Jianying 叶剑英 and Xu Xiangqian 徐向前.⁷

The 12th plenum of the eighth Central Committee (CC), the first meeting since the radical rump-plenum in August 1966, convened in purged form between 13 and 31 October 1968. In spite of Mao's call to end the Cultural Revolution "next summer,"⁸ conflict among the three leadership factions broke open again. Jiang and Lin attacked the four marshals for anti-revolutionary activities.

2 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), pp. 171–83.

3 Philip Short, *Mao* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), pp. 583–85.

4 Lyle J. Goldstein, "Return to Zhenbao Island," *The China Quarterly*, No. 168 (2001), pp. 989–96; M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 203–15.

5 MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution*, pp. 308–23.

6 Lee Hong Yung, *Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 332.

7 Huang Hua, *Memoirs* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2008), p. 197.

8 Yang Kuisong, "The Sino-Soviet border clash of 1969," *Cold War History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2000), p. 22.

Under pressure, they had to relinquish their Chinese Communist Party (CCP) positions. Although Mao was unable to prevent their subsequent exclusion from policy making, he nevertheless called for their participation in the CCP congress in April.⁹

Although evidence of friction within the Soviet leadership during late 1968 is patchy, the duumvirate under Leonid Brezhnev and Aleksei Kosygin that had emerged after Khrushchev's fall in October 1964 doubtless disagreed over leadership in foreign policy making.¹⁰ While the Kremlin was still focused on diffusing the crisis in Czechoslovakia, it was also at loggerheads over nuclear arms limitation talks.¹¹ Lack of access to the relevant archival holdings in Moscow thwarts any analysis of internal disagreements over policies towards China, but in 1965 Kosygin had pushed for reconciliation while Brezhnev had remained sceptical about the possibility of rapprochement.¹²

In late 1968 and early 1969, the United States was in the midst of a leadership transition from Lyndon B. Johnson to Nixon following the 4 November election. Although Nixon's platform had been vague apart from his promise to disengage from Vietnam, he had formulated some clear policy goals: détente with the Soviet Union and possibly rapprochement with China, and nuclear arms limitation negotiations with the USSR.¹³ Once inaugurated on 20 January, however, the new administration faced more immediate problems, such as the Sino-Soviet border clashes and the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁴

Nixon's New China Policy, November 1968–February 1969

Long before the 1968 presidential election, Nixon had formulated a strategic vision for East Asia. Several trips around the world from March 1964 to June 1967 convinced him of the need to approach the problem of Communist China creatively.¹⁵ In the *Foreign Affairs* article "Asia after Viet Nam," published in October 1967, he portrayed the PRC as a great threat but urged the US to

9 Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi bian (CCP, Central Documents Research Office) (ed.), *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976* (*A Chronicle of Zhou Enlai's Life: 1949–1976*), Vol. 3 (ZELNP3) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1997), p. 264; CCP Central Documents Research Office, *Mao Zedong zhuan (1949–1976)* (*Biography of Mao Zedong (1949–1976)*) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2003), pp. 1530–37; Cong Wenzhi, "Zhongshi wajiao diaoyan, shanyu zhanlüe sikao" ("Attach importance to the study of foreign relations, be adept at reflecting on strategy"), *Wajiao xueyuan xuebao*, No. 4 (2001), p. 5; Liu Shufa (ed.), *Chen Yi nianpu (A Chronicle of Chen Yi's Life)* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1995), pp. 1210–11.

10 Moshe Lewin, *The Soviet Century* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 248–53.

11 *Guardian*, 10 March 1969, p. 4.

12 A.M. Aleksandrov-Agentov, *Ot Kollontai do Gorbacheva (From Kollontai to Gorbachev)* (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1994), pp. 167–69; Oleg Troyanovskii, *Cheres gody i rasstoianiia (After Years and Distance)* (Moskva: Vargius, 1997), p. 350; "Record of conversation of A.N. Kosygin with Mao Zedong," *Arkhivum Akt Nowych (AAN; Archive of Modern Records, Warsaw, Poland)*, KC PZPR, XI A/10, 11 February 1965, pp. 514–33.

13 John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), p. 272.

14 Jussi Hanhimäki, *Flawed Architect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 28–30.

15 The handwritten notes are in several boxes in *Richard Nixon Library, Wilderness Years, Series II: Trip Files, Boxes 4, 7, 9, 11 and 13.*

come “to grips with the reality of China.”¹⁶ During the election campaign, Nixon repeatedly called for opening channels of communication.¹⁷

Without a concrete China policy in place, Nixon called in his 20 January inaugural address for “an era of negotiation.”¹⁸ Yet, during his first press conference seven days later, he rejected any immediate changes in policy unless the PRC provided some positive signals.¹⁹ Nevertheless, on 5 February Nixon ordered a complete review of his predecessor’s China policy.²⁰ A draft review – the National Security Study Memorandum 14 – was ready in late April; the final review was completed on 8 August and was discussed at the National Security Council meeting six days later.²¹ The problem the Nixon administration faced, even after the March clashes at the Sino-Soviet border, was whether to seek rapprochement with the Soviet Union, China or both.²²

While the China policy of the United States was only slowly coming into focus, Mao carefully read the “Asia after Viet Nam” article.²³ Although PRC media reacted negatively to Nixon’s election,²⁴ Beijing positively responded to Washington’s attempts to restart the informal Warsaw ambassadorial talks, which had been dormant for some time.²⁵ In a talk with Cambodian visitors in late 1968, Zhou justified this decision by stressing the necessity of being tactically flexible while sticking to the greater strategic plan.²⁶ Although evidence is scant, it seems that the Taiwan issue sparked the Chinese willingness to resume informal talks.

Nixon’s inaugural address seemed to confirm to Mao that the new President sought a new beginning. After he had studied a translation, he ordered its publication in *Renmin ribao* on 28 January, a novelty in his China.²⁷ Yet, even before

16 Richard Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (1967), pp. 111, 113, 121.

17 *New York Times* (NYT), 16 September 1968, p. 40; 25 September 1968, p. 46; 20 October 1968, p. 45.

18 “9. Editorial Note,” United States. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1969–76), Vol. I, pp. 53–55.

19 NYT, 28 January 1969, pp. 1, 13; Xiong Xianghui, “Dakai ZhongMei guanxi de qianzhou” (“Prelude to the opening of Sino-American relations”), *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao*, No. 42 (1992), p. 56.

20 “National Security Memorandum 14,” 5 February 1969, *National Archives and Record Administration (NARA)*, Washington DC, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-037, “Review Group China NPG (Part 2).”

21 “NSSM 14: United States China policy,” 29 April 1969, NARA, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-037, “Review Group China NPG (Part 2);” “NSSM 14: United States China policy, outline and key issues,” no date, 1969, NARA, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-023, “NSC Meeting (San Clemente) 8/14/69 briefings: Korea; China (2 of 3);” “Draft minutes of NSC meeting,” 15 August 1969, NARA, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-121, “NSC Meeting – August 14, 1969.”

22 “24. Editorial Note,” *FRUS 1969–1976*, Vol. I, pp. 81–82.

23 Liu Zhinan, “1969nian, Zhongguo zhanbei yu dui MeiSu guanxi de yanjiu he diaozheng” (“China’s war preparation and study and balance towards Soviet-American relations in 1969”), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, No. 3 (1999), p. 51.

24 “US imperialism stages presidential ‘election’ farce, making Nixon new president,” 8 November 1968, *Survey China Mainland Press (SCMP)*, No. 4298 (1968), p. 33.

25 Li Jie, “Changes in China’s domestic situation in the 1960s and Sino-US relations,” Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin (eds.), *Re-examining the Cold War: US-China Diplomacy, 1954–1973* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 313.

26 ZELNP3, p. 267.

27 “Document 1: Front page of People’s Daily,” <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB145/index.htm>, accessed 26 January 2005.

the newspaper hit the streets, Nixon's apparent rejection of any immediate changes in US policy during his first press conference undermined Chinese goodwill.²⁸ Anti-American propaganda started on the publication day of Nixon's inaugural address.²⁹ After the defection of the acting PRC chargé d'affaires to the Netherlands, Liao Heshu, to the United States in early February, the PRC cancelled the 135th meeting of the ambassadorial talks scheduled in Warsaw a few days later.³⁰

Sino-Soviet Border Clashes, March 1969

The Sino-Soviet border clashes on 2 and 15 March followed the militarization of the mutual border since the mid-1960s. The Soviet-Outer Mongolian defensive alliance of January 1966 permitted the USSR to station troops there.³¹ As early as November 1967, Soviet and Chinese border guards were involved in skirmishes on the frozen rivers in the eastern sector.³² On 5 January 1968, the Chinese side suffered its first fatalities. As a result, the CC Military Affairs Commission (MAC) of the CCP ordered the Shenyang military region to start planning an operation at a "politically opportune moment," designed as a "bitter lesson" for the Soviets.³³ However, no more clashes occurred in 1968 before the ice thawed.³⁴ Incidents resumed in the following winter.³⁵ On 19 February 1969, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff and the PRC foreign ministry agreed to a plan, submitted by Heilongjiang provincial military command, for an ambush on Zhenbao.³⁶

Also on 19 February, Mao ordered the four recently purged marshals Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian and Nie Rongzhen to study international relations. In order to protect them from Jiang and Lin, Mao and Zhou sent them under the pretext of employment to various factories in Beijing so that they could study without political interference. The four started to work independently on various aspects of international relations on 1 March and met four times under

28 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," p. 56.

29 Various documents: *SCMP*, No. 4355, p. 25; No. 4356, p. 22; No. 4359, p. 21.

30 "Spokesman of the Information Department of Chinese Foreign Ministry," 6 February 1969, *Current Background (CB)*, No. 887, p. 31; Li Jiasong (ed.), *Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo waijiao dashiji (Chronicle of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China)*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1999), p. 209; "From American Embassy in Warsaw to Secretary of State," 18 February 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, "POL 2 CHICOM-US."

31 Thomas W. Robinson, "The Sino-Soviet border conflict," in Stephen S. Kaplan (ed.), *Diplomacy of Power* (Washington: Brookings, 1981), p. 272.

32 Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dagemingzhong de renmin jiefangjun (The People's Liberation Army during the Cultural Revolution)* (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao chubanshe, 1989), p. 317.

33 Yang Kuisong, "Sino-Soviet border clash," p. 24–30.

34 Xu Yan, "1969 nian ZhongSu bianjie de wuzhuang chongtu" ("The 1969 armed clashes at the Sino-Soviet border"), *Dang de yanjiu ziliao*, No. 5 (1994), p. 5.

35 Yang Kuisong, "Sino-Soviet border clash," p. 25.

36 Li and Hao, *The PLA during the Cultural Revolution*, p. 319.

Chen's chairmanship, until Chen collated their reports into one to be submitted on the 18th.³⁷

On 2 March, Soviet border guards marched into the Chinese ambush. The Soviet side suffered more than 31 fatalities; the exact number of Chinese casualties remains unknown.³⁸ Afraid of "large-scale conflict,"³⁹ Zhou stressed: "We are rational ... if we start war it will be part of a world war, we don't want to expand the conflict."⁴⁰ The incident astonished the Kremlin.⁴¹ Moscow informed its Warsaw Pact (WAPA) allies about "necessary steps to prevent further border violations."⁴² In reality, the Kremlin planned a massive counterattack. However, the Soviet ambush on 15 March did not unfold as intended; the Soviet troops were unable to dislodge Chinese troops from Zhenbao.⁴³ In total, the Chinese suffered 91 casualties (30 fatal) and the Soviets over 200, of which at least 91 were killed.⁴⁴

This and simultaneous events in the United States took the Chinese by surprise. On 14 March, Nixon officially announced the stationing of a new anti-ballistic missile system designed to counter "a direct attack by the Soviet Union" and "the kind of attack which China is likely to be able to mount within the decade."⁴⁵ Nixon's announcement on 14 March (American time) and the ferocity of the simultaneous Soviet assault early on 15 March (Far Eastern time) rocked the Chinese leadership. Mao concluded: "We are now isolated. No one wants to make friends with us."⁴⁶

The failure to retake Zhenbao was also a setback to the Kremlin. As early as the afternoon of 15 March, Soviet radio stations transmitted Chinese-language broadcasts implicitly threatening nuclear war.⁴⁷ Although no more clashes occurred on the frozen rivers after mid-March,⁴⁸ both sides continued to militarize the whole border.⁴⁹

37 Cong Wenzhi, "Attach importance to the study of foreign relations," p. 6. Zhang Baijia, "The changing international scene and Chinese policy toward the United States, 1954–1970"; Ross, *Re-examining the Cold War*, p. 70. Text of report not found.

38 Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Chinese Foreign Policy during the Cultural Revolution* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), p. 88. Li and Hao, *The PLA during the Cultural Revolution*, pp. 320–21. Xu Yan, "The 1969 armed clashes," 6–7. *Guardian*, 5 March 1969, p. 1.

39 *ZELNP3*, pp. 284–85.

40 Gao Wenqian, *Wannian Zhou Enlai (Zhou Enlai's Last Years)* (Niu Yue: Mingjing chubanshe, 2003), p. 402.

41 Arkadii N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), pp. 164–65; *Guardian*, 10 March 1969, p. 4.

42 "Document No.1: Soviet Report to GDR Leadership on 2 March 1969," http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=385, accessed 29 January 2005.

43 Li and Hao, *The PLA during the Cultural Revolution*, pp. 321–23.

44 Fravel, *Strong Borders*, pp. 201–02.

45 *NYT*, 15 March 1969, p. 17.

