

# A Critical Analysis of the Breakdown of Sino-Soviet Relations - Structural Inequality

Jianing Wang

King's College London, 570100, Britain

jianing.2.wang@kcl.ac.uk

**Keywords:** China, Nternational relation, Structural

**Abstract:**Between the 1950s and the 1960s the relationship between China and the Soviet Union went from being as close as brothers to being enemies. The reasons for the Sino-Soviet split have been analysed in a relatively complete and comprehensive manner by academics. The author also agrees that a complex event such as the Sino-Soviet split cannot be completely explained by a single factor. At the same time, however, the author argues that there was a central or underlying cause that coexisted with other, non-primary causes and motivations. The article attempts to discuss, from a critical perspective, some of the flaws and shortcomings in the explanation of the Sino-Soviet split from the perspective of personal factors, conflicts of interest, and ideological conflicts often used in comprehensive cause analysis, and to demonstrate that the root cause of the Sino-Soviet split was due to a structural inequality in inter-party and state relations. And in the same period and in the same socialist camp, the breakdown of relations between China and the Soviet Union was not an isolated case; this fragility and structural problem existed throughout the socialist camp.

## 1. Introduction

The breakdown between China and the Soviet Union is a great change in China's foreign policy. China and the former Soviet Union once trusted and helped each other. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union provided China with continuous and vigorous economic assistance, and even contributed to China on military issues, such as participating in the Korean War <sup>[1]</sup>. It can be said that China and the Soviet Union were the most important allies against the United States during the Cold War (Fairbank and Goldman, 2006). However, this alliance did not last long. Since the 1950s, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union began to crack.

Although the exact time of the “breakdown” is still controversial, the academic circles generally believe that 1958-1960s was a process from disagreement to division (Shen Li, unlike other academic viewpoints to be put forward in this paper, the author thinks that the Sino-Soviet split was due to the structural inequality between political parties in the whole socialist camp.

## 2. Personal Factors

First, academics and politicians generally believed that the breakdown of relations between China and the Soviet Union was closely related to the deterioration of personal relations between Mao Zedong and Khrushchev (Heinzig, 1998). Deng (2011) also mentioned that under the historical background at that time, Mao Zedong was the leader with the greatest voice in China and had the final say in almost all government affairs <sup>[2]</sup>. This also means that Mao Zedong's personal preferences and judgments played a decisive role in China's foreign policy at that time. However, some scholars questioned that this general understanding is untenable. Because if the deterioration of personal relations is the main reason for the breakdown of relations between countries, then it cannot explain why the relations between China and the Soviet Union did not improve after Khrushchev stepped down (Shen Li, 2012). One might think Mao might consider continuity in foreign policy. Despite Khrushchev's resignation, relations with the Soviet Union were relatively

poor for diplomatic continuity<sup>[3]</sup>. But if we look at Mao Zedong's diplomatic tendencies, not only after the 1960s, it actively established friendly diplomatic relations with developing countries and third world countries to counter the United States and the Soviet Union, but in the 1970s, China also cooperated with Western Europe, Japan and the United States, which shows that the continuity of foreign policy may not be the most concerned issue for China (Yu, 1977). Therefore, it can be speculated that the reason for the lack of obvious recovery of Sino-Soviet relations after Khrushchev's downfall is not China's concern for the continuity of foreign policy, and under this background, it cannot replace personal factors to reasonably explain the Sino-Soviet split.

### **3. Conflicts of National Interest**

There is also a mainstream view that the deterioration of relations between China and the Soviet Union is rooted in the conflict of interests between the two countries (Hao, 1996), especially the national interests of the territory<sup>[4]</sup>. For example, China at that time had always maintained a tough attitude on issues involving the Taiwan Strait issue and the Sino-Indian border conflict. This contradicts Khrushchev's direction of easing tensions with the United States when he came to power, implying that the Soviet Union cannot support China on Taiwan and India. This view tries to show that the Soviet Union's diplomatic orientation conflicts with China's interests, especially the border issue and Taiwan issue, which are actually China's red line and eventually lead to the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations<sup>[5]</sup>. However, this does not explain the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement. At the time, Stalin did not discuss Taiwan or China joining the United Nations (Yahuda, 2011).

### **4. Ideological Conflict**

However, there is another ideological view that is more widely accepted. Yahuda (2011) noted that Soviet foreign policy was strongly influenced by its ideology. In addition, when Khrushchev criticized Stalin's personality cult and declared the direction of peaceful coexistence, Khrushchev's views were quite different from Mao Zedong's. On the other hand, Mao Zedong's interpretation of communism is more in line with the line of class struggle and violent proletarian revolution, which leads to substantive ideological differences between the Soviet Union and China (Li, 2007). This view has been widely accepted by academic circles<sup>[6]</sup>. Fairbank and Goldman (2006: 380) share this ideological clash as a major cause of division, noting that “the Chinese Communist Party and the CPSU used to have the same faith, but now everyone thinks the other party is denigrating it.<sup>[7]</sup>” Followers of this view, therefore, argue that ideological divisions emerged after Khrushchev came to power, and that those divisions seemed to turn into divisions after public debate in 1960<sup>[8]</sup>. However, this argument does not explain the important fact that Khrushchev's critique of Stalin's cult of the individual was put forward as early as 1956, when the ideological conflict was already obvious. Although Mao Zedong expressed dissatisfaction, it did not have a substantial impact on the relations between the two countries. In addition, in 1957, not only did China and the Soviet Union maintain good cooperation, but China also helped mediate among the Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary (Shen & Li, 2012). If this argument were true, then the division would have happened long ago. In addition, Friedman (2015) provides a new perspective for the consensus between China and the Soviet Union, that is, socialism or communism will replace imperialism and capitalism, but their own history and culture have different understandings of the world revolutionary process. For the Soviet Union, realizing communism is the most important thing, while anti-imperialism is more a means to achieve an end<sup>[9]</sup>. For China at that time, from the perspective of the overall national interests, the painful memory of the “hundred years of humiliation” was unforgettable for the Chinese people, and the determination of the entire Chinese nation to overthrow imperialism was unshakable. The Chinese leaders at that time realized that only by developing the socialist system can China's long-term development and peace and stability be ensured. This view respects China's historical culture and social reality, and provides a new way of thinking for answering this question. It must be admitted that the historical narrative of “a hundred years of humiliation” is really

important to China, and Callachan(2010) believes that the history of aggression and humiliation from the Opium War to the Japanese War has given the Chinese Communist Party irreplaceable legitimacy <sup>[10]</sup>. Therefore, it seems reasonable to think that Friedman is right. However, it does not seem to provide a reasonable explanation for China's reconciliation with the United States, which has long been defined by China as an imperialist country.

## 5. Structural Perspective

Another argument about the structure of Sino-Soviet alliance is as follows: First, Stalin's death created a vacuum in Sino-Soviet dialogue. Since then, the way of dealing with problems and exchanges between the two countries is mainly the struggle for the privilege of representing the socialist group. Secondly, the inter-party relationship between the Communist Party of China and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union transcends international relations and ignores the concepts of equality, national interests and national sovereignty, which is the deeper reason for the split between China and the Soviet Union (Shen & Li, 2006). Finally, the author will expound his own views on this basis.

The author thinks that the reason for the split between China and the Soviet Union lies in the structural inequality between political parties. This inequality does not come from the Sino-Soviet alliance, but from the socialist alliance under the leadership of the Soviet Union. The structural problems discussed by Shen and Li (2006) can be summed up here.

From the perspective of overall state relations, the diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries were unequal, and many Eastern European countries condemned the Soviet Union's aggressive attitude. For example, during the Prague Spring incident, the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact member countries invaded Czechoslovakia armed forces, which aroused dissatisfaction from all walks of life. In addition, on the Taiwan Strait issue and the Sino-Indian border conflict, the Soviet Union made vague statements, which greatly damaged China's national interests <sup>[11]</sup>, and applied to establish a long-wave radio station for its fleet in China in 1958 (Li, 2007). As mentioned in previous paragraphs, even in Stalin's time, the Soviet Union did not support China in solving the Taiwan issue or restoring China's seat in the United Nations after the Korean War. In addition, when China was founded, Stalin asked China not only to ensure the validity of the Soviet Union's previous acquisition of Chinese territory, but also to allow citizens of third countries to enter China, which led to the subsequent dispute between the Soviet Union and China on the border of Xinjiang (Yahuda, 2011). In fact, we can infer that although China and the Soviet Union are important allies, China's interests are often not among the primary considerations of the Soviet Union. These actions can assume that the Soviet Union did not regard China as a completely equal partner, but regarded China as an inferior existence. Yahuda (2011) put forward the Soviet view that peaceful coexistence among socialist countries is based on the premise of Soviet leadership. As for China, the image of "Big Brother" of the Soviet Union is still deeply rooted (Zhang, 2014), and this view of Sino-Soviet relations also seems to regard China as inferior to the existence of the Soviet Union. In fact, due to the success of the socialist revolution and the historical position of orthodox ideology, the Soviet Union has the highest status among other communist countries (Shen & Li, 2012). In addition, China not only received aid from the Soviet Union when it was founded, but also maintained close ties with the Soviet Union before the Sino-Soviet relations broke down. On the economic side, China introduced the Soviet model focusing on heavy industry, with a large amount of loans and assistance. On the technical level, the Soviet Union provided China with technical training and close talent exchange. On the institutional level, China learned from the experience of Soviet reform and introduced the Soviet Commune (Chai, 2011). Generally speaking, the Soviet Union is not only superior to other socialist countries in ideology, but also has unparalleled experience in governance, economy and system in various fields. However, the absolute superiority of the Soviet Union in terms of overall national power has also led to power competition among other communist countries (Shen and Li 2006), but it needs to be clarified that this kind of open and covert competition between countries is not Appeared only after Stalin's death. When Stalin was in power, Yugoslav leader Tito and some nationalist leaders

