**China-Soviet 6: From Being in War to Being Friends Again; Why did China-Soviet Relations Quickly Normalize in 1989?**

**May 2024**

**What was Chairman Mao’s most important concern when dealing with China-Soviet relations?**

**Why was the Soviet military so furious when gunshots were heard on Zhenbao Island?**

**Soviet hardliners planned a massive nuclear attack on China. Why was Brezhnev at a loss as to what to do?**

**How did Chairman Mao break the impasse in the face of the Soviet Union’s active blockade against China?**

In the late 1950s, as differences grew over issues of national interest, such as the establishment of a long-wave radio station and a joint fleet within the Chinese land and sea terrritory, relations between China and the Soviet Union began to drift apart. The so-called establishment of a joint fleet meant opening the territorial waters and territories of the two countries to each other's navies. However, the Chinese navy was still very weak, and it was impossible for China to sail into the Soviet territorial waters even if the Soviet Union opens its territorial waters. Besides, what would be the point and value of China’s naval warships sailing into the territorial waters of other countries?

**Chairman Mao’s Most Important Concern**

For Chairman Mao and other older generation leaders, the Chinese nation and tens of thousands of revolutionary martyrs sacrificed their lives and shed their blood in bloody battles with Japanese imperialism, the Kuomintang reactionaries, American imperialism and others for decades to gain the country's sovereignty, independence and national freedom, which was absolutely impossible to make concessions. The new People’s Republic of China was neither the Qing government of 19th century that lost its sovereignty and humiliated the country, nor was it the Nationalist Chinese government that fawned on foreign powers and sold out the country! In retaliation, to this conflict Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev stopped providing China with nuclear weapons technology.

In July 1960, Khrushchev withdrew all Soviet experts from China, destroyed some technical drawings, and tore up almost all economic contracts for cooperation with China.

At this time, New China was experiencing unprecedentedly severe natural disasters, so the Soviet Union's behavior was essentially equivalent to adding insult to injury, hoping to make China suffer. But the Chinese people, led by Mao Zedong, withstood the increasing pressure from the Soviet Union and, through self-reliance and hard work, exploded the first atomic bomb on October 16, 1964. Many people believe that this atomic bomb was China's **"prestige bomb."** Coincidentally, just two days ago, on October 14, Khrushchev was dismissed from his posts as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and Chairman of the Council of Ministers and stepped down in disgrace. In recognition of Khrushchev's "contribution" to the development of nuclear weapons in New China, Chairman Mao said wittily: "Khrushchev should be awarded a one-ton medal."

Against the backdrop of the increasingly tense global Cold War with the United States, the Soviet authorities, led by Khrushchev and his successor Brezhnev, began to frequently take action against foreign countries, provoking armed conflicts everywhere and even interfering in the internal affairs of fraternal countries by force. This had also aroused Chairman Mao's high vigilance. In January 1968, Czechoslovakia began to implement reforms to the country's political and economic system, announcing that it would establish a socialist model that suited its actual conditions. This move was known in history as the "Prague Spring." Brezhnev was very annoyed by the Czech Republic's eccentricity. On the evening of August 20, 1968, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact countries dispatched troops to openly invade Czechoslovakia. The Soviet army quickly occupied Prague, and the "Prague Spring" died prematurely. The Soviet Union's tough interference in Czechoslovakia caused an international uproar. Not only did the Chinese government publicly condemn it, but Romania, also a socialist country, also expressed strong opposition. The events in Europe only proved once again that the Soviet army was not just a decoration, but a real tiger that could bite.

**Soviet Pressure upon China from northern China region suddenly increased.**

**Gunshots on Zhenbao Island**

According to the Soviet-Mongolian Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance signed between the Soviet Union and the Mongolian government, the Soviet Union obtained the right to station troops in Mongolia, thus enabling Soviet Union's thousands of kilometers of front line against China from the northeast to the northwest. Starting from 1965, the Soviet Union gradually expanded its troops stationed on the China-Soviet border and in Mongolia to more than 50 divisions, divided into three military regions: the Far Eastern Military Region, the Trans-Baikal Military Region and the Siberian Military Region, with a total strength of more than 700,000 troops.

In addition, there were more than 10,000 tanks, 15,000 armored vehicles, 12,000 artillery pieces, more than 2,000 aircraft and the most terrifying strategic rocket force. The Soviet Army's "Iron Torrent" was not in vain. Backed by such powerful military force, the Soviet side was of course fearless and began to frequently provoke, arbitrarily intercept and beat Chinese border guards in the border areas.