46 Gong Li, "Chinese decision making and the thawing of US–China relations," Ross, *Re-examining the Cold War*, p. 323.

47 *Guardian*, 20 March 1969, p. 1.

48 There was another clash on 17 March: see MacFarquhar, *Mao's Last Revolution*, p. 310.

49 "Memorandum for Col. Haig," 27 March 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 711, USSR "Vol. 1 (Dec. 68–Dec. 69) (3 of 3)"; "From American Embassy in Moscow to Department of State," 5 April 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1850, "POL—POLITICAL AFF. & REL. ASIA 1-1-67."

The Soviet military build-up paralleled Soviet attempts to pressure China internationally. On 17 March, the WAPA Political Consultative Committee met in Budapest after it had been called by Brezhnev at short notice. Although the gathering was supposed to discuss European security issues, events in East Asia overshadowed the preparatory meetings on 15 and 16 March.⁵⁰ Romanian resistance over a Soviet draft declaration of pact solidarity against Chinese aggression in the Far East led to acrimonious discussions throughout the previous night and even delayed the official meeting, which was attended by both Brezhnev and Kosygin.⁵¹ During the actual gathering, Brezhnev was preoccupied with China, at the expense of any other business.⁵²

The day after the Soviet failure to get support in Budapest, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union hosted 66 fraternal parties in Moscow in a gathering supposed to make final decisions on a world communist conference following weeks of discussions. While resentment over the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was still lingering, the Sino-Soviet confrontation again heavily influenced the discussions. The Romanian, Italian, Austrian, Spanish and Swiss party delegations were opposed to any condemnation of the CCP. The debates eventually led to a vague statement on common objectives and the agreement to invite all parties – including the CCP – to the conference on 5 June.⁵³

Sino-Soviet Relations, March–August 1969

It was in this context that the Kremlin seemed to switch tactics. While the Soviet Army and Brezhnev throughout the year followed a hard line, Kosygin seemed to represent a more conciliatory policy.⁵⁴ On 21 March, Radio Moscow suddenly denied Western news reports about Soviet nuclear threats.⁵⁵ The same day, Kosygin tried to telephone Mao.⁵⁶ The Chinese operator refused to connect the Soviet premier, cursed him as a “revisionist element” and then simply hung up. Zhou was shocked: “The two countries are at war, one cannot chop the messenger.”⁵⁷ While the Soviet embassy tried to obtain Mao’s office phone number several times during the evening of the 22nd, the Chinese leadership received

50 “X. meeting of the PCC, Budapest, 17 March 1969: editorial note,” by Vojtech Mastny, http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php/documents/collection_3/PCC_texts/ed_note_69.htm, accessed 28 April 2004.

51 *NYT*, 18 March 1969, pp. 1, 6.

52 *Washington Post (WP)*, 19 March 1969, pp. 1, 14.

53 “International Conference of Communist Parties,” 24 April 1969, *Bundesarchiv Bern (BA Bern; Federal Archive Berne, Berne, Switzerland)*, E 2300-01, Aksektion 1977/28, Box 5, “1969 p.a. 21.31 Moskau Politische Berichte.” *NYT*, 20 March 1969, p. 8; 23 February 1969, pp. 1, 14.

54 “Meeting of the Directorate on 20 June 1969,” *Fondazione Istituto Gramsci (FIG; Foundation Institute Gramsci, Rome, Italy)*, Archivio del Partito Comunista (APC; Archive of the Communist Party), Direzione 1969, Vol. 6, p. 1726.

55 *NYT*, 23 March 1969, p. 12.

56 “Dear comrades,” 2 April 1969, *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO-BArch; Archive of the Parties and Mass Organizations of the GDR in the Federal Archives (Foundation))*, Berlin, Germany), DY 30/3613, pp. 16–17.

57 Wang Yongqin, “1966–1976 nian ZhongMeiSu guanxi jishi (lian'ai yi)” (“Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet Relations (1)”), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, 1997, No. 4, p. 119.

reports alleging Soviet troop movements near Zhenbao. Zhou proposed to keep channels of communications open via the foreign ministry, but, given the supposed Soviet military preparations, to avoid any phone contacts. The Chairman agreed, but nevertheless ordered in an optimistic mood: "Immediately prepare to hold diplomatic negotiations."⁵⁸ But negotiations did not materialize.

On 22 March, Mao ordered the four marshals to prepare another report. The first one, submitted four days earlier, had quickly become obsolete following the second border clash. Mao believed that both sides had stormed into conflict without due deliberation. As a result, he concluded, China had become isolated in the world. Thus all aspects of the country's foreign relations should be up for reconsideration.⁵⁹ While ordering the marshals to write another report, he criticized their previous method of splitting up responsibilities, meeting only infrequently, collating the report from individual parts and focusing only on military issues.⁶⁰ The marshals submitted the still classified second report within ten days.⁶¹

The ninth CCP congress (1 to 24 April) slowed down China's attempts to defuse the border crisis. Although Mao tried to strengthen the moderate forces, the results of the congress were mixed. The election for the new CC resulted in a victory for the radical factions around Jiang and Lin.⁶² Conflict between these two factions, however, now got carried into reconstituted CCP organs.⁶³ On 28 April, the new CC elected the Politburo, which also ended up in the hands of the members of the radical Cultural Revolution Small Group which it was supposed to replace.⁶⁴

With the congress over, Mao and Zhou were finally able to address China's international problems.⁶⁵ In view of the most recent Soviet military build-up along the north-eastern border,⁶⁶ Mao emphasized the need to concentrate on war readiness. Rejecting the idea of fighting on the "territory of other nations," he argued for a defence in depth, allowing space to be traded for the world's sympathy in case of a large-scale attack.⁶⁷

Against this background, the newly constituted Politburo picked the members of the MAC, formally in charge of military planning. Although the MAC also included the four marshals, its lower-level work group under PLA General

58 "Zhou Enlai's report to Mao Zedong and Mao's comments, 22 March 1969," http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=204, accessed 29 January 2005.

59 Wang Yongqin, "Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet Relations," p. 119.

60 *Biography of Mao Zedong*, p. 1543.

61 Zhang Baijia, "Changing international scene," p. 69.

62 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," p. 61.

63 *Biography of Mao Zedong*, pp. 1556–57.

64 Gong Li, "Chinese decision making," p. 324; *ZELNP3*, p. 293.

65 Zheng Qian, "Zhonggong dajiu qianhou quanguo de zhanbei gongzuo" ("The war preparations around the ninth CCP Congress"), *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao*, No. 41 (1969), p. 212.

66 Liu Zhinan, "China's war preparation," pp. 43–44.

67 "Document 8: Mao Zedong's speech at the First Plenary Session of the CCP's Ninth Central Committee, 28 April 1969"; Chen Jian and David L. Wilson, "'All under heaven is great chaos': Beijing, the Sino-Soviet border clashes, and the turn toward Sino-American rapprochement," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 11 (1998), p. 164.

