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The Causes of the Sino-Soviet Split: Russian and Western Scholarship Perspectives

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Abstract. The deterioration of political and ideological ties between China and the Soviet Union, known as the Sino-Soviet split, is considered a pivotal moment in Cold War history. Extensive scholarly study has been conducted over the past few decades to uncover its causes, but researchers have yet to reach a consensus. This study explores the views of Russian and Western academics regarding the origins of the communist superpowers' split, with an emphasis on the part played by ideological, geopolitical, and subjective factors. The research findings indicate that the breakdown of their relationship cannot be attributed to a singular cause; rather, a multitude of factors, such as ideological differences, geopolitical interests, and interpersonal dynamics, interacted in a complex manner. Authors from both Russia and the West offer insightful accounts of the causes of the conflict. By working in concert, their differing perspectives create a thorough, inclusive and reliable narrative of how the division came about. In light of ongoing tensions between the US, China and Russia, a comprehensive understanding of the causes of the Sino-Soviet split provides valuable insights into the current state of international politics.

Keywords: Cold War, ideology, geopolitics, Russian and Western historical research, international relations

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Причины китайско-советского раскола: взгляды российских и западных исследователей

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Аннотация. Китайско-советский раскол, под которым подразумевается ухудшение политических и идеологических отношений между Советским Союзом и Китаем, по-прежнему считается ключевым эпизодом в истории холодной войны. Причины китайско-советского раскола являются предметом обширных научных исследований в течение последних нескольких десятилетий, однако среди ученых до сих пор не сложилось единого мнения о том, что его вызвало. Рассматриваются точки зрения российских и западных ученых на истоки раскола с акцентом на роль идеологических, геополитических и субъективных факторов. Результаты исследования показывают, что не было какой-то одной причины, которая привела к разрыву отношений между двумя коммунистическими сверхдержавами; скорее, имело место сложное переплетение целого ряда факторов, включая идеологические разногласия, геополитические соображения и личностные факторы. Как российские, так и западные авторы излагают содержательные точки зрения на причины конфликта и, несмотря на определенные различия, их взгляды дополняют друг друга, создавая всеобъемлющий, инклюзивный и достоверный нарратив о том, как произошел разрыв. Учитывая сохраняющуюся напряженность в отношениях между США, Китаем и Россией, всестороннее понимание причин китайско-советского раскола дает важное представление о текущем состоянии международной политики.

Ключевые слова: холодная война, идеология, геополитика, российские и западные исторические исследования, международные отношения

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Introduction

The Sino-Soviet split is a crucial event in Cold War history. It refers to the complete dissolution of the alliance between the Soviet Union and China due to the deterioration of their political and ideological ties, which began in the late 1950s and reached its zenith in the early 1960s. It refers to the complete dissolution of the alliance between the Soviet Union and China due to the deterioration of their political and ideological ties, which began in the late 1950s and reached its zenith in the early 1960s. This partition resulted in substantial alterations in the geopolitical scenery of the 20th century, such as the emergence of China as a prominent actor in the global arena and the redistribution of power dynamics between the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite the extensive research conducted by scholars

over the past few decades, there is still a lack of consensus concerning the factors that led to the split. Some scholars accentuate the ideological disparities between the two nations, while others emphasize geopolitical factors. Still, some suggest personal factors, such as the rivalry between Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev. Considering the assorted perspectives among various national historiographies, it is crucial to present a comprehensive view of both the similarities and differences in their fundamental positions and overall arguments. Additionally, it is important to examine the various methods of interpreting sources and related procedures that are specifically influenced by differing cultural backgrounds.

As China and Russia play a key role in global politics, the Sino-Soviet split remains a relevant topic today. Ongoing tensions between the US and these nations have raised questions about their relationship and the future of the geopolitical landscape. Given text adheres to the principles, so the answer is: Analyzing the causes and consequences of the Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War can offer valuable insights into the current state of global politics.