questioned and challenged the absolute status of the Soviet Union (Yahuda, 2011). This also directly led to the division and disintegration of the Yugoslav state under the leadership of Tito. In addition, we must know that the tearing and competition of this kind of relationship did not only exist between countries with a large voice at that time, and even Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries, where the Soviet Union had a small voice, also had obvious struggles (Shen & Li, 2012). However, China may have seen a better opportunity to compete for rhetoric after Stalin's death. Zideng (2011) Referring to Mao Zedong's belief that Stalin should have the highest revolutionary position in Eastern bloc after his death means that the Soviet Union has lost its unparalleled legitimacy in the lofty position of "communist" orthodoxy in socialist countries. In contrast, Albania's split with the Soviet Union almost coincided with the Sino-Soviet split. This means that different countries in the same camp are divided at the same time in time, which shows once again that this is a structural problem in the eastern camp. Finally, in several debates between China and the Soviet Union, Albania chose to side with China (Marku, 2020). This is a manifestation of resisting this unequal relationship. In addition, the party-government relations within Eastern bloc are mixed, because the National Communist Party tends to influence relations, and the influence of the political structure and norms before taking office on the relations with the state after taking office (Shen Heli, 2012). Therefore, although the CPSU has the highest status among socialist countries, the Soviet Union has always maintained an unequal and higher status with other countries in its relations with other countries, just like in party relations. This led the Soviet Union to treat its relations with socialist countries differently from those of countries in the modern sense, ignoring national interests and sovereignty, which is the second point mentioned by Shen and Li (2006). This means that in the eyes of the Soviet Union, neither Eastern European countries nor even China are equal countries, but deal with diplomatic issues according to their highest revolutionary status, and it is easy to ignore the sovereignty and fundamental interests of other countries.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, the author does not believe that a question such as the Sino-Soviet split can be adequately explained by a single cause, but the author does believe that there is a fundamental or central cause, which is that structural inequalities among factions within the socialist camp eventually led to a breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations. Specifically, this unequal relationship between factions aroused mutual suspicion and competition for the right to speak in politics. It can be said that at that time, the struggle between factions even surpassed the competition between countries. The result of vicious competition was the fragmentation of the Soviet Socialist Union as it was known. From the point of view of structural inequality, this also seems to provide an explanation for the long-standing friendly relations that China and Russia have achieved today, in that even though today Russia is far behind China economically, China still maintains an equal partnership with Russia. However, Russia today still seems to have a Soviet-style view of its neighbours and countries belonging to the former Soviet Union. It is therefore still necessary to take into account the complex temporal and other differences between the Soviet Union and Russia in order to properly understand today's Russian-Chinese relations. Although in Nixon's 1967 article he called for America's Asian allies should go to contain China, but the article also reflects the view that for the first time in the American perspective China is not placed in the same camp as the Soviet Union (Nixon, 1967). This became a major strategic change for the US after Nixon's victory in the 1968 election, which saw the US joining forces with China to contain the Soviet Union. The Sino-Soviet split also later became the precondition for a rapprochement in Sino-American relations, paving the way for China's reform and opening towards a global market.

## References

- [1] Deng, k., 2011. *China's Political Economy in Modern Times*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- [2] Fairbank, J. K. & Goldman, M., 2006. *China: a new history*. Cambridge, Mass; London:

Belknap.

[3] Friedman, J., 2015. *Shadow Cold War: The sino-sovite Competition for the Third world*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

[4] Hao, C., 1996. An attempt to compare the similar causes of the Soviet-Yugoslavian conflict and the Sino-Soviet conflict. *Journal Of Jiangsu Normal University (Philosophy And Social Science Edition)*, 4.

[5] Heinzig, D., 1998. *The Soviet Union and Communist China 1945-1950: The Arduous Road to the Alliance: The Arduous Road to the Alliance*. s.l.:Routledge.

[6] Li, H., 2007. *Beijing and Moscow: alliance, confrontation, cooperation*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.

[7] Marku, Y., 2020. Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of Soviet-Albanian Relations, and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960–1961. *The International History Review*, 813-832 4.

[8] Shen, Z. & Li, D., 2006. *A Study of Some Issues in Post-War Sino-Soviet Relations*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.

[9] Shen, Z. & Li, D., 2012. Structural imbalance: the deeper reasons for the breakdown of the Sino-Soviet alliance. *Exploration And Free Views*, 10, pp. 3-11.

[10] Yahuda, M. B., 2011. *The international politics of the Asia-Pacific*. London; New york: Routledge.

[11] Zhang, H., 2014. The rural construction of the image of the "big brother" of the Soviet Union. *CPC history studies*, 5.