Huang Yongsheng 黄永胜, one of Lin's protégés, fulfilled most of its planning functions.⁶⁸ While Lin expected large-scale war, the four marshals received instructions to work on another report on a general assessment of China's position in world affairs.⁶⁹ However, Chen wondered how far the marshals could depart from Lin's report on foreign relations to the recent CCP congress. Thus, while Zhou provided the four with two assistants from the foreign ministry, they still waited for over a month for additional instructions.⁷⁰

Once the congress was over, Mao also turned toward diplomatic measures. On 1 May, he invited several ambassadors from friendly or neutral countries to attend the Labour Day festivities in Tiananmen Square, where he announced the resending of Chinese ambassadors abroad and apologized for the Cultural Revolution violence against foreign embassies.⁷¹ From 15 May to 17 August, the PRC stationed ambassadors in almost 20 countries across the globe, except in the socialist world but including Vietnam.⁷² Yet Beijing made no overtures to the United States; Zhou only instructed Lei Yang 雷阳, who left for Warsaw to become chargé d'affaires in June, "to pay close attention to developments in US policy."⁷³

Following Kosygin's unsuccessful call, Soviet policy seemed to vacillate between confrontation and accommodation. On the one hand, anti-Chinese propaganda increased dramatically after 22 March.⁷⁴ According to American intelligence, Kosygin's son-in-law Jermen Gvishiani and the nuclear specialist Lev A. Artsimovich tried to solicit American reactions with hints of a Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear facilities during their spring stay in Boston.⁷⁵ In the same vein, the Soviet Union also tried to organize China's neighbours in an anti-Chinese security system. Kosygin travelled to India on 5 May, where he tabled a proposal of greater regional cooperation, particularly with Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran.⁷⁶ The chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, Nikolai V. Podgorny, visited North Korea from 14 to 19 May, but failed to achieve the desired show of unity.⁷⁷ During his subsequent five-day stay in Outer Mongolia, Podgorny and Yumjaagiyn Tsedenbal agreed that border

68 *Biography of Mao Zedong*, pp. 1553–54.

69 Yang Kuisong, "Sino-Soviet border clash," p. 35.

70 Cong Wenzhi, "Attach importance to the study of foreign relations," p. 6.

71 *CB*, No. 886, p. 15. Zhang Baojun, "1969 nian qianhou dang dui waijiao zhanlue de zhongda tiaozheng" ("The significant readjustment of the Party's foreign policy strategy in 1969"), *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu*, No. 1 (1996), p. 63.

72 "New ambassadors of the PR China," 8 August 1969, *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bestand: Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten (PAAA-MfAA, Political Archive of the Office for Foreign Affairs, Files: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Berlin, Germany), Abteilung Ferner Osten—Sektor China, Microfiche C 186/74*, pp. 68–69.

73 Gong Li, "Chinese decision making," p. 336.

74 *Guardian*, 26 March 1969, p. 3. *NYT*, 26 March 1969, p. 8; 31 March 1969, p. 36.

75 "Memorandum for the President," 10 September 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1529, "DEF 12 CHICOM."

76 "Telegram-written report (coded) from: New Delhi, no. 529 from 7 July 1969," *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA; Political Archive of the Office for Foreign Affairs, Berlin, Germany)*, B41, Sowjetunion Referat IIA4, Vol. 95, p. 66.

77 "Intelligence Note – 408," 26 May 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969,

problems should be settled “first of all at the negotiation table.”⁷⁸ Kosygin’s tour of Afghanistan and Pakistan on 30 and 31 May obviously had the aim of promoting the security system once more,⁷⁹ but Pakistani General-turned-President Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan warned Kosygin that his country was unwilling to be drawn into any anti-Chinese cooperation.⁸⁰

The Soviets tightened the screws once more at the Moscow meeting of the world’s communist movement from 5 to 17 June. Seventy-five communist parties gathered in an attempt to overcome past divisions – divisions not only over Czechoslovakia but also over the PRC. In his opening remarks, Brezhnev avoided mentioning the disagreements with China,⁸¹ but during his long speech two days later, the Soviet party leader attacked the PRC for splittist activities and called for an Asian security system similar to WAPA.⁸² Brezhnev explicitly called for a *new, separate* alliance system because he knew that some WAPA members had previously rejected the use of that alliance against China.⁸³ But the Romanian, Italian, Australian, Swiss and Swedish party delegations warned against turning the gathering into an anti-China meeting while strongly advocating Sino-Soviet negotiations.⁸⁴ In view of the failure to obtain significant political support against China,⁸⁵ the proposed Asian security system never took off.

On the other hand, the Soviet government indicated in a 29 March note to its Chinese counterpart that it was willing to restart border negotiations that had been stalled since September 1964.⁸⁶ After a while, on 11 May, the PRC agreed to convene the Sino-Soviet Commission on the Navigation of Boundary Rivers in mid-June.⁸⁷ This agreement reflected Beijing’s decision to balance its foreign policies. In particular, it did not want to provide the United States with an opening to exploit the Sino-Soviet conflict, while at the same time it tried to maximize its

footnote continued

Box 2679, POL 7 USSR 7/1/69; “From American embassy in Tokyo to Department of State,” 3 July 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 2680, “POL 7 USSR 7/1/69.”

78 “From American embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State,” 25 May 1969 (quote), and “Intelligence Note – 408,” 26 May 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 2679, POL 7 USSR 7/1/69.

79 “From American embassy in Kabul to Secretary of State,” 4 June 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 2679, “POL 7 USSR 7/1/69.”

80 “Telegram (coded) from: Rawalpindi, no. 366 from 7 July 1969,” *PAAA*, B41, Sowjetunion Referat IIA4, Vol. 95, pp. 73–74.

81 *WP*, 6 June 1969, pp. A1, A14. *NYT*, 6 June 1969, p. 2.

82 *Pravda*, 8 June 1969, pp. 1–4.

83 Lorenz M. Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2008), p. 269.

84 *NYT*, 7 June 1969, p. 5. *WP*, 10 June 1969, p. A16. *NYT*, 12 June 1969, p. 46. “Speech of Berlinguer (ready for lecture),” 11 June 1969, *FIG*, APC, Fondo Enrico Berlinguer, Movimento Internazionale 1960–1984, “81. Conferenza internazionale dei partiti comunisti e operai, Mosca 5–17 giugno 1969,” pp. 1–54. *NYT*, 13 June 1969, p. 3.

85 *WP*, 13 June 1969, p. A24. *NYT*, 18 June 1969, p. 3.

86 *Pravda*, 30 March 1969, p. 1.