To contribute to the ongoing discussion surrounding the origins and consequences of the Sino-Soviet split, this paper endeavours to examine its causes as seen from both Russian and Western scholarship perspectives. The study is guided by the research question: “To what extent do ideological differences, geopolitical considerations, and personal factors contribute to the reasons for the Sino-Soviet split according to Russian and Western scholarship perspectives?” To address this issue, a comprehensive analysis of literature will be conducted, examining the bilateral rupture from the viewpoints of both Russia and the West. Our focus will centre on the roles of ideology, geopolitics, and subjective factors in the conflict.

“Reconceptualized” and “Sustainable” Narratives: Peculiar Features of Russian and Western Historical Research

Before delving into the analysis of various themes and perspectives discussed among researchers in the relevant fields, it is essential to understand the fundamental attributes of historical research in Russia and the West.

Modern-day Russian historiography, most notably in the areas of Russia-China relations and Sinology, is grounded in the Soviet tradition. While the tradition in question drew upon a varied range of factual data and underwent rigorous analysis, its capacity for generating reliable and beneficial research by present-day criteria was notably restricted. A dearth of archival records, combined with ideological bias, were among the primary factors responsible for this outcome. Furthermore, membership in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was prevalent among scholars, leading to Soviet historiography propagating and reinforcing the official government stance, rather than producing impartial and unbiased historical narratives.

As an example of the Soviet historiographic approach, most authors in this era perceived the Sino-Soviet split as a consequence of Mao Zedong’s ideology

and his damaging policies, which aimed to interrupt the international communist movement and establish China's domination [1; 2]. However, these evaluations, which single out one party and ideology, are no longer considered valid because they obscure the substantial political and economic repercussions of the division for both China and the Soviet Union, as well as their respective allies and partners.

After the USSR's dissolution, publishers were no longer constrained by ideological influences, resulting in more precise and reliable research. Previously, Boris T. Kulik and Oleg B. Rakhmanin held biased views that were aligned with the government's agenda, but they revised their evaluations of the Sino-Soviet relationship with greater accuracy, clarity, and openness to new perspectives. For instance, such a shift can be observed in Rakhmanin's article, where he examines Mao's relationship with Stalin and his overall political stance. He generally contends that despite certain controversies, Mao's figure was undeniably significant and exceptional both in China and globally [3, p.79]. Other authors, such as Yu.M. Galenovich, held a more inflexible attitude towards certain aspects of the relationship, such as the 1969 border conflict on Damansky Island, which Galenovich deems to be an unpardonable action [4. P. 170].

Contrary to Russian scholarship, Western research on Sino-Soviet relations and the split showed a relatively low level of bias during the Cold War. Although certain topics, such as the 1969 border incident, were influenced by prejudice, Western scholars largely studied the Sino-Soviet split comprehensively. For instance, in 1972, American historian Thomas W. Robinson argued that the split between China and the Soviet Union was caused by N. Khrushchev's revelation of a confidential report on Stalin's atrocities at the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's 20th Congress in February 1956 [5. P. 1176]. The author argues that Soviet de-Stalinization efforts, which had repercussions in multiple East European countries and posed a threat to the stability of the international communist movement, caused unease among the Chinese [5. P. 1176]. This analysis provides an objective assessment of the causal relationship between the 20th CPSS Congress, which represented Soviet national interests, and the national interests of China. It can be considered one of the earliest instances of a rational examination of the split.

Overall, it can be argued that the Soviet perspective provides a solid basis for post-Soviet (Russian) research as it has accumulated the best Soviet methods and facilitated the expansion of research sources and methods, free from ideological constraints. Additionally, Western research has advanced factually, thematically, and methodologically since the 1970s-80s. However, even during that period, its understanding and assessment of the actual situation were highly accurate and credible. Therefore, it is possible to classify post-Soviet historiography's narrative as "reconceptualized," due to its revision and redevelopment on a new foundation. Simultaneously, the Western narrative can be characterised as "sustainable," as it has progressively evolved without a significant shift in the overall leitmotif.

