

The Origin of the Sino-Soviet Alliance

Niu Jun

I

Communist ideology played a critical role in the long-standing relationship between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Soviet Union. However, a great change took place during the Anti-Japanese War in China.

Firstly, the Central Committee of the CPC had repeated disputes with the Soviet Union and the Communist International on how to conduct policies related to the Anti-Japanese National United Front. The ideologic links which had maintained the relationship were also weakened. The CPC adopted policies different from those of the Soviet Union and the Communist International for different strategic reasons, and Soviet leaders' resentment towards the Central Committee of the CPC developed into doubts about the nature of the Party. Stalin believed that the CPC, which was nothing more than a petty bourgeois group of patriotic peasants, lacked strength.

In terms of ideology, the CPC was faced with a more complex problem. On the one hand, they sincerely believed in communism and willingly respected the Soviet Union as an authority. On the other, however, they realized from their experience that it would bring great harm to the Party to apply Soviet theories, experience and policies mechanically. The Rectification Campaign initiated by Mao Zedong marked the Central Committee's determination to make fundamental changes in the CPC's relationship with the Soviet Union.

Once the Anti-Japanese War came to an end, the relationship between the Soviet Union and the CPC became unbalanced. The Soviet Union had relegated the CPC to a minor position in its China policies, although the CPC considered its relationship with the Soviet Union as one of the key factors influencing its major policies. The CPC was faced with the fact that they could receive only limited help from the Soviet Union, and that cooperation could only be achieved with great effort.

II

At the time Japan surrendered, there were few common points between the policies of the CPC and those of the Soviet Union, and the two appeared to be running on different tracks. The Soviet Union wanted to make the articles of the

secret Yalta Agreement and the Sino-Soviet Agreement become reality and to maintain its interests in this arrangement. However, the leaders of the CPC based the strategies and policies of the Party mainly on the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States rather than on their understanding of the Yalta and Sino-Soviet agreements. It was not until 19 September 1945 when the Central Committee officially declared its strategies and policies for taking north-eastern China that there was a turning point in CPC-Soviet relations.

From mid October, in order to maintain its interests in Northeast China, the Soviet Union offered to support and help the CPC with its development in the area. Influenced by Soviet policies, the Central Committee formulated its strategy towards Northeast China in mid October, and the two parties began their close strategic co-operation.

The development of the relationship between the CPC and Soviet armies in Northeast China had a long-lasting influence on CPC-Soviet relations. If the Soviet Union wanted to maintain its strength in Northeast China, the only choice was to help the CPC take the northeast, which was impossible for the CPC without the agreement and support of the Soviet Union. It was this mutual interest in fighting against US and Kuomintang (KMT) control over Northeast China that pushed the CPC and the Soviet Union into strategic co-operation in spite of Soviet adjustments to its Northeast China policies. CPC-Soviet relations at this time signified a turning point in the post-war relationship between them and provided the cornerstone for its later development.

III

However, the strategic co-operation between the CPC and the Soviet Union in Northeast China was local and restricted by the outside pressures facing both sides. The disappearance of the factors stimulating such co-operation inevitably had serious consequences.

In mid November 1945, when Albert Wedemeyer came to China to examine the situation, Chiang Kai-shek decided to halt his negotiations with the Soviet army. This was considered by the Soviet Union to be a diplomatic action instigated by the USA. Not wishing to have a confrontation with the USA in Northeast China, the Soviet Union immediately decided to take measures to make peace with the KMT, and to limit the CPC's activities in the area.

Realizing that Soviet policies for limiting the CPC's activities in Northeast China were by no means general or temporary, the Central Committee of the CPC decided to change the emphasis to establishing strong bases in remote areas away from the major cities and main roads. Although seemingly a reaction to changes in Soviet strategy which put pressure on the CPC, at a deeper level this actually reflected progress in the CPC leaders' understanding of the relationship with the Soviet Union. The fact that the Soviet Union repeatedly ignored the CPC's difficulties forced the Central Committee of the CPC to consider its relations with the Soviet Union from a very practical perspective.