87 *SCMP*, No. 4417, pp. 21–22.

own opportunities.⁸⁸ Concurrently, it also did not wish to make too many concessions to Moscow.⁸⁹ Overshadowed by the 8 July border incidents at Bacha Island (Heilongjiang River),⁹⁰ the commission met from 18 June to August and was able to resolve only minor issues.⁹¹

It was in the context of this dual Soviet policy that Zhou turned to the four marshals, criticizing them for having lost a month in providing strategic advice.⁹² On 27 May, they finally started to work in the same conspiratorial framework⁹³ while, for the following seven weeks, Zhou provided them with sensitive information.⁹⁴ The final report reflected the help of one of Zhou's assistants who researched English-language materials, including Western newspapers.⁹⁵

The 11 July report was the first Chinese official analysis of international relations to contain the Western concept of a Sino-Soviet-American power triangle, to which the Chinese leadership had previously not subscribed.⁹⁶ Defining "the struggle between China, the United States and the Soviet Union" as the dominant feature in international relations, it concluded that war with the United States was highly unlikely, but a quick Soviet "war of aggression against China" possible. Yet the marshals believed that Moscow shied away from a long war because of logistical, economic and political difficulties. They considered recent Western news speculation of a Soviet, American or combined nuclear attack on China mostly an empty threat. Ultimately, China would be best served if it was willing to defend itself actively, to take positive diplomatic steps on a global scale and to develop itself economically. However, the four marshals did not advocate Sino-American rapprochement; China should continue to oppose both the United States and the Soviet Union.⁹⁷

Sino-Soviet-American Relations, July and August 1969

Since its inauguration, the Nixon administration had been pondering its own China policy. A 17 June letter by Democratic senator and majority leader Mike Mansfield to Zhou was designed to bring new momentum.⁹⁸ Written in cooperation with the White House and sent via the Cambodian Prince

88 Liu Zhinan, "China's war preparation," pp. 54.

89 *SCMP*, No. 4426, pp. 24–32.

90 *SCMP*, No. 4455, p. 23; "Soviet protest to the Chinese embassy in Moscow," 8 July 1969, *BA Bern*, E 2200.174 Peking, Aksektion 1985/195, Box 9, "China-USSR 1969–1972"; "Some aspects of Sino-Soviet problems," 14 August 1969, *BA Bern*, E 2300-01, Aksektion 1977/28, Box 5, "1969 p.a. 21.31 Moskau Politische Berichte."

91 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," p. 78. Liu Zhinan, "China's war preparation," p. 54.

92 Wang Yongqin, "Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations," p. 121.

93 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," pp. 62–65.

94 *ZELNP3*, pp. 301–02, 305.

95 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," p. 62.

96 Lüthi, *Sino-Soviet Split*, 3, p. 6.

97 "Document 9: report by four marshals," Chen and Wilson, "All under heaven," pp. 166–68.

98 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," pp. 68–69.

Sihanouk, it requested a personal meeting to improve mutual understanding.⁹⁹ After its arrival in Beijing as late as 26 July,¹⁰⁰ the prime minister declined to invite the senator because of both the “policy of aggression” which the United States was waging and the “occupation ‘by force of the province of Taiwan’.”¹⁰¹ Yet, although Zhou’s reply to Mansfield was harsh, he and Mao placed it within the context of increased Soviet pressure and supposed US attempts to use China to “pressure Soviet revisionism.” Thus, the marshals were ordered to write another report.¹⁰²

In the meantime, Nixon had decided to remove travel and trading restrictions with China but had not yet determined when to make his decision public.¹⁰³ In early July, he ordered the launch of National Security Study Memorandum 63 to “consider the broad implications of the Sino-Soviet rivalry.”¹⁰⁴ An internal report had raised the possibility of Soviet fears of a Sino-American rapprochement giving rise to Soviet-American détente. The memo made the novel implication that Washington could have good relations with both Moscow and Beijing.¹⁰⁵

After the failure of the Mansfield probe, Nixon tried to send peace-feelers through Pakistan and Romania, two countries which had kept friendly relations with China and which he visited during a trip around the world. On 1 August, in Pakistan, the President stated that “the US would welcome accommodation with Communist China and would appreciate if President Yahya Khan would let Chou En-lai know this.” American intentions, however, were so vague that Kissinger instructed his staff four weeks later to call the Pakistani ambassador, Agha Hilaly, with the clarification that “the President had in mind ... that President Yahya might at some natural and appropriate time convey this statement ... in a low-key factual way.”¹⁰⁶ Yet Yahya Khan apparently had already passed the President’s word to China.¹⁰⁷

From Pakistan, Nixon flew directly to Romania for talks on 2–3 August. In specially arranged private meetings, Nixon and Nicolae Ceaușescu extensively discussed China. Nixon indicated that he not only considered Brezhnev’s proposal for an Asian collective security system a mistake but also felt that China’s size and potential was the main reason for the United States to establish normal relations. At the very end of the talks, he asked his host to play “a mediating

99 “Your Excellency,” no date, and “My dear Prince Sihanouk,” 17 June 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-US 3/1/1969.”

100 *ZELNP3*, p. 312.

101 “From American embassy in Canberra to State Department,” 6 September 1969, and “From embassy in Cambodia to Senator Mansfield,” 9 September 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-US 3/1/1969.”

102 Xiong Xianghui, “Prelude,” p. 77.

103 “National security decision memorandum 17,” 26 June 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-134, “NSSM-14 (2 of 2).”

104 “National security study memorandum 63,” 3 July 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-040, “Review group meeting – NSSM-63 Sino-Soviet differences 9/25/69.”

105 “Memorandum for Henry A. Kissinger,” 24 June 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 711, “USSR Vol. III (June–July 1969) (1 of 1).”

106 “Memorandum of conversation,” 29 August 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 1032, “Cookies II.”

107 Wang Yongqin, “Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations,” p. 123.

role between us and China.” Ceaușescu merely promised that “we shall tell our opinion to the Chinese, and of your opinion of this problem.”¹⁰⁸ The Romanians seemed to have handled the mediation task with utmost secrecy and at the highest level only. Ceaușescu did not mention Nixon’s request in his report to the Romanian Party Executive Committee on 4 August.¹⁰⁹ The prime minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer personally passed Nixon’s feelers to Zhou on 7 September when he stopped over in Beijing en route to Ho Chi Minh’s funeral in Hanoi.¹¹⁰ If Ho had died later, the American message would have been delayed even more.

The necessity for the United States to rethink its China foreign policy became evident on 13 August. Just five days after the end of the Sino-Soviet border navigation talks, a major border clash occurred at the border’s western sector, probably incited by the Soviet side.¹¹¹ In its aftermath, Moscow again threatened nuclear war.¹¹² In reality, the Soviet leadership was undecided about such a drastic step; eventually, it would dismiss nuclear war as unfeasible against populous China.¹¹³

At the National Security Council meeting on 14 August, Nixon asserted that he had emphasized during his trip around the world that “we do not intend to join the Soviets in any plan to ‘gang up’ on China.”¹¹⁴ However, neither a discernible policy change nor a public statement on this position followed. Beijing was left in the dark, which, as outlined below, had an enormous impact on its policy choices.