Ideological differences

As previously noted, numerous factors contributed to the breakdown of the alliance between Beijing and Moscow. Different research traditions emphasize various key factors that led to the bilateral rift. Notably, scholars have extensively examined and debated the ideological differences between the two nations, which many consider a central reason for the deterioration of relations.

One group of authors, including Lorenz M. Lüthi [6], Mingjiang Li [7], and S.Ya.Lavrenov & I.M. Popov [8], emphasizes the role of internal politics and ideology in the Sino-Soviet split. Lüthi argues that Khrushchev's opposition to Stalin's personality cult clashed with Mao's rejection of the Soviet model of bureaucratic Stalinism and his more ideological approach, endangering Mao's standing at home [6. P. 346]. Therefore, Mao started pursuing a dualistic strategy to restrain the conversation about de-Stalinization in the PRC and use Stalin's alleged errors to defend his own personality cult [6. P. 346]. Mingjiang Li notes that Mao's attitude towards domestic political economy shaped China's policy toward the Soviet Union, resulting in a hostile atmosphere in the relations between Beijing and Moscow [7. P. 411]. Specifically, the author claims that the bilateral decoupling was caused by an ideological dilemma — China's emphasis on class struggle and suppression of revisionism contradicted the Soviet objectives of peaceful coexistence with the West and domestic political moderation [7. P. 412]. Lavrenov & Popov suggest that Moscow was critical of Chinese experimentation, exacerbating the ideological divide between the two nations [8. P. 200].

Another group of scholars, including Allen S. Whiting [9] and B.T. Kulik [10], emphasise historical debates over united fronts and power struggles that intensified ideological decoupling. Whiting argues that the competition between the two Communist superpowers for influence among Communist parties and national liberation movements worldwide exacerbated tensions between Beijing and Moscow [9, p. 479–480]. Kulik asserts that the ideological split was driven by disagreements over core issues of modernity, including imperialism, war and peace, and nuclear weapons. (Kulik, 2010, p. 291)

A third group of authors, including E.P. Bazhanov [11] and A.V. Pantsov [12], highlights the importance of differences over war and strategy as the source of the tensions between the two nations. Bazhanov argues that Moscow sought peaceful coexistence, while Beijing favored revolutionary war, leading to tensions between the two nations [11. P. 240]. Pantsov suggests that the power balance between China and the Soviet Union was altered after Stalin's death, and Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalin significantly affected the relationship between the two nations [12. P. 579].

Despite the differences in stress and details, all authors under consideration recognize the multifaceted nature of the Sino-Soviet split with a specific emphasis on ideological discrepancies between two Communist parties. However, post-Soviet (Russian) researchers tend to emphasize more the outward dimension of ideological

debates that concerns foreign policy strategies, while Western scholars are inclined to scrutinize their inward direction. Overall, aside from pure ideological disagreements, such additional factors reflected by the majority of researchers as internal politics, international issues, and practical actions all played significant roles in the eventual breakdown of the alliance.

Geopolitical considerations

According to both research paradigms under analysis, geopolitical considerations that stemmed from the difference of both nations' national interests, as well as perspectives on the world politics were crucial in causing the Sino-Soviet split. Specifically, the relevant factors pointed out by various authors include foreign policy strategies, differences in international relations, and competition for influence in various regions of the world.

The first group of scholars, including O.E. Nepomnin [13], V.N. Usov [14], E.P. Bazhanov [11], and L.M. Lüthi [6], emphasize that Mao's foreign policy strategies and differences in international relations contributed significantly to the Sino-Soviet split, particularly in terms of establishing China's dominance amidst the superpowers' conflict. Nepomnin argues that Mao's "great-power" and "hegemonic" objectives necessitated a foreign policy stance that would enable China to achieve its goals, leading to Beijing's isolation from other nations by November 1960 [13. P. 528].