Between April and November 1946, Mao Zedong revised his previous opinions on the international post-war situation, and proposed the concept of “an intermediate zone.” This concept differed greatly from Soviet ideas on international strategy. Mao also placed national revolutionary movements represented by China above the strategic position of the Soviet Union in his later discussions on the issue, which greatly influenced the subsequent relationship between the two sides. Mao’s re-estimation of the international situation indicated that the Central Committee of the CPC no longer considered the Soviet-US relationship as a decisive factor in the political situation in China, and that the CPC would no longer be fettered by the Soviet-US relationship, nor by the diplomatic strategies of the Soviet Union.

IV

After the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War, the Soviet Union’s greatest concern was US interference. At that time, Soviet leaders considered it impossible for the CPC to win the war. By deciding to defeat the KMT by means of war, the CPC leaders had actually made the decision to protect the interests of the Chinese revolution and to break down Soviet-US dominance in the Far East. Mao was extremely unhappy about the Yalta system established by the Soviet Union and the U.S., and the Soviet Union’s demand that the CPC compromise with the KMT in response to Soviet diplomatic policies.

The CPC’s military victory led the Soviet leaders to re-examine their relations with the CPC. Stalin admitted that he had misjudged the situation in China, and the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party decided to provide aid to the CPC. Although this was merely a tactic to maintain Soviet trade relations with the areas under the CPC’s control in Northeast China, this aid to the CPC became a strategic policy.

Clearly Mao Zedong felt it necessary to reinforce relations with the Soviet Union at a time when the PLA was beginning its strategic offensive and he therefore proposed a visit to the Soviet Union. During this period, the relationship between the CPC and the Soviet Union in Northeast China was reinforced, and the Northeast Bureau of the CPC took Soviet demands into consideration when formulating its policies towards the American Consulate in Shenyang.

On 31 January 1949, Mikoyan paid a visit to Xibaipo where the Central Committee of the CPC was located. The dialog between Mikoyan and the CPC leaders had a positive influence on CPC-Soviet relations, manifested on the Soviet side by a dramatic increase in Stalin’s confidence in the CPC. This resulted in Stalin giving his approval for the CPC to develop trade and diplomatic relations with Western nations, including the United States.

Mikoyan’s visit and later developments in CPC-Soviet relations led to the final decision of the Central Committee of the CPC. Mao claimed at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the CPC in early March 1949 that the diplomacy of New China would “lean to one side.” This session

marked the final formulation of a policy of alliance with the Soviet Union by the Central Committee of the CPC.

The development of the CPC's relationship with the Soviet Union inevitably affected its relations with the US, the extent of this effect depending on the state of Sino-American relations. In the period following this, US contact with the CPC made the CPC-Soviet alliance appear even more obviously like a confrontation with the US.

V

After the PLA crossed the Yangtze River, it was merely a question of time before the CPC and the Soviet Union formed an alliance. During his visit to the Soviet Union in July 1949, Liu Shaoqi discussed critical issues with the Soviet leaders, such as the basic policy for establishing political power in New China, New China's diplomatic policies, Soviet aid to China and the Sino-Soviet agreement. Liu's visit prepared the CPC for an alliance with the Soviet Union before the founding of New China. The only problem that remained, and the most sensitive, was how to deal with the old Sino-Soviet agreements and whether or not to formulate a new one.

The victory of the Chinese revolution meant a great change in the international post-war relations in East Asia, since it not only broke down the international order in the area, which had been established on the basis of the Yalta and Sino-Soviet agreements, but also compelled the states involved to confront a revolutionary nation rising in arms. It was obvious that the Soviet Union would benefit from its alliance with China, yet the problem remained of whether or not the Soviet Union was willing to give up some of the benefits it derived from the old setup.