At an 18 August lunch meeting, the second secretary of the Soviet embassy in Washington and a suspected KGB (Soviet secret service) agent, Boris N. Davydov, asked a mid-level State Department official, William L. Stearman, “point blank what the US would do if the Soviet Union attacked and destroyed China’s nuclear installations.”¹¹⁵ Nine days later, the State Department and the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) publicly announced that the Soviet government had reportedly asked its Warsaw Pact allies about a “pre-emptive Soviet attack on ... China’s nuclear weapons center at Lop

108 “Memorandum of conversation,” 2 August 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 1023, “(MemCons – President Nixon President Ceausescu August 2–August 3, 1969).”

109 “Stenogram of the session of the Executive Committee of the CC of the RCP on 4 August 1969,” in: Romulus Ioan Budura, coord., *Relațiile Româno-Chineze 1880–1974 (Sino-Romanian Relations, 1880–1974)* (Bucharest: Foreign Ministry and National Archives, 2005), pp. 929–36.

110 Wang Yongqin, “Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations,” p. 80. “Stenogram of conversation between the Romanian delegation headed by Ion Gheorghe Maurer and Paul Nocușescu with the Chinese delegation headed by Zhou Enlai and Li Xiannian,” 7 September 1969, Budura, *Relațiile*, pp. 943–59.

111 “Sino-Soviet relations,” 25 June 1969, *National Archives of the United Kingdom (NA UK*, Kew Garden), FO 676/546, “Sino-Soviet relations,” p. 130.

112 Xiong Xianghui, “Prelude,” pp. 79–80. Liu Zhinan, “China’s war preparation,” p. 45.

113 Shevchenko, *Breaking*, pp. 165–66.

114 “NSC meeting, August 14, 1969, talking points; China,” no date, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, H Files, Box H-023, “NSC meeting (San Clemente) 8/14/69 briefings: Korea; China (2 of 3).”

115 “Memorandum of conversation,” 18 August 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1529, “DEF 12 CHICOM.”

Nor.”¹¹⁶ It is unclear why the US government went public. Although Washington did not indicate its own position in the ongoing confrontation, the recent peace-feelers of the Nixon administration in Pakistan and Romania suggest that the United States was already tilting towards China.

The Chinese leaders knew about the US public announcement within a day; the news arrived while Beijing was considering defensive preparations.¹¹⁷ Mao and Zhou immediately ordered the general mobilization of the PLA and massive civilian and military preparations against a Soviet attack.¹¹⁸ This stood in marked contrast to the defence policies implemented since April which had addressed mainly the frequent flare-ups of violence in several provinces: factional fighting had occurred in early April in Shanxi, on 11 May in Guizhou, on 17 May in Wuhan (Hubei), and on unspecified dates in Henan and Jiangsu.¹¹⁹ This unrest was highly problematic, since Shanxi, where the Chinese leadership expected a deep conventional attack by Soviet troops stationed in Outer Mongolia, was at the heart of Chinese defensive plans.¹²⁰ Western journalists in Hong Kong picked up the quickening war preparations by 29 August.¹²¹ On the 30th, Gansu province ordered the urban population to leave the cities and “scatter” to the provinces. War preparations in Guangdong started the following day. Beijing mobilized its 8 million inhabitants on 2 September.¹²²

The Kosygin–Zhou Talks and Their Consequences, September 1969

Ho’s death on 3 September interrupted China’s war planning. The following day Zhou flew to Hanoi to express his condolences. Although foreign news agencies reported that he quickly departed to avoid meeting the Soviet delegation, he in fact returned to Beijing to resume military preparations.¹²³

Kosygin arrived in Hanoi some days later with the intention of contacting Zhou. By that time, the USSR had realized that Sino-Soviet conflict had opened the door to the possibility of Sino-American rapprochement, and thus tried preventive diplomacy.¹²⁴ On the day of Ho’s funeral service on 9 September 1969, Kosygin attempted to contact the Chinese government through Vietnamese channels.¹²⁵ Although Chinese sources blame the Vietnamese for the subsequent

116 *NYT*, 28 August 1969, p. 8; 29 August 1969, p. 5.

117 Xiong Xianghui, “Prelude,” p. 80. Xiong misdates the dispatch as 18 August. Wang Yongqin, “Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations,” p. 78.

118 “The CCP Central Committee’s order for general mobilization in border provinces and regions, 28 August 1969,” Chen and Wilson, “All under heaven,” pp. 155–75.

119 *ZELNP3*, pp. 290, 296, 298, 300; Zheng Qian, “The war preparations,” pp. 214–15.

120 Liu Zhinan, “China’s war preparation,” p. 44.

121 *NYT*, 30 August 1969, pp. 1, 5.

122 Zheng Qian, “The war preparations,” pp. 216–18.

123 Wang Yongqin, “Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations,” p. 123.

124 “From American embassy in Tokyo to the Secretary of State,” 9 October 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1974, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-USSR 10/1/1969.”

125 Xiong Xianghui, “Prelude,” p. 81. Cong Wenzhi, “Attach importance to the study of foreign relations,”

delay,¹²⁶ it seems that Beijing deliberated extensively on Kosygin's proposal. Against the background of Maurer's 7 September communication of Nixon's peace-feelers, it eventually decided to agree in order "to whet the appetite of the Americans."¹²⁷ But its reply arrived in Hanoi only after Kosygin had left for Moscow via Calcutta.¹²⁸ Once the Chinese agreement caught up with him during a refueling stop in Dushanbe in Soviet Central Asia, he ordered the plane to fly via Siberia to Beijing.¹²⁹

No transcript of the Zhou–Kosygin meeting at Beijing airport on 11 September has surfaced. Mikhail S. Kapitsa remembers that the two prime ministers talked about past Sino-Soviet disagreements, border problems, the re-dispatch of ambassadors and economic cooperation.¹³⁰ According to Chinese recollections, Zhou announced China's preparations for diplomatic relations with the United States, obviously with the goal of increasing pressure.¹³¹ After the meeting, Soviet propaganda stopped and the borders remained quiet.¹³² Although defence preparations in China continued,¹³³ Zhou reported to Mao about his talks with Kosygin on 13 September, advising him to accept border negotiations.¹³⁴ The two Chinese leaders furthermore believed that this would "increase capital to pressure American imperialism."¹³⁵ On 16 September, the CCP Politburo discussed a draft letter by Zhou to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with detailed proposals to relax the situation at the border.¹³⁶

The same day, a KGB leak to the *London Evening Times* recommenced Soviet threats against China's nuclear weapons project.¹³⁷ Although the US embassy in Moscow called it Soviet psychological warfare,¹³⁸ Mao and Zhou suddenly doubted the sincerity of Kosygin's motives five days before. Equating his visit with Japanese deceitful behaviour before the attack on Pearl Harbor in late 1941, the two convinced themselves that the Soviet Union was using diplomacy to obscure its war preparations.¹³⁹

footnote continued

p. 8. M.S. Kapitsa, *Na raznykh parallelakh (On Different Parallels)* (Moskva: Kniga i biznes, 996), p. 81.

