The Sino-Russian Boundary Settlement

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In 1991, Russia and the Peoples' Republic of China signed a boundary treaty after over thirty years of acrimony and bloody confrontation. The Sino-Russian boundary dispute was complicated by the fact that territorial issues were only one aspect of a broader historical conflict exacerbated by the political and ideological debate that emerged during the 1960s.

Historical Background

Russian expansion into regions claimed by the Qing court eventually resulted in confrontation along the frontier between imperial China and Czarist Russia. The Treaty of Nerchinsk was concluded in August 1689 in an attempt to delimit a Sino-Russian boundary and avoid further conflict. However, as the Qing dynasty continued to decline, especially after the Opium War, additional boundary treaties that China considers *"unequal treaties"* were negotiated. In 1858, the Treaty of Aigun pushed the Russian boundary to the Amur and Ussuri Rivers, but it left territory east of the rivers in *"joint possession"* to be settled in future negotiations. Two years later, the Treaty of Peking granted the territory between the two rivers and the Sea of Japan to Russia. China made further territorial concessions in this region when, just days before the fall of the Qing Court, it was forced to sign the Qiqihar Treaty of 1911, which ceded several hundred square miles near the trijunction of Russia, Mongolia, and China.

During the 1860s, Russia also advanced into the Ili region of Central Asia (present day Xinjiang). Following negotiations, the Treaty of St. Petersburg (Treaty of Ili) was concluded in 1881. Russia received territorial 'compensation' for returning the Ili region, and trade and other rights in Xinjiang were also granted. Delimitation of the Sino-Russian Central Asian boundary was completed except one sector in the Pamir Mountains that was delineated by the Protocol on the Sino-Russian Boundary in the Kashgar Region of 1884, but never demarcated. The boundary in the Pamir region was further complicated due to the Anglo-Russian factor.

Eventually Great Britain and Russia negotiated a settlement in the region, but China was not a party to the agreement. In 1924 the new Russian government and the Chinese authorities agreed that a new boundary treaty would be negotiated, but before the conclusion of a new treaty the earlier treaties would be considered *"invalid."* However, overshadowed by other issues, a new boundary treaty was never concluded.

The Boundary Dispute

The boundary dispute involved two major areas. In the northeast, ownership of hundreds of islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers was contested because of disagreement over the location of the riverain boundary. Most significantly, ownership of Heixiazi Island (Bolshoy Ussuriyskiy and Tabarov), at the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri Rivers was contested. The Soviet government claimed the Chinese bank of the river as the international boundary. The second area of dispute is in the Pamir Mountains of Central Asia, an area never demarcated, but since the breakup of the Soviet Union this has become a Sino-Tajikistan boundary question.

The PRC accepted the boundary established by the earlier treaties, with some minor adjustments, but insisted that Soviet Russia occupied additional territory even in violation of these treaties. Speaking before the United Nations General Assembly in 1973, Deng Xiaoping stated that China only sought the return of a *"few square kilometers here and there."*[1] This included 20,000km² in the Pamir Mountains; islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers (approximately 1,500km²); 140km² along the Russian bank of the Amur River in the Blagoveshchensk area that encompassed 64 Chinese villages, and 375km² near Manzhouli (Mongolia-PRC-Russia trijunction) ceded in 1911 by the Treaty of Qiqihar, two weeks before the fall of the Qing dynasty. This was a total of approximately 33,000km².

Boundary Negotiations

The Soviets insisted on the legitimacy of the early treaties and contended that reconsidering the boundary line was impossible. Moscow resisted China's contention that there was a boundary dispute and obviously wanted to downplay what they considered only minor questions regarding territorial issues.

Negotiations began in Beijing on February 25, 1964 but were halted in August. At the outset of negotiations Beijing insisted that issues of *"principle"* be discussed first. This meant that China expected Russia to recognise the unequal nature of the nineteenth century boundary treaties, but was willing to negotiate a new boundary agreement using these earlier treaties as the basis for establishing the boundary. Moscow, from the outset, was unwilling to negotiate a new boundary treaty, arguing that adequate treaties already existed, and that only minor technical adjustments were necessary. This first round of negotiations deteriorated rapidly. The disagreement on issues of principle and conflicting objectives made any resolution very difficult. Moscow was alarmed by the military confrontation that occurred in early 1969, and took steps to renew negotiations. China continued to insist on recognition of the unequal nature of the old treaties and acceptance of the thalweg principle for delimiting river boundaries. Moscow rejected these *"preconditions"* and accused Beijing of attempting to *"substantiate its claim to 1.5 million square kilometers of land that properly belongs to the Soviet Union"*, by using a *"far-fetched pretext of righting the 'injustices' of past centuries."*[2]

Agreement to begin negotiations was eventually reached in September 1969. Talks were renewed on October 20, and continued until June 1978. However, no settlement was achieved, and a short round held in 1979 ended in deadlock as well. At the outset of this second round of negotiations China put forward a proposal that called for the discussion of issues of principle first: the old treaties must be recognised as *"unequal"* and *"imposed"* upon China, but used as the basis for delimiting the present boundary, not the return of territory *"annexed"* by Czarist Russia. However, territory occupied in violation of these treaties must be returned and any *"necessary adjustments"* should be made through consultation. This would lead to the conclusion of a new *"equal"* treaty and the demarcation of the boundary.