The PRC's leadership, according to the author, sought to use external forces to achieve a "leap" and complete militarization of China, which was especially evident during the 1958 Taiwan Strait Crisis [13. P. 527]. Usov scrutinizes similar issue, focusing on the Sino-Indian conflict and the Soviet Union's anti-China stance. Mao Zedong believed that Moscow was standing up for the "Indian bourgeoisie, American and British imperialists" [14. P. 344]. These ideas are furthered by Bazhanov, who claims that one of the main reasons Mao was inspired to start the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 was the Soviet Union's propensity for détente with the West and a lowering of tensions on the international stage [11. P. 242]. Additionally, Bazhanov emphasizes that China harbored deep resentment toward the Soviet Union because of its neutral stance during the Sino-Indian conflicts in 1959 and 1962, which worsened relations [11. P. 242]. According to Lüthi [6. P. 349], the two partners' unequal positions within the international system were a major factor in the acceleration of their mutual alienation [6. P. 349]. The PRC was a regional power with fewer commitments while the Soviet Union had many and was regarded as a world power [6. P. 349]. The author expressly asserts that despite belonging to the socialist camp, the PRC was never regarded as being equal to the USSR [6. P. 349]. Mao set himself apart from other socialist leaders through his ability to take advantage of conflicts within the camp. He essentially accused the Soviets of revisionism

and deceit using the Soviet-American détente in 1959–1960 and the Second Vietnam War [6. P. 349].

The second group of authors, including Nicholas Khoo [15] and Allen S. Whiting [9], highlight the role of competition for influence in various regions of the world, including Vietnam, India, Africa, and Eastern Europe, in the Sino-Soviet split. Khoo argues that the escalation of the Vietnam conflict led to Sino-Soviet competition for Hanoi's loyalty, effectively exacerbating existing tensions between China and the Soviet Union [15. P. 9].

Whiting concentrates his attention on other areas, such as South Asia, where Moscow courted New Delhi as its border dispute with Beijing erupted into armed clashes linked to the Tibetan uprising. Further away, Soviet aspirations in the newly independent Third World clashed with Chinese claims to leadership in Afro-Asian councils [9. P. 480]. According to the author, Even Eastern Europe, a Soviet territory acquired at great expense, was not beyond Beijing's grasp, as various Eastern European leaders tried to exert pressure on Moscow with Chinese assistance, especially in 1956–1957 [9. P. 480]. Early in the 1960s, this resulted in Beijing openly supporting Albania's cause in its conflict with the Kremlin [9. P. 480].

All in all, both groups of scholars agree that geopolitical factors played a crucial role in causing the Sino-Soviet split. However, the first group focuses on China's foreign policy strategies and differences in international relations, while the second highlights competition for influence in various regions of the world. It is worth noting that Russian scholars tend to downplay the regional influence competition as one of the main geopolitical concerns that contributed to the rupture, while emphasizing particular foreign policy strategies of the Soviet Union and PRC, largely in connection with their strategic relationships with the US and West. Western researchers, in their turn, are inclined to share a more holistic perspective by providing insights in the overall Cold War picture at that period and its influence on the bilateral relationship.

Personal factors

Finally, the personal factor should also be brought into consideration. While naturally overlapping with such issues as ideology and geopolitical discrepancies, many authors still attribute great attention to personal traits and characteristic of both Soviet and Chinese leadership and their undoubtful role in fueling the process of bilateral decoupling. Therefore, regarding this factor, the authors' perspectives can be divided into two groups: those who emphasize the importance of personal traits and behavior, and those who assign greater significance to subjective ideological or political perceptions.