126 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," p. 81.

127 Gao Wenqian, *Zhou Enlai's Last Years*, p. 411.

128 Cong Wenzhi, "Attach importance to the study of foreign relations," p. 8.

129 Kapitsa, *Na raznykh parallelakh*, p. 81.

130 *Ibid.* pp. 82–92.

131 Xiong Xianghui, "Prelude," p. 83.

132 *NYT*, 17 September 1969, p. 5; 19 September 1969, p. 2.

133 Zheng Qian, "The war preparations," p. 219.

134 *ZELNP3*, p. 321.

135 Gao Wenqian, *Zhou Enlai's Last Years*, pp. 411–12.

136 Niu Jun, "1969 nian Zhongguo bianjie chongtu yu Zhongguo waijiao zhanlüe de tiaozheng" ("The Chinese border clashes in 1969 and the readjustment of China's foreign policy strategy"), *Dangdai Zhongguo shi yanjiu*, No. 6 (1995), p. 73.

137 *London Evening News*, 16 September 1969, p. 7.

138 "From American embassy in Moscow to Secretary of State," 19 September 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1975, "POLITICAL AFF. & REL. 8/1/69."

139 Yang Kuisong, "Sino-Soviet border clash," p. 39. Niu Jun, "The Chinese border clashes," p. 74.

It was in this context that the four marshals submitted their fourth report on 17 September. They had met for almost 30 hours in total since 29 July to discuss the “Sino-American-Soviet triangle.” Before the 13 August Sino-Soviet border clash, they had advocated equidistance from both superpowers. After the public US revelation of Soviet inquiries about an attack on China’s nuclear weapons project, they advocated playing “the American card.” Even if they did not expect “a large-scale [Soviet] invasion,” Chen and his colleagues urged “taking advantage of American-Soviet contradictions.”¹⁴⁰ The final version of the 17 September report asserted that “Soviet revisionism might attack,” but it also claimed that Moscow did not have the stomach for a military conflict with Beijing. As Kosygin’s visit to the Chinese capital seemed to prove, not only the United States but also the Soviet Union was extending its hand to China for improved relations; thus, the PRC was in the “beneficial” position of being able to choose between the two. However, at the end of the report, Chen added some “non-conformist ideas.” China should resume the Warsaw talks and possibly even raise their level in a “strategic move.” Yet while “we should not raise any preconditions” in these talks, no concessions on Taiwan should be made.¹⁴¹

Despite these positive recommendations, both Zhou and Mao were worried that Washington had not yet *publicly* declared its position regarding Moscow’s threats against Beijing’s nuclear weapons project. The two concluded – wrongly – that the United States not only supported the Soviet Union but was deliberately waiting for the two communist rivals to go to war in order to join the conflict late on the winning side, as it presumably had done in the First and Second World Wars.¹⁴² The final version of Zhou’s letter to Kosygin of 18 September thus included the demand to stop threats against China’s nuclear weapons project.¹⁴³ The Soviet reply a week later asked for negotiations to start in Beijing on 10 October but did not contain any references to the nuclear issue. Mao and Zhou concluded that this meant that war was indeed imminent.¹⁴⁴

Consequently, the Chinese leadership started with emergency preparations for war. While Zhou responded to Kosygin’s letter on 29 September with a request to postpone the talks for another ten days, presumably with the idea of gaining more time, Lin ordered the PLA on full alert by 30 September in anticipation of a Soviet attack on China’s National Day, 1 October.¹⁴⁵ The Chinese leadership was surprised when the Soviet attack did not come, but remained suspicious.¹⁴⁶ War preparations continued.¹⁴⁷

140 Xiong Xianghui, “Prelude,” pp. 76–83.

141 *Ibid.* pp. 84–87.

142 Liu Zhinan, “China’s war preparation,” p. 46.

143 “Letter, Zhou Enlai to Alexei Kosygin, 18 September 1969,” Chen and Wilson, “All under heaven,” pp. 171–72.

144 *ZELNP3*, p. 323.

145 *Ibid.* Liu Zhinan, “China’s war preparation,” p. 48.

146 Yang Kuisong, “Sino-Soviet border clash,” p. 40.

147 Zheng Qian, “The war preparations,” p. 221.

In anticipation of a Soviet attack at around 20 October – the start of border negotiations – most of the top Chinese leaders, including the four marshals, left Beijing to different locations throughout the PRC with the aim both of escaping anticipated capture by Soviet troops and of positioning themselves to organize guerilla warfare.¹⁴⁸ Simultaneously, a mass campaign to build air raid shelters gathered momentum in urban centres.¹⁴⁹ On 17 October, Lin ordered the PLA on emergency alert.¹⁵⁰

Again, the Soviet Union did not attack, neither after the start of the first round of Sino-Soviet border talks on 20 October nor after their preliminary failure on 11 December.¹⁵¹ But the PRC, according to an East German report, continued to suffer from a “war psychosis” in anticipation of the freezing of the rivers.¹⁵² The quiet at the border throughout the winter of 1969/70 eventually convinced the Chinese leaders that the worst was over. On 1 May, Mao received the head of the Soviet border negotiation delegation on Tiananmen with the words: “We should negotiate well, should have good-neighbourly relations, should be patient, and only fight with words.”¹⁵³

The war scare was the result of three factors. China’s self-isolation had led to security paranoia in Beijing. Soviet diplomacy – intended or not – increased Chinese security fears. And finally, Washington’s failure to take a clear public position in the Sino-Soviet conflict made the situation worse, despite Nixon’s policy tilt towards the PRC since August. In fact, on 9 September, the President had instructed the US ambassador in Warsaw, Walter Stoessel, to express his desire for improved relations once he had the chance to meet Lei Yang.¹⁵⁴ However, no public signals were sent out.

It was only on 24 September that the Nixon administration decided to rebuke the Soviets in some form, at a time when American inaction had already caused the PRC to fall into a war scare.¹⁵⁵ Thus, on the 30th, Secretary of State William Rogers asked the Pakistani Minister of Information and National Affairs, Sher Ali Khan Pataudi, whether China had replied to Nixon’s secret 1 August inquiry, but received a negative reply.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, as Paris informed Washington, during the 25 September meeting with the French ambassador, Etienne Manac’h, Zhou expressed a “rather sympathetic view of US policy towards the

148 Liu Zhanan, “China’s war preparation,” pp. 48–49.

149 Yang Kuisong, “Sino-Soviet border clash,” p. 41.

150 Wang Yongqin, “Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations,” pp. 124–25.

151 *ZELNP3*, p. 338.