The issues of principle were, in China's view, necessary preconditions for discussing specific questions. Beijing proposed that if Moscow would first consider issues of principle such as the recognition of unequal treaties, and the violation of these treaties in some cases, China was willing to make necessary adjustments along the boundary to make the boundary more manageable and to correspond to natural borders. The Soviets were truly apprehensive of Chinese irredentism and the Chinese delegation exacerbated this fear by refusing to disavow Mao's earlier statements on *"Czarist expansionism."* Negotiations were deadlocked from the outset of this second round primarily because of China's demand to address issues of principle first and the Soviet insistence that only following an agreement to normalise relations could specific technical questions be addressed.

Although no settlement was reached, some progress on at least one substantive issue was achieved. The Soviets initially rejected the thalweg principle, but eventually the USSR suggested it would be willing to accept the thalweg principle, in effect acknowledging China's claim to hundreds of islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers.

The Boundary Settlement

The Soviets opened the way for a settlement with Brezhnev's speeches in March 1982 in Tashkent and in September in Baku in which he appealed for improved relations. By early 1982, leaders in Beijing also had determined to seek better relations with Moscow as part of China's new independent foreign policy orientation. In November 1982, Foreign Minister Huang Hua attended Brezhnev's funeral and met his counterpart, the first such high-level meeting in twenty years. A major Soviet stumbling block was removed in 1983 when China stopped insisting that the Soviet Union acknowledge the unequal character of the nineteenth century treaties.

Negotiations were renewed in October 1982. A compromise agreement began to take shape and several areas where compromise was most likely were identified. Beijing stood firm on the boundary in the Pamir mountains. Movement toward a settlement gained momentum when Premier Li Peng attended General Secretary Chernyenko's funeral and met with Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev wanted Soviet-Chinese relations freed

from the albatross of the twenty-five-year long Sino-Soviet boundary dispute, and took the initiative during these discussions. This was an important watershed in the progress toward a boundary agreement. But there was strong resistance to compromise primarily from Andre Gromyko, Deputy Foreign Minister Kapitsa, and Central Committee China policy czar Oleg B. Rakhmanin, who argued that any concession to China would weaken Soviet control of the border and require a change in the Russian interpretation of nineteenth century treaties.

Nevertheless, Gorbachev moved forward, deflecting criticism that he was capitulating to Chinese demands by insisting that he was merely recognising internationally accepted principles of international law. He argued that this would not open a Pandora's box regarding China's historical claims. The hardline Sinophobes were out of power by 1986 and the boundary negotiations gained momentum.[3] These significant personnel changes, and Moscow's new position resulted in agreement on general principles in 1988.[4] After this agreement on principles, for the Chinese the boundary negotiations became more of a technical question of delimitation, and progress was not so directly dictated by the political atmosphere. During this final stage of negotiation, Chinese negotiators were straightforward and flexible.[5]

A pivotal issue of contention centred on Heixiazi Island in the confluence of the Amur and Ussuri rivers. Although the thalweg principle was accepted as the basis for demarcating the riverain boundary, Beijing and Moscow disagreed over which channel formed the main channel of the Amur River. Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Gorbachev favoured recognising China's claims in order to settle the boundary. The minister of defence and Prime Minister Rizkov strongly opposed this concession, arguing that it was strategically unwise because of the islands' proximity to Khabarovsk, and because it would set a dangerous precedent in the dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands. While in Beijing in May 1989, Gorbachev explained to Deng Xiaoping that domestic political constraints made it impossible for him to accept China's claim to the islands. Deng accepted this explanation and suggested that a final settlement of this particular issue could be delayed, allowing a settlement of all other outstanding issues to go forward.[6]

Negotiations became more cordial following the May 1989 Gorbachev-Deng summit that marked the complete renormalisaton of Sino Soviet relations after three decades of bitter, and at times, bloody conflict. Negotiations on the eastern border progressed rapidly and in 1990, before the breakup of the Soviet Union, Moscow and Beijing reached an agreement that settled the Amur and Ussuri river boundary; made possible by Deng Xiaoping's willingness to shelve the issue of Heixiazi Island during the final stages of negotiations. The *Agreement on the Eastern Section of the Boundary between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* was signed by Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and his counterpart, Alexander Bessmertnykh on May 16, 1991 during CCP Secretary General Jiang Zemin and President Mikhail Gorbachev's summit in Moscow, and the treaty was subsequently ratified by the new Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation.[7]