It is only more than 500 kilometers from the China-Mongolian border to Beijing. Once a war break out, Soviet tanks could be able to reach the outskirts of Beijing within a few days. For New China in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such a threat was like a sword hanging over its head every day. The Chinese government led by Chairman Mao was not willing to be outdone, and retaliated by deploying a huge force of over one million people in the Shenyang Military Region, Beijing Military Region, Lanzhou Military Region and Xinjiang Military Region, and deploying most of the most advanced tanks and combat aircraft in the north. Under such tense circumstances, small-scale armed conflicts were almost inevitable.

At 8 a.m. on March 2, 1969, the Soviet army dispatched tanks to intercept the Chinese border guards patrolling Zhenbao Island, and shot and killed and wounded six Chinese border guards. The unit attacked by the Soviet army was the 217th Regiment of the 67th Division of the 23rd Army of the People's Liberation Army. Its predecessor was the 4th Column of the Huaye Army led by Tao Yong and Lu Sheng. This was a unit that feared neither heaven nor earth. They were the first to shell the British warship "HMS Amethyst" on the Yangtze River.

The Soviet army shot and killed our comrades, how could we tolerate this? Fierce gunfire rang out on the very small Zhenbao Island, which covers an area of ​​only 0.74 square kilometers. After a brief and fierce battle, the Soviet army suffered a crushing defeat, with more than 60 casualties, and the loss of one armored vehicle, one command vehicle, and one truck. They withdrew from the battle in a panic. The People's Liberation Army also suffered more than 50 casualties. Two weeks later, the Soviet Union dispatched more than 100 infantrymen, under the support of more than 50 tanks and armored vehicles, to launch another attack on Zhenbao Island in an attempt to completely occupy the island. In order to block the PLA from landing on the island, the Soviet army also dispatched heavy artillery to fire fiercely at our troops assembled on the other side of the Ussuri River. The intensity of the firepower was no less than that of the U.S. military during the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea!

After the battle, U.S. spy satellites observed that "the river bank on the Chinese side was densely covered with craters left by Soviet artillery, looking like the surface of the moon." Chinese army's heavy firepower was limited, but Leng Pengfei, the commander of the 1st Battalion of the 217th Regiment who was in charge of the front-line command, remained calm and ordered rocket launchers to fire at close range and drove the enemy tanks and armored vehicles into the anti-tank minefields that we had arranged in advance. Braving the enemy's hail of bullets, our army's rocket launcher operator Hua Yujie and the deputy gunner worked closely together and shot with great accuracy, hitting four Soviet armored vehicles in succession. Due to the frequent firing of anti-tank rockets, Hua Yujie's ears were deafened, and the deputy gunner patted him on the shoulder to point out the shooting direction for him.

Because our army wrapped the anti-tank mines with white sheets, they were not visible on the ice and snow and could not be avoided. After the Soviet army fell into the trap, a T-62 tank numbered "545" had its tracks broken by an anti-tank mine and could not move, so it had to anchor on the ice. In the melee, China’s backup Type 75 recoilless gun showed its power, destroying two Soviet armored vehicles in succession and damaging several tanks and armored vehicles, forcing the Soviet army to retreat once again. Subsequently, a series of battles broke out between the two sides over the tanks. By April, the Soviet army had suffered more than 250 casualties and lost 18 tanks and armored vehicles in the conflict, and the PLA also suffered more than 150 casualties. In the end, Zhenbao Island was still under the control of the PLA.

But what made the Soviet military feel most ashamed was that its Soviet T-62 tanks, which were regarded as the pride of the army and were said to be the most advanced in the world at that time, were not only paralyzed within the Chinese territory but were also eventually seized by China and taken to Beijing, becoming strong evidence of the Soviet invasion of China. In order to salvage the heavy tank that was sunk to the bottom of the Ussuri River by the Soviet army, Chinese engineers led by Ji Qingchang fought a battle of wits and courage with the Soviet army. After paying the price of many casualties, they finally towed the tank ashore with the cooperation of the Lushun naval divers.