152 “Dear Comrade Fischer,” 28 November 1969, *PAAA-MfAA*, Abteilung Ferner Osten – Sektor China, Microfiche C 186/74, p. 86.

153 Zhang Baojun, “The significant readjustment,” p. 63.

154 “Memorandum of conversation,” 9 September 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-US 3/1/1969.”

155 Nixon’s approval is in: “Memorandum for the Under Secretary of State,” 24 September 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 711, “USSR Vol. V (Aug.–Oct. 1969) (2 of 2).”

156 “Memorandum of conversation,” 30 September 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 2406, “Pol Pak-US 1/1/68.”

Sino-Soviet dispute.”¹⁵⁷ Obviously, the fourth report of the marshals had started to have an impact on Zhou’s mind.

On 10 October, Kissinger decided to send the first public signal. After Pakistani ambassador Hilaly had asked the United States to make a concrete gesture, Kissinger announced the withdrawal of two US destroyers from the Taiwan Strait and proposed that Pakistan act as a secret channel.¹⁵⁸ Cunningly, Kissinger cast the withdrawal of the ships as an important concession, although it had already been decided for budgetary reasons.¹⁵⁹ In a handwritten letter some days later, Hilaly urged Yahya Khan to hurry with this communication and not wait for Zhou’s scheduled visit to Pakistan.¹⁶⁰ However, it took until 5 November for the message to arrive in the Pakistani embassy in Beijing,¹⁶¹ and another nine days to reach Zhou.¹⁶² In the meantime, on 7 November, the United States publicly announced that it would stop its naval patrols of the Taiwan Strait which had started in mid-1950.¹⁶³

Even before Beijing had received this message, the PRC foreign ministry considered signalling to Washington its readiness to relax relations. Following a 27 October routine inquiry by the US Consul General in Hong Kong about the fate of two American sailors who had been arrested as they strayed into Chinese territorial waters in February, the ministry concluded on 7 November that this was an American test of Chinese responsiveness, and thus advised Mao to order their release as a sign of goodwill.¹⁶⁴ After both this and the Pakistani message on the withdrawal of US ships from the Taiwan Strait, Zhou sent the proposal to Mao on 16 November: “We should pay attention to Nixon’s and Kissinger’s inclinations.”¹⁶⁵

On 1 December, the chargé d’affaires of the PRC embassy in Poland, Lei Yang, received orders to invite the US ambassador.¹⁶⁶ Walter Stoessel, however, acted more quickly when he cornered an interpreter of the Chinese embassy two days later at a reception in the Yugoslav embassy.¹⁶⁷ The next day, Mao agreed to Zhou’s proposal to start talks in Warsaw and to free the two US sailors.¹⁶⁸ Four days later, Lei invited Stoessel to talks in the PRC embassy in

157 “EA– Marshall Green to the Under Secretary,” 6 October 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-US 3/1/1969.”

158 “Memorandum for the President,” 10 October 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 1032, “Cookies II”; F.S. Aijazuddin, *From a Head, Through a Head, To a Head* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 27–28, 149–50.

159 “EA – Marshall Green to the Under Secretary,” 6 October 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-US 3/1/1969.”

160 Aijazuddin, *From a Head*, pp. 28–30.

161 Niu Jun, “The Chinese border clashes,” p. 77.

162 Liu Zhinan, “China’s war preparation,” p. 55. Li Jie, “Changes,” p. 314.

163 Niu Jun, “The Chinese border clashes,” p. 77.

164 Gong Li, “Chinese decision making,” p. 336.

165 *ZELNP3*, p. 334.

166 Xiong Xianghui, “Prelude,” p. 92.

167 “From American embassy in Warsaw to Secretary of State,” 3 December 1969, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 489, “Dobrynin/Kissinger 1969 (Part 2).”

168 Wang Yongqin, “Chronicle of Sino-American-Soviet relations,” p. 125.

Warsaw.¹⁶⁹ During the unusually friendly meeting, the ambassador reconfirmed that the United States desired “greater communication with the People’s Republic of China” in the ambassadorial talks, but did “not wish to engage in a sterile rehash of old ideological arguments.”¹⁷⁰

At a return visit to the US embassy on 8 January 1970, the Chinese chargé d’affaires stated that the PRC was ready to resume the informal ambassadorial-level talks in 12 days.¹⁷¹ Although no Chinese ambassador had arrived from Beijing, the 135th Sino-American ambassadorial meeting in Warsaw took place with Lei Yang attending as the PRC representative. Although peaceful coexistence and Taiwan were still major points of disagreement, the meeting again took place in an unusually cordial manner. The Chinese chargé d’affaires stated China’s interest to “fundamentally improve relations between China and the US.”¹⁷²

Conclusion

The momentous changes within Sino-Soviet-American relations over the course of 1969 were not the product of intentional design. Despite formulating a grand vision in late 1967, the Nixon administration had no detailed China policy ready when it came to office in early 1969. The signals it conveyed to China before October 1969 were weak and contradictory. As a result, for most of 1969, the PRC was confused about the US position on Sino-Soviet-American relations. It was only by early October that Washington started to send out clear signs that it wanted to seek rapprochement with Beijing.

China was institutionally and politically unable to shape events during the year. For 15 years, its interest in contacts with the United States had been simply to gain control over Taiwan. The 2 March 1969 border clash was neither a strategic move nor a signal to the United States but an aggressive though limited defence against Soviet encroachment. However, the Soviet reaction threatened to escalate the crisis beyond Chinese intentions. As a result of its international self-isolation, China’s leadership suffered from an insecurity complex, which was further exacerbated by the lack of international links necessary for intelligence gathering. The Cultural Revolution inhibited China from conducting a coherent foreign policy and thus led it into a war scare. Throughout much of 1969, Beijing continued to maintain equidistance between the superpowers. It was only once the United States had sent out clear signals, after the PRC had gone through the war scare, that Beijing was willing to improve relations with the United States despite the Taiwan issue.

169 *Ibid.* pp. 125–26.

170 “From American embassy in Warsaw to Secretary of State,” 11 December 1969, *NARA*, State Department, RG 59, Central Files, 1967–1969, Box 1973, “POLITICAL AFF. & REL. CHICOM-US 3/1/1969.”

171 Gong Li, “Chinese decision making,” p. 337.

172 “Airgram from American embassy Warsaw to Department of State,” 24 January 1970, *NARA*, NIXON, NSC, Box 1032, “Cookies II.”

The Soviet Union pursued a double-edged policy towards China, either intentionally or accidentally, throughout 1969. It clearly had not understood the limited nature of the 2 March border clashes, and it tended to respond disproportionately to Chinese actions throughout the year. As a result, it helped to push the Chinese leadership into a war scare by the autumn of the year. Although Soviet actions were partly motivated by genuine concerns over the possibility of a Sino-American rapprochement, Moscow eventually could not prevent the improvement of relations between Beijing and Washington.