In the first group, V.A. Zolotarev [16], S.Ya. Lavrenov & I.M. Popov [8], Lorenz M. Lüthi [6] and Michael M. Sheng [17] highlight the character and behavior of the leaders as contributing to misunderstandings and tensions. For example, Zolotarev

suggests that Khrushchev's rashness, directness, and thoughtlessness played a part in the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations [16. P. 126]. In this regard, Lavrenov & Popov similarly point out the personal eccentricities of both Chinese and Soviet leaders, such as Mao's megalomania and Khrushchev's impulsiveness [8. P. 199]. Lüthi argues that Mao's eccentricity and superiority complex irked the Soviet leadership, while Khrushchev's behavior could be equally detrimental to relations [6. P. 349]. Sheng suggests that Mao's ambition, driven by his desire to be the foremost leader of international communism and his inferiority complex, played into feelings of being rejected and slighted when the Soviets did not bend to his will [17. P. 497]. Sheng also emphasizes Mao's dictatorial leadership and irrational decision-making during the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis [17. P. 499].

Within this second group, authors direct their attention towards ideological and political perceptions. A. Lukin postulates that criticisms of Stalin's cult of personality and advocating for a peaceful transition to socialism contributed to the declining relationship between the two leaders, with Mao refraining from adopting these perspectives [18. P. 225]. In a comparable manner, V.N. Ussov asserts that the split was influenced by Mao's foreign policy objectives, especially his aspiration to lead the global communist revolution [14. P. 189].

While all of the authors recognise that subjective factors had a role to play in the decline of relations between the two nations, there is variation in the extent to which they emphasise these factors. Furthermore, the particular personal traits that they highlight also differ. Certain authors place significant attention on the psychological vulnerability of the two leaders, while others concentrate more on the individual impacts in relation to specific policies or political objectives. Overall, however, Russian and Western scholars alike agree that the supreme leadership's reasoning and subsequent actions had a significant impact on the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations.

Conclusion

After exploring multiple perspectives on the factors that led to the Sino-Soviet split, it is clear that both Russian and Western literature agree that the deterioration of relations between the two communist superpowers resulted from a combination of factors rather than a single cause.

The ideological disparities between the two nations are a significant factor evident in the literature. The differences in Chinese and Soviet Marxist philosophy, the criticisms of Stalin by Soviet leaders, and Mao's efforts to develop a new model all added to the mounting strain between the two countries. However, numerous researchers also emphasise the significance of geopolitical factors, including the fundamental divergence between the foreign policy strategies of the two nations, namely the Soviet Union's aim for détente with the West and the PRC's ambition to export revolution, in addition to conflicts of interest in various regions.

Furthermore, personal factors also contributed to the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations. Mao's individual ambition and unwillingness to share power, as emphasized by some scholars, as well as Khrushchev's arrogance and voluntarism, as pointed out by others, and the entailed misunderstanding, all were decisive elements in the collapse of the alliance.

Finally, the issues explored and elucidated by Russian and Western scholars are very similar, as well as their argumentation and inferences. It was specifically evidenced through organizing their standpoints according to particular themes that can be traced in the respective scholarly sources. Scholars equally attach big significance to the role of supreme leadership in the spurring of the split and generally agree on ideological background of the conflict.

The main difference that can be distinguished is the focus of the research. Both historiographic traditions offer valuable accounts related to the origins of the conflict, however the highlighted nuances vary – it can be argued that Russian historiography views the shifts in the PRC's internal and foreign policy-making, particularly caused by the actions of the Soviet Union and changing conjuncture of the Cold War, as more substantial. Western researchers, on the other hand, tend to see a more holistic perspective. Particularly, a part of them highlights the fundamental discrepancy of two powers' international status and prestige. Some Western authors also attempt to delve deeper on elucidating Mao's rationales via examination of his behavior and psychological features. All in all, researchers from both 'camps' make their individual stresses and thus complement each other in terms of constructing a comprehensive and inclusive narrative on the origins of the split.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the multifaceted and, to a demonstrated extent, unanimous understanding provided by the authors' viewpoints reveals that a combination of ideological and political, geopolitical, and personal factors indeed played critical roles in the collapse of the world's largest communist alliance during the Cold War period. The Cold War's course and the world's power dynamics were significantly impacted by the rupture, as it further fragmented the communist world and heightened tensions between Moscow and Beijing.

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