The fundamental difference that made agreement possible, was the political will of both Gorbachev and Deng. However, Russians remain apprehensive that Deng willingly shelved the Heixiazi Island issue because he believes time is on China's side and Beijing can raise it in the future when China is even stronger to elicit additional territorial concessions from Russia.[8] Indeed, on April 24, 1996, on his way to a summit in Beijing, at a Khabarovsk news conference, President Boris Yeltsin stated: *"There are instances in which we agree to no compromises. For example, the issue of to whom the three islands...in the Amur River not far from Khabarovsk and the...Bolshoy island in the Argun River in Chita should belong. With regard to this our position remains firm: the border should be where it lies now."*[9]

Besides islands in the Amur and Ussuri rivers that will be transferred to Chinese sovereignty, there is speculation that Moscow also agreed to transfer 15km² of territory near the mouth of the Tumen River to give China access to the Sea of Japan. Moscow has never publicly denied that this is the case.[10] However, it is not clear whether or not any agreement has been reached. According to one Chinese report, it is the continuing disagreement over China's access through the Tumen River to the Sea of Japan that is preventing cooperation in the development of the region. Chinese argue that according to an 1886 agreement, China was granted the right of unobstructed access to the Sea of Japan, but in 1938 this right was denied. Despite the restoration of Sino-Russian relations, a Sino-

Russian-North Korean tripartite agreement on the boundary and navigation has yet to be concluded.

In the Russian Far East, and among conservative nationalists, opposition to the treaty is strong. Russian nationalists called for a *"review"* of the treaty even though it was ratified by parliament. Local officials and China experts in the Russian Far East were never consulted about the proposed territorial concessions. The governor of Primoria publicly stated that he would refuse to comply with the border agreement and would block the transfer of any territory to Chinese control.[11] At a news conference in May 1994, the governor of Khabarovsk called the boundary treaty *"unfair and an infringement of Russian interests."* He complained that according to the boundary treaty, the territory transferred to China could amount to as much as ten thousand square kilometers of fertile pasture land. The chair of the Federation Council International Affairs Committee argued that regional interests should not be neglected by Moscow in determining Russia's China policy and said border area residents opposed ceding land to China as agreed to by the Soviet Union.[12]

While Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev was in Beijing in March 1995, he stressed that despite domestic opposition, Moscow would stand by the agreement and on April 11, 1996, President Boris Yeltsin denied rumours that demarcation work on the Russian-Chinese border might be suspended in some areas of Primoria, as announced by the governor, signing a decree speeding up the demarcation of the border.[13] While on his way to Beijing in April for a summit, Yeltsin stated at his Khabarovsk news conference: *"For the first time in the 300-year-long history of relations with China we have a legally adjusted border, which is almost completely registered."* Reminding local leaders of the past he said, *"I think that you have not forgotten the recent times when China advanced demands for 1,500,000 sq.km of Russian territory. Now this issue is a closed one."* Yeltsin recognised the local opposition to territorial concession in two areas of Primoria – Ussuriyskiy and Khasanskiy – but stressed that *"intentional obligations must be fulfilled"* and argued that if demarcation in these two small areas was not completed, it would cast doubt on the entire 4,000 km boundary accord.[14]

A treaty delimiting the short 53km boundary to the west of Mongolia, the *Agreement on the Western Section of the Boundary Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation* was signed on September 3, 1994. The following month China, Mongolia, and Russia jointly drafted a protocol and map of the eastern and western boundary junctures.[15] According to China's Xinhua news agency, this completed the delimitation of the *"overwhelming part"* of the Sino-Russian border, implying that there still remain some outstanding issues to be settled.[16] Indeed, the joint communique issued following the Russian-Chinese Summit in April 1996, pledged to *"continue their negotiations to resolve in a fair and equitable manner the remaining boundary issues."*[17] Russian nationalists opposed to the compromise settlement in the eastern sector may also delay ratification of these treaties to gain leverage to force a review of the eastern boundary treaty.

The second major boundary question was the Pamir Mountains. By the late 1980s Moscow was willing to accept the watershed principle in establishing the boundary. Nevertheless the issues remained very complex and both sides agreed to leave the issue until after the eastern sector was settled. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the venue for negotiations on the Pamir boundary changed. China now must negotiate a boundary with the newly independent and nationalistic Tajikistan. Since 1991, as newly independent states, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, with the technical assistance of Moscow, conducted joint boundary negotiations with Beijing. Except Tajikistan, where no progress toward solving a rather complex boundary as been made, boundary agreements were concluded with the other Central Asian states. In April 1994 China and Kazakhstan signed a demarcation treaty.[18] While in Shanghai in April 1996 to sign the treaty on confidence-building measures along the border, the president of Tajikistan raised the boundary issue stating that *"we are facing the heavy task of...solving the important border issues left by history."*[19] China is not pressing to reach an early settlement with Tajikistan and feels no pressure to seek a compromise settlement.

On 26 April 1996, the leaders of China, Russia and the three Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed an *Agreement on Confidence-Building in the Military Field along Border Areas* following the conclusion of negotiations that began in the late 1980s. This agreement imposed limits on the number, scope, and scale of military exercises conducted within 100 km of the border. Follow-on talks on troop reduction and disarmament along the border are

ongoing in an effort to strengthen mutual confidence in the border area.

Despite significant local opposition in the Russian Far East to the boundary settlement, the settlement has made possible increased cross-border cooperation in the region, but distrust continues. In May 1994 an agreement on boundary administration was signed, in August 1995 agreement on cooperation in border defence was reached, and in April 1996 a protocol on procedures for maintaining and improving border control was concluded. In addition to the very significant growth in official and unofficial trade, large numbers of Chinese immigrants into the Russian Far East have provoked local Russian fears of a Chinese strategy of 'silent occupation' of areas previously claimed by China. However, despite the mutual suspicions that still exist, cooperation is ongoing. For example, a very significant 'Ussuri River Watershed Land Use Planning Project' was initiated in 1994. This project involves significant Sino-Russian cooperation in identifying and mapping present local land-use and establishing a *"sustainable land use allocation program"* to guide future development, and the boundary agreement calls for joint economic exploitation of areas incorporated into the other side after demarcation.[20] A second major project in the region is the UNDP sponsored Tumen River Project. Although not progressing very rapidly, such a large project involving Russia, China, and North Korea was unthinkable a few years ago. One of the remaining hurdles to be overcome before this project can really move forward is the uncertainty over the lingering boundary and navigation question.

Conclusions

The pattern followed by China in its dispute with Soviet Russia is strikingly similar to the pattern followed with other states. At the outset China made it clear that it expected acknowledgement of the unequal nature of the early treaties and would not accept them as legitimate, although China agreed that these treaties should be used to establish the *"historical and customary"* boundary as a basis for new treaties. The Soviet Union rejected this position. However, Beijing was still unwilling to concede its demand that the historical question of *"unequal treaties"* – a fundamental issue of principle for the Chinese must – precede any discussion of technical questions.

As Sino-Soviet tensions diminished in the late 1980s, mutual interest in improving bilateral relations grew as both Russia and China turned their attention to economic and political reform. This lent impetus to renewed efforts to settle the boundary; both sides feeling it necessary to eliminate what became a major cause of tension in the 1960s. With improved relations, China no longer insisted on *"preconditions of principle"*, and negotiations moved directly to considering specific technical issues and the conclusion of a new treaty.

Notes

1 'Quarterly Chronicle and Documentation,' *The China Quarterly*, 59, (July-September 1974): 656.
2 'On Settling Frontier Disputes: Statement by the Government of the USSR to the Government of the People's Republic of China,' *Reprints from the Soviet Press*, 9, 2, (25 July 1969): 51.
3 Interviews with Russian foreign ministry officials, November 1993 and 10 April 1995.
4 *New York Times*, (8 February 1987):3; (10 February): 5; (8 August): 3; (25 September): 12; *Boston Globe*, (22 August 1987): 3; *Christian Science Monitor*, (1 November 1988): 2.
5 Interview with a Russian foreign ministry official, 10 April 1995.
6 Interview with a Russian foreign ministry official, 10 April 1995.
7 *Washington Post*, (17 March 1991): A11; *Survey of China Mainland Press*, (16-21 May 1991).
8 Interview at Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, November 1993.
9 *ITAR-TASS* (Moscow) 24 April 1996.
10 Interview with a Russian foreign ministry official, 10 April 1995.
11 *China News Digest*, (25 April 1995).
12 *RA Report*, 17, (July 1994): 46, 48.
13 *China News Digest*, (2 March, 1995); *Interfax* (Moscow) 11 April 1996; *ITAR-TASS* (Moscow) 11 April 1996.
14 *ITAR-TASS* (Moscow) 24 April 1996.
15 *China News Digest*, (23 October 1994).
16 *Xinhua* (Beijing) 21 April 1996.
17 *Xinhua* (Beijing) 25 April 1996.
18 *Xinhua* (Beijing) 20 April 1996.
19 *Chinese Central Television* (Beijing) 26 April, 1996 via BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, (27 April 1996): FE/2597, G/1.
20 See 'Ussuri River Project: Update,' *United States-China Relations: Notes from the National Committee*, 24, 1, (Autumn, 1995): 13-14.

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