After the Zhenbao Island incident broke out, the Soviet Union reacted strongly and further increased its border garrison to 64 divisions, 800,000 people, and mobilized more than 3,400 combat aircraft and more than 800 naval ships, plus 100,000 strategic missile forces, bringing its total border force to 1.14 million. Soon, the Soviet army provoked a series of armed conflicts in Heilongjiang and Xinjiang regions in an attempt to save face. The People's Liberation Army won and lost alternately in small-scale battles with the Soviet army.

**Comprehensive China-Soviet Contest Shifts from Military to Diplomatic Sphere**

Throughout 1969, the northern border of New China was shrouded in a huge nuclear cloud from the Soviet Union. Many Western media predicted that the Soviet Union and China were likely to go to war. The tough-minded Defense Minister Marshal Grechko, supported by Assistant Minister and hero of the Battle of Stalingrad Marshal Chuikov, advocated "solving the China issue once and for all" and tried to persuade Brezhnev to use nuclear weapons. Marshal Zakharov, the Chief of the General Staff, also advocated a military attack. In the combat plan formulated by the Soviet General Staff, an action plan of "four-pronged schock-war " plan against China was even issued: One group of Soviet troops followed the old route used in the "August Storm" battle against the Japanese Kwantung Army, passing through Harbin and heading south to China’s Shenyang city. One group of Soviet troops, led by a tank cluster, passed through the Inner Mongolia prairie and took a week to reach Beijing. One group of Soviet troops attacked Urumqi in Xinjiang; another group of Soviet troops, mainly airborne troops, raided Lanzhou.

At this time, the top Soviet military officers were all veterans who had experienced the cruel test of the Soviet-German War. They were courageous, had rich war experience, and had great influence in domestic politics. This was why the Soviet Union had the upper hand in the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Of course, the plan of Grechko and others was mainly based on the military's standpoint. However, as the top leader in charge of the overall situation, Grechko had to consider the serious consequences of a full-scale war against China.

First, it would be impossible to completely destroy China's war preparedness by using nuclear weapons. Since China had already sent a large number of heavy industries, experts and technicians to the Southwest Third Front, the Soviet nuclear bombs could not destroy them all.

Second, looking at Chairman Mao's character, Mao would not offend anyone unless they offended him, but Mao would definitely offend them if they offended him. At that time, China not only had atomic bombs, but also exploded hydrogen bombs in 1966. Although their hitting capability was not strong, if one was exploded over the heads of a Soviet tank cluster entering the border, no matter how many tanks the Soviets had, they would be destroyed.

Third, the PLA Army’s fighting will and combat experience were world-class quality. The Soviet Union still remembers the horrific record of defeating the U.S. military on the Korean battlefield more than a decade ago. The millions of PLA soldiers on the northern border at this time could not be dealt with in the short term.

**Brezhnev was not completely sure of attacking and defeating China**

China was not Czechoslovakia. If the Soviet Union wants to defeat the Chinese army, the 700,000 to 800,000 ground forces deployed on the front line of confrontation between the two sides would not be enough. At least another 1 million troops needed to be withdrawn from Europe and prepared to fight for several years! But Soviet shouldn't forget that there were millions of NATO troops eyeing China from the other side of the "Iron Curtain" in Europe. Once the Soviet Union would be caught in a protracted war in China, Soviet Union would face an extremely unfavorable situation due to fighting on two fronts. The Soviet Union's global strategic focus had always been Europe, and going to war with China over border issues was not in the overall interests of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev's bottom line and attitude on this point were very clear.

Kosygin, a veteran of the Soviet Communist Party who was then the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Suslov, a member of the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party (they were two of the Big Three leaders), and Foreign Minister Gromyko also disagreed with the use of force. So Brezhnev turned to using a combination of military threats and diplomatic pressure to force New China to make concessions on the border issue. However, the Chinese government's subsequent series of unexpected actions stunned the Soviet side. As the Chinese often say: If the East is dark, the West will be bright. Since the Soviet Union was trying to isolate and blockade us, why don't we look further ahead? On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, some people are eager to improve relations with the new China. May be USA.

Due to China's years of anti-US fight aid to Vietnam, the US military was caught in a dilemma on the Vietnam battlefield. In 1969, the newly elected US President Nixon began to secretly contact China through the Pakistani government. In order to gain trust, the USA even "sold" to China the top-secret intelligence that the Soviet Union intended to use nuclear weapons against China’s Lop Nur nuclear bomb base. Nixon was very active mainly for two reasons:

First, to gain China's cooperation and to withdraw gracefully and honorably from the Vietnam battlefield, where tens of thousands of American soldiers was buried. Second, to use China to balance the Soviet Union's aggressive offensive expansion in the Asia-Pacific region. For Chairman Mao, the America’s such enthusiasm to normalize relations had come at the right time.

**Kissinger visits China**

In July 1971, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger made a secret visit to China. In February 1972, US President Richard Nixon visited China and met with Premier Zhou and Chairman Mao. This sudden visit shocked the world. Nixon's visit to China triggered a wave of efforts in the Western world to establish diplomatic relations with China. Throughout 1972, China established or upgraded diplomatic relations with **the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Greece, West Germany, Luxembourg, Australia, New Zealand and other countries.**

In September 1972, Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka visited China despite domestic political resistance in Japan, and subsequently issued a joint statement with Premier Zhou Enlai, which normalized China-Japan diplomatic relations.

In the context of the US-Soviet rivalry, Chairman Mao never gave any compromise from China’s independent and non-alliance foreign policy and not allow any big power ( USA or others) to use China as its pawn, while CPC led by Mao thought that mutual approachment with any big power could be used in order to help China gain a more favorable bargaining position in the international arena. By this wise tactic the Soviet Union's dream of isolating and suppressing China was shattered. Instead, China's relations with the West were fully normalized, and a certain degree of tacit understanding was reached with the United States in strategic co-ordination and cooperation. This allowed the United States, which had been struggling to deal with the Soviet Union, to gradually recover, and the Soviet Union's position in the global hegemony struggle gradually shifted from offensive to defensive.

**Soviet Union’s Defeat on the Diplomatic Battlefield**

Although the Soviet Union's attempt to suppress China on the diplomatic battlefield has failed, Soviet Union still hoped to create trouble for China in its surrounding neighbor areas. At the end of 1978, the Soviet Union and Vietnam signed a Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance, and established a military alliance, with the Soviet Union promising to assist Vietnam in dealing with military attacks from any other countries. This other country naturally referred to China. After this military alliance Vietnam increased its provocations in Chinese border and expelled and tortured the Chinese minority living in Vietnam for centuries. The aim was to provoke a military conflict. In February 1979, China launched a self-defense counterattack against Vietnam. After weighing the pros and cons, the Soviet Union did not dare to send troops. Soviet Union watched the Vietnamese army being beaten by the People's Liberation Army and only issued a light diplomatic statement "condemning" China, which caused the Soviet Union's international reputation to plummet.

However, the Soviet Union did not give up its plan to dominate Asia. In order to eliminate the influence of the United States in Afghanistan and threaten China and in order to scare Iran which had an anti-Soviet position at the same time, for these aims the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in late 1979. Brezhnev thought Soviet Union could destroy the anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan in one fell swoop, but unexpectedly the Soviet army, like the US army, was stuck in the quagmire of war.

Due to the boycott by the United States plus China and many other countries, only 81 countries participated in the 1980 Moscow Olympics, this was the Olympics games with the fewest participating countries since 1956. Even if many countries participated the Olympics games, they only sent symbolical number of athletes as flag bearers.

Without China's support, the Soviet Union was unprecedentedly isolated on the international political stage, and its foreign military operations encountered obstacles everywhere. This forced the Soviet leaders to begin to correct the huge mistake of making China an enemy Soviet Union. In March 1982, 13 years after the Zhenbao Island incident, the already terminally ill Brezhnev delivered a speech in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, actively sending a signal for reconciliation with China. Brezhnev's speech attracted the attention of Deng Xiaoping, who arranged for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to hold a brief press conference, stating that "how the relationship between the two countries develops depends on the actual actions of the Soviet Union." But in November 1982, Brezhnev died. The next two leaders died suddenly within two years of taking office. The aging Soviet government was no longer able to maintain its global hegemony. When Gorbachev took office in March 1985, Gorbachev was faced with a huge mess:

**Externally:** victory in the war in Afghanistan was nowhere in sight. Soviet interference in the civil wars in Ethiopia and Angola was futile and instead consumed a great deal of resources. Also the United States had begun its offensive posture since president Reagan came to power, leaving the Soviet Union exhausted.

**Internally:** the Soviet state system was corrupt, the economic reforms initiated by previous leaders had all failed, and long-term militarism had brought the Soviet Union's national economy to the brink of collapse, and people's living standards had seriously declined.

**A Quick Normalization Was Needed By the Two Sides**

Forced by the dilemma of both internal and external difficulties, Gorbachev was eager to seek to improve relations with China. Gorbachev believed that only China was the key country to help the Soviet Union win international living space and thus deal with the new offensive strategy of United States. At this time, Deng Xiaoping also realized that the time had come to resolve the tension between China and the Soviet Union that had lasted for more than 20 years. Since the Soviet Union had asked China for help, China should show sincerity towards the Soviet Union. This sincerity can be simply described as removing the threat to China: this would lead to the withdrawing of Soviet troops from the China-Soviet border and Mongolia, as well as withdrawing Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and stopping Soviet military aid to Vietnam.

In order to concentrate its efforts on economic development, socialist China began large-scale disarmament in the second half of 1985. At this time, the Soviet Union still deployed heavy troops on the northern border of China and attempted to encircle China from the west and south, which was very unfavorable to China's economic development and its national defense consolidation efforts. Only by creating a stable external environment for the country can people live in peace! Of course, this reality was also true for the situation of the Soviet Union. On July 28, 1986, Gorbachev delivered an important speech in Vladivostok, stating that the Soviet Union was willing to discuss and establish relations with China at any time and at any level.

Five months later, the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Mongolia. In 1987, the Soviet Union, which had already suffered a serious fiscal deficit, stopped its aid to foreign countries, including Vietnam. In early 1988, the Soviet Union began negotiations to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan. From this point on, the Soviet Union officially gave up its goal of struggle for global domination and turned to self-preservation. After 1989, the Eastern European countries under the control of the Soviet Union were on the eve of drastic changes. Faced with the surging wave of social change, the Soviet Union, which was already overwhelmed, was unable to stop this wave. As the Soviet Union was gradually collapsing, the United States, which once had a close relationship with China, quietly changed its attitude, thus a new round of blockade and suppression policy against China was imminent. Especially on some key issues involving China's core interests, the United States' two-faced attitude has made China become aware that USA is unreliable!

Deng Xiaoping analyzed that neither the Soviet Union nor the United States could fall. If one of two would fall, it would not be good for China! So he thought both should remain which would be a better option for China. But the Soviet Union unexpectedly collapsed too quickly, so China had no choice but to take action as soon as possible.

Deng Xiaoping, who had already dealt with major issues such as the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the United States, the China-British negotiations on the Hong Kong issue, and on the normalization of China-Vietnamese relations, hoped to resolve these historical burdens in the limited time he had left and not leave them to future generations. On February 15, 1989, the Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. On May 15, 1989, Gorbachev visited China and met with Deng Xiaoping the next day.

During the summit talks, Deng Xiaoping said eight words with ease: let us leave behind the past and open up a new page and look to the future. The twenty years of confrontation and hostility that began with the Zhenbao Island Incident in 1969 was wiped out that day. Without complicated negotiations and bargaining, the two sides readily announced the normalization of bilateral relations on May 16, 1989 ; this was because both sides knew that there was no time to waste. The normalization of China-Soviet relations enabled the Soviet Union to withdraw a large number of troops and materials from the border between the two countries, which greatly alleviated financial pressure on the Soviet Union. At the same time, the two sides quickly reached a series of military and economic cooperation agreements.

Although the Soviet Union collapsed two years later, the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations enabled China to establish friendly relations with Russia and other CIS countries. In particular, the normalization in 1989 set the tone for future border negotiations with Russia in advance, eliminating the biggest problem in bilateral relations.

In November 1997, at a meeting in [Beijing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beijing), [Russian President](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_Russia) [Boris Yeltsin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boris_Yeltsin) and  Chinese [President](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/President_of_the_People%27s_Republic_of_China) [Jiang Zemin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jiang_Zemin) signed an agreement for the demarcation of the 4,000 kilometres eastern section of the border, in accordance with the provisions of the 1991 China-Soviet agreement.

The last unresolved land territorial issue between the two countries was settled by the 2004 Complementary Agreement between China and Russia on the Eastern Section of the China–Russia Boundary. Signed by Putin and Hu Jintao.

On June 5, 2019, the heads of state of China and Russia decided to upgrade bilateral relations to the "China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination in the New Era", which is a unique stage in China's foreign relations.

The normalization of China-Soviet relations in 1989 had a very significant and far-reaching significance for the world situation over the next 30 years and effect the situation in the 21st century. The foresight and decisive decision-making of the older generation of Chinese revolutionaries played an indispensable role in this normalization.