The CPC leaders were unsure of the Soviet attitude towards signing an agreement when they decided to forge an alliance with the Soviet Union. They were also justified in doubting whether Stalin would ever put his proclaimed "proletarian internationalism" into action because of the behavior of the Soviet Union after the war. The CPC had therefore made preparations before the PLA crossed the Yangtze River.

The Sino-Soviet agreement was central to the dialog between Mao and Stalin during Mao's visit to Moscow in December 1949. At first, Stalin had no intention of settling the issue because he did not want any change in the existing setup in the Far East, nor did he want to lose Soviet interests gained from this setup.

There were no important changes in Soviet attitudes until 2 January 1950. On 20 January, Zhou Enlai arrived in Moscow, and from this time onwards negotiations were directed towards drafting the new agreement. On 14 February, the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed by China and the Soviet Union, heralding the birth of the Sino-Soviet alliance.

In the light of post-war developments in Sino-Soviet relations and the entire process of the negotiation between the leaders of New China and Stalin, the

alliance between China and the Soviet Union could be said to have been established on continuous efforts by the two sides to co-ordinate their strategic interests and overcome their ideological differences. The signing of the treaty laid the foundation for the development of Sino-Soviet relations over the following decade. However, history has shown that at the time China and the Soviet Union formed the alliance, Soviet leaders also planted the seeds which would finally lead to the breakdown of the alliance.

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Revised by Su Xuetao

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

- Cai Shangsi (蔡尚思), Professor, Department of History, Fujian University.
- Cao Mingde (曹明德), Research Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Street, Beijing 100732, China.
- Cheng Yaping (成亚平), b. 1954, Lecturer, University of Politics and Law. Address: Beijing 100088, China.
- Fang Keli (方克立), Professor, Dean of the CASS Graduate School.
- Hou Jie (侯捷), Minister of Construction. Address: Beijing 100835, China.
- Hu Sheng (胡绳), b. 1918, Vice Chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Street, Beijing 100732, China.
- Li Lixin (李力新), Institute of Philosophy, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Street, Beijing 100732, China.
- Liang Zhixue (梁志学), b. 1931, Research Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Dajie, Beijing 100005, China.
- Liao Xuesheng (廖学盛), b. 1936, Director and Research Fellow, Institute of World History, CASS. Address: Beijing 100006, China.
- Liu Ben (刘奔), Research Fellow, Institute of Philosophy, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Street, Beijing 100732, China.
- Liu Fusen (刘福森), Department of Philosophy, Jilin University. Address: Changchun 130023, China.
- Lu Xueyi (陆学艺), Research Fellow, Institute of Sociology, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Street, Beijing 100732, China.
- Luo Guojie (罗国杰), Professor, the Department of Philosophy, Chinese People's University. Address: Beijing 100872, China.
- Ma Min (马敏), b. 1955, Professor, Institute of History, Huazhong Normal University.
- Niu Jun (牛军), b. 1954, Research Fellow, Institute of American Studies, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Dajie, Beijing 100005, China.
- Shen Zhen (沈真), b. 1933, Senior Translator, Institute of Philosophy, CASS. Address: #5 Jianguomennei Street, Beijing 100732, China.
- Tao Siyan (陶思炎), b. 1947, Doctor of Arts, Vice Professor, Director, Institute of Oriental Culture, Southeastern University. Address: Nanjing 210018, China.
- Wang Jinling (王金玲), b. 1955, Vice-Editor-in-Chief of *Zhejiang Journal*, Senior Research Fellow, Zhejiang Academy of Social Sciences. Address: Juvenile Palace, Xiacheng District, Hangzhou 310026, China.
- Wang Zhongling (王钟陵), b. 1943, Professor, the Department of Literature, Suzhou University. Address: Suzhou 215006, China.
- Wang Jingyu (汪敬虞), b. 1917, Research Fellow, Institute of Economics, CASS.
- Wu Yifeng (吴易风), b. 1932, Professor of the Department of Economics,