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Background Information USSR

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THE WORLD'S GREATEST BORDER CONFLICT?

The second part of the Soviet government statement (Pravda, 22 September 1963) is far more explosive than the first, which was primarily political and ideological in its main thrust. Whereas the first part restored the level of the dispute to the international plane, far above the petty squabbling over pamphlets and train crews of the past week or two, the second part reopens the border conflict with unprecedented vigor:

"Beginning in 1960, Chinese servicemen and civilians have been systematically violating the Soviet border. In the single year of 1962 more than 5000 violations of the Soviet border from the Chinese side were registered. Attempts are also being made to 'develop' some parts of Soviet territory without permission."

Thus the Kremlin wishes to emphasize the magnitude of the trouble, the fact that the Chinese Army is involved, and the fact that territorial seizures have taken place and are continuing. This use of the present tense is important because when the People's Daily (5 September 1963) referred to the serious conflict on the Sinkiang-Kazakhstan border, most of the subsequent official "leaks" in Moscow were contrived to give the impression that the trouble occurred mainly in 1962, when some 50,000 Moslem refugees crossed the frontier westwards at the same time as another 200,000 Chinese were simultaneously escaping to Hong Kong.

The new statement not only shows that in 1963 the tension is at least as grave, and probably still more serious than last year, but also extends the area of conflict to the long Amur River section of the border in Siberia, which did not appear to be covered by the People's Daily complaint at the beginning of this month.

The main bone of contention in the Amur River area, and in the Ussuri River which continues the Soviet-Chinese frontier to the South towards Vladivostok, appears to be the islands in mid-stream, ownership of which is claimed by both

sides. The Soviet Government statement now quotes a written order taken from one of the Chinese border "violators" and signed by the provincial Chinese Party Committee to the effect that Chinese fishermen could occupy the islands and refuse to be removed by Soviet border guards.

In other words it is official Chinese policy to infiltrate its subjects into the vacant disputed areas and then present the Kremlin with a fait accompli which would require the use of force to reverse it. This is brinkmanship of a most literal and dangerous nature.

Disclosure of the Chinese order by the Kremlin also suggests strongly that the Chinese reference in March to the "revision, abrogation or renegotiation" of the Tsarist treaties of Aigun, Peking and Ili¹ was not, after all, intended purely as a long-range diplomatic threat. It is already being followed by extremely concrete measures which appear to be designed to place the USSR at a considerable disadvantage, in terms of the citizenship of settlers on the ground, when the demand for "renegotiation" is eventually made.

The Kremlin now calls this procedure "the artificial creation in our times of territorial problems", but it omits to mention that it was precisely the same technique in reverse which originally brought Russian settlers and soldiers to the Ili, Amur and Ussuri valleys not so many centuries ago. If it is unfortunate for the USSR that the expansionism of Tsarist Russia should now be blamed on it, there is at least a measure of poetic justice in the process. The Kremlin yesterday claimed that:

"The USSR has no frontier conflicts with any of its neighboring states"

but as it has simply absorbed parts of Poland, the Baltic States, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and other areas by force majeure that is not surprising. China is both too powerful and too revanchiste to be treated in this way, and the Chinese statements of 8 March and 5 September, together with the series of disclosures in Moscow yesterday, make it abundantly clear that the USSR has a major frontier dispute with China, and that the latter will not be quickly settled.

On Thursday, 19 September, Pravda carried a long editorial full of warnings addressed to Peking concerning the Sino-Indian border dispute. It was headed "A Serious Source of Tension in Asia", and it contained one statement which is now applicable to the Sino-Soviet border as well. Pravda wrote:

"When the troops of the neighboring states stand opposite each other with rifles at the ready, particularly when in the past there has been bitter fighting between them, naturally there is a danger that bloodshed may begin with an accidental rifle shot."

¹See Background Information, 12 March 1963, "Slicing up Siberia."

In view of the recent violations of the borders by the Chinese Army described in the Soviet Government statement, it is now logical to assume that the Kremlin must be seriously concerned to reinforce its conventional forces on the Eastern frontier. Since at present about half of the Red Army's available divisions are tied down in Eastern Europe facing Nato, Khrushchev's recent proposal for a "thinning out" of the forces in East and West Germany probably had a more pragmatic motive than merely the general desire to make further progress towards disarmament or détente. Moreover the hope of any alleviation of his military budget as a result of the desired reduction of strength in Germany becomes increasingly chimerical.

Only two weeks ago the London Times (10 September 1963), is an excellent survey of the historical aspects of the Sino-Soviet border problem, wrote that since the October Revolution, there has never been any discussion of the Siberian territories by Moscow with Peking, and nor have the Chinese raised the question. Now, however, the Amur and Ussuri valleys, as well as the Sinkiang-Kazakh border, are being openly discussed not by courteous diplomatic notes between the two capitals but by propagandistic statements addressed to the world at large.

The always strong latent nationalism of the Russians is certain to be inflamed by the disclosures from Moscow of the extent to which their territorial interests are at stake. As for the Chinese reaction, the Government statement ends with one of Moscow's ritual appeals to Peking to discontinue open polemics, and a broad hint that China has no intention of resuming the Sino-Soviet bilateral talks, in which its authors are probably right. Yet surely the publication of this state document in Izvestia can only hasten the day when Peking decides to "revise, abrogate or renegotiate" the unequal treaties of the 19th century. Increasingly the emphasis is shifting from a general dispute on communist policies to a direct, and now even physical clash of national, territorial and imperialist interests.

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