

The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American *Rapprochement*

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The question of how the Sino-Soviet military clashes at Zhenbao (Damanskii) Island of March 1969 were related to Beijing's *rapprochement* with Washington has received much attention in the study of China's contemporary foreign relations. It has been widely accepted by scholars that the incident played an important role in shaping the reorientation of China's US policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This article uses new Chinese documentation to discuss the Zhenbao Island incident within the context of both the development of the Sino-Soviet border conflict and China's changing domestic and international policