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Soviet-Taiwanese Relations during the Cold War: The One China policy and a saga of rapprochements

Adarsh Patel
Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Abstract:

The Bipolar cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union was a period of intense rivalry affecting most if not all global political issues. The Chinese civil war was one such issue which was fought between the CCP and the KMT, with the former emerging victorious in October 1949 and the latter taking refuge at the neighboring island of Formosa. The KMT has been the wartime ally of the Allied powers and at the Yalta Agreement in February 1945, it was agreed that the Soviet Union would restore its Tsarist privileges in China. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance was signed between the Soviet Union and the ROC in 1945 which was later declared 'unequal' by Mao who wanted to replace the treaty after he came to power in 1949 and subsequently a Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed in 1950. While the relations between the PRC and the Soviet Union has been a subject of much scholarly work, the Soviet-Taiwanese relations have been largely ignored. This paper looks at the relations between the two countries in the context of the major developments in the Cold war such as the Sino-Soviet split in 1964 and the US-PRC rapprochement in 1972. A Soviet-Taiwanese rapprochement is evident in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet border conflicts in 1969 even before the US-PRC rapprochement, which nevertheless failed to materialize and was fleeting.

Background of the Soviet-ROC relations

The far east during the second world war saw Japanese expansion into mainland China at the expense of the Soviet and other Western states' spheres of influence in China. The earlier Russian defeat in the 1904-05 war against Japan led to the loss of the island of southern Sakhalin, the Chinese-Eastern Railway, the ports of Arthur and Dalian and Kurile islands to Japan and established the Japanese influence as a great power in Korea and Manchuria. The struggle for influence in Manchuria continued and in 1932 a puppet state of the Empire of Japan named

Manzhouguo (Manchuko) was established. With that, the Japanese began to "penetrate westwards and southwards" (Wang 1997). In 1936, Megguguo (Mongolia) was proclaimed independent and it created a "cordon sanitaire" (MacNair and Lach 1955) between the Russian and the Japanese spheres of influence (Wang 1997). However the Japanese challenge against the Russian presence in China continued in Outer Mongolia, Xinjiang and other Western provinces. After the communist revolution in the Soviet Union, it sought to pacify its borders and signed non-aggression pacts in the west with Hitler's Germany - The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, 1939 - and in the east with Japan - The Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, 1941.

As the Second World War ravaged, the Soviet Union found itself in a "life-and-death situation as Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in April 1941" (Wang 1997) leaving it no choice but to enter the war, however, there was no war against Japan yet as a result of the Neutrality Pact and the Japanese preoccupation with its eastern theater against the United States after the Pearl Harbour attack. At the Yalta Conference (February 1945) , Stalin agreed with Roosevelt that it will enter the war against Japan three months after the German surrender in return for the recognition of the independence of Mongolia and a restoration of the privileges of the former Tsarist Russia in the Far East - The Chinese-Eastern railway, the ports of Lushun and Dalian, Kurile Island and Southern Sakhalin.

Meanwhile in China, the nationalist opposition against Japanese imperialism was getting stronger. The nationalist party Kuomintang (KMT) led by Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist Party of China (CCP) led by Mao Zedong joined hands to defeat the Japanese forming a "nationalist front" (Coble 1985). The fighting continued throughout the second World War and the Allied powers found a reliable ally in the nationalist Chiang Kai-shek in China. When the Potsdam Conference concluded 2nd August 1945, Germany had surrendered and the Japanese Imperial Army had begun to lose ground. Churchill, Truman and Chiang Kai-shek issued the Potsdam Declaration outlining the terms of "surrender for Japan. Stalin attended the conference but refused to sign the declaration because the Neutrality pact with Japan was still valid. However it declared war against Japan two days after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on 6th August 1945.

The Sino-Soviet treaties - August 1945 and February 1950

Ten days after entering the war against Japan, on 14 August 1945 the Soviet Union and The Republic of China signed The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. Articles 1,2 and 3 of the treaty obliges both the parties to "prosecute the war against Japan until final victory" through "military assistance" with "the means at the disposal" and "after the termination of war" take measures to "render impossible the repetition of aggression by Japan". Other articles in the treaty mention "mutual respect" for "sovereignty and territorial integrity", "non-intervention in internal affairs", "security and economic development" and "post-war economic aid and assistance" for "rehabilitation". The treaty also contains the agreements on the status of - the Eastern

Manchurian Railway, independence of Mongolia and port Arthur and Dairen - which will be discussed further in comparison with the subsequent Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950.

The surrender of Japan however also meant the loss of the common enemy for the KMT and the CCP. Hence, what was once a "nationalist front" in China took the form of a military struggle for power between the KMT and the CCP after the collapse of Japanese imperialism (Pepper 1999). The ensuing civil war concluded with the victory of the communists over the KMT and on October 1, 1949 Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China (PRC). The KMT leadership including Chiang Kai-shek fled to the neighboring island of Taiwan and declared the Republic of China (ROC) with the stated claim over the mainland and a foreign policy oriented to take it over by all means possible. Since the ROC was not succeeded by the PRC and the change in its status was in terms of the territory and the population it commands, what happened to the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1945 remained a question.

Mao was as much nationalist as he was communist and disliked the Soviet influence in China. He also accused the Soviet Union for their tacit support to Chiang Kai-shek during the civil war and not supporting the CCP despite calling itself the leader of the communist world. Mao campaigned against what he called the "unequal treaties" signed by the ROC during the "century of humiliation". However Stalin was quick to mend fences with Mao and the Soviet Union became the first country to recognise the PRC and establish diplomatic relations with it, therefore acceding to Mao's "one-China policy" which stated that there is only one legitimate representative of the Chinese people and to establish relations with the PRC, a sovereign country must renounce its sovereign relations with the ROC (Share 2003). In the exchange between the Chinese and Soviet Foreign Ministers before the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty, it was therefore mentioned that "the corresponding treaty and agreements concluded August 14, 1945, have become invalid" (Ballis 1951).

When Mao and Stalin negotiated the 1950 Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, it effectively invalidated the previous 1945 Treaty, however the new treaty was "built on" the previous treaty (Ballis 1951). It included a similar emphasis on the prevention of "Japanese imperialism, independence of Outer Mongolia, economic aid and assistance and post-war rehabilitation". However Mao successfully sought a transfer of the Soviet possessions in the Eastern Manchurian Railway and Ports Arthur and Darian to the PRC alongwith securing credits, joint-stock companies, trade agreements and technology transfer (Ballis 1951).

Soviet Taiwanese relations 1949-1964

Share (2003) calls the period of 1949-1961 as the "period of minimal contact" and after the signing of the Treaty of Mutual Defense between the US and Taiwan in 1954, Taiwan was nothing more than a military outpost of the US for the Soviet Union. It nevertheless did not express any desire to aid the PRC to occupy Taiwan because a divided China was a leverage for Soviet diplomacy. It is often suggested that a complete break of contacts between the Soviets and the KMT occurred after 1949, however occasional meetings between the officials would nevertheless

happen at United Nations as the ROC still had the permanent seat at the Security Council, alongwith meetings at other international organizations and diplomatic capitals - most notably Tokyo (Ivanov 1996). However, no significant improvement in relations can be accounted for as the leaders on both sides went on confrontational narrative building. Chiang Kai-shek took a anti-communist and anti-soviet stance and Stalin would call Taiwan a "capitalist stooge".

The matters became worse with the first Taiwan straits crisis in 1954 and during the Second Taiwan Straits crisis in 1958 when, according to one study, Kruschev supplied Mao with "all necessary armaments needed to conquer Taiwan in 1958 and spared no effort to convince the United States of Moscow's will to support the Chinese communists in case of American attack" (Ivanov 1996). However Tubilewichz (2005) argues that Stalin viewed the independence of the ROC as an asset to the Soviet China policy possibly because of his mistrust against Mao and Kruschev did not approve of the "military intimidation of Taiwan" during 1958 fearing it as Mao's attempt to "provoke the Soviet-American Nuclear War'' (Tubilewicz 2005).

Therefore for the Taiwanese, the close alliance between Moscow and Beijing was the main threat to its existence and they would keep a vigilant watch on the developments. The news of diplomatic rifts preceding the Sino-Soviet split in 1964 was music to the Taiwanese.

Soviet Taiwanese relations 1964-1971

Share (2003) argues that the Soviet-Taiwanese ties started developing only in response to the growing Sino-US rapprochement, however various scholars have questioned this view. On one hand, the Sino-Soviet split followed by the increasingly deteriorating situation during the Cultural Revolution and the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 made the Soviet Union rethink its Taiwan policy. On the other hand, the decreasing US commitment towards Asian security evident to the Taiwanese as the "prospective withdrawal from Vietnam and the withdrawal of the Seventh Fleet from the Taiwan straits in 1969" made Taiwan explore the Soviet option (Tubilewicz 2005).

According to a chinese sources, at least 6 soviet secret agents visited Taiwan from 1965-1972. The secret talks before 1969 were never made available in public however after 1968, it is seen that on certain instances, the information of visits or secret talks were leaked to the press as a means of political signaling to the PRC or the US. The visits by Victor Louis, a Moscow based reporter became popular and he was assumed to be a KGB agent by some. Later it became clear that Louis represented the "hawkish faction" in the Soviet leadership led by Aleksander Shelepin who was an emerging rival to Breznev and was in favor of "using Taiwan to destroy Mao's regime" (Tubilewicz 2005). Louis' talks were conducted at a high level including the Minister of Defence, Chief of Intelligence and Minister of Economic Affairs. Louis questioned the Taiwanese leadership if they would - "seek to establish relations with the Soviet Union'',"allow existence of a pro-soviet party in mainland china in case of successful invasion", "seek Soviet neutrality in case of a ROC attack on the mainland". The Taiwanese leadership welcomed Moscow's neutrality but did not agree to allow pro-soviet communist parties arguing that the KMT alone will succeed the PRC and afterall it is a "socialist party" itself. The talks however did not reflect in any mainstream

diplomatic communication and remained a matter of journalistic rumor. Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek, was perceived as a bridge between the Soviets and the Taiwanese because of his Russian wife and having spent his formative years in the Soviet Union, he spoke fluent Russian and had close contacts with some of the Soviet leadership.

The matter of an emerging Soviet-ROC rapprochement became clearer in the aftermath of the Ussuri River clashes in March 1969. The CPSU convened a conference in which some participants called for cooperation with Taiwan in its "undeclared war against PRC". The rift had been escalated due to casualties on the border and Soviet Defence minister Andrei Grechko went so far as to recommend "nuclear blockade" against China and seeking help from Taiwanese for a "naval blockade" and opening war on "two fronts against the PRC". However the so-called "dove faction" in the Soviet leadership - Breznev and Kosygin - went ahead with a "parallel military and diplomatic escalation" (Tubilewicz 2005). The last meeting between Louis and Taiwanese leadership was in Vienna where he discussed proposals for Soviet-ROC military intelligence sharing and plans for the invasion of the mainland. In a September 1969 article in London Evening News, Louis wrote about the "Soviet readiness to conduct a Czechoslovakia style invasion in China".

The conflict was also evident on the diplomatic front. The Soviet Union for the first time in 1969 refused to speak in favor of PRCs membership in the United States and during the UN vote on the question of who represents China, ROC received 10 extra votes coming possibly from states that previously voted for PRC - possibly the Eastern European states and the Soviet Union itself. The Soviet Union and its Eastern European did not protest in international organizations representing the Taiwanese. Except for those held in the Soviet Union itself, Moscow would attend all such conferences and meetings signaling the tacit support to ROC and faltering support for One-China principle.

The easing of the Sino-Soviet border tensions and the subsequent negotiations made the Soviet Union prefer settlement over the rather uncertain collaboration with Taiwan thereby derailing the "secret" attempts made by Louis and his Taiwanese counterparts and the "dove" faction prevailed over the "hawks". That was so far the Soviet-ROC rapprochement went and it failed in producing any significant outcomes except the fact that both the Soviets and the Taiwanese were able to use the "Taiwan card" and the "Soviet card" for political signaling to the PRC and the US, which resulted in nothing but hastening the Sino-US rapprochement. The aftermath of the Sino-US rapprochement saw the Soviets reemphasising their faith in the "one China policy" as the PRC was now the permanent member of the Security Council and Taiwan found itself increasingly isolated. The Soviets calculated that there was more to gain by mending fences with the PRC than by considering the Taiwan option.

Soviet taiwanese relations 1971-1991

The winner out of the entire Sino-Soviet episode in the 1960s was the United States that was able to make the most out of the split in what for the longest time seemed as the "monolithic

communist bloc". Kissinger (1994) writes that felt no need to "wield any card to try to influence China's foreign-policy decisions" and the "PRC simply cooperated with the United States out of an obvious convergence of interests engendered by Chinese fears of the Soviet Union". Hence, made possible by what is often termed as "Bismarkian diplomacy", Kissinger put the Soviet Union in a dilemma to choose sides. After the Shanghai Communique and taking over of the China seat by the PRC instead of the ROC, which subsequently became diplomatically isolated, the Soviet Union had no choice but to re-emphasize their faith in the "one China policy". The Soviets calculated that there was more to gain by mending fences with the PRC than by considering the Taiwan option. Beijing on the other hand left no opportunity to criticize the Soviet Union by presenting a "stronger image of an aggressive and expansionist Soviet Union" (Goh 2004).

With the improving Sino-American relations during the Carter presidency, the Taiwanese had no choice but to diversify its dependence on the US and seek a more "flexible foreign policy" (Vardiy 2007). In the 1970's and 1980's Soviet-Taiwanese relations revolved around fringe issues such as trade and did not develop into any strategic area. With the economic reforms in the Soviet Union in the late 1980's, Taiwan found a suitable market in the Eastern European countries and shunned its predicament against trading with communist countries which it called "anti-Sovietism". It allowed Soviet ships to pass through the Taiwan straits and in 1988 as a gesture of goodwill it released the sailors it took hostage at the Tuapse Oil tanker incident (Vardiy 2020). Therefore throughout the 70s and 80s despite the setbacks, the Soviet Union felt the need to maintain good neighborly relations with the PRC. The "one-China policy" was always upheld by the Soviet Union despite having relaxed it at the lower levels of leadership during the brief rapprochement period. In spite of the Sino-US rapprochement, Breznev in a speech in Tashkent in 1982 upheld "Moscow's recognition of China's sovereignty over Taiwan and refusal to support the "two China" concept "in any form" (Tubilewicz 2005).

Conclusion

Many International Relations scholars predicted that due to the Sino-Soviet split, Moscow would repudiate the "One China" policy and may collaborate with Taiwan. However, the period of the Soviet-Taiwanese rapprochement was brief and limited to secret negotiations, diplomatic signaling and journalistic rumors. The rapprochement was contingent on the escalation of the Sino-Soviet conflict and as soon as the negotiations on the border dispute began, higher leadership on the Soviet side made all attempts to prevent the ongoing "secret negotiations" from meeting the public eye lest it hamper the negotiations. The Sino-US rapprochement, which was another setback and could have potentially escalated the Sino-Soviet conflict and subsequently the Soviet-Taiwanese rapprochement did not materialize because of diplomatic mileage that the PRC gained and the ROC lost due to the Shanghai Communique and its joining the United Nations replacing the ROC.

Two theoretical conclusions seem to be reaffirmed. One, it is evident from this study that states make hard-headed assessments of their national interest and ideology plays only a secondary

role - as evident from the Sino-Soviet split, Soviet-Taiwanese rapprochement and Sino-US rapprochement. Two, the Cold war bipolarity, whereas on the one hand limited the choices available to the second tier powers, such as PRC and ROC, on the other hand they were able to assert their autonomy by playing one against the other and securing concessions and security often leaving the superpowers tied into conflicts they could not ignore (Gaddis 2006). The PRC and ROC conduct during the cold war is an excellent manifestation of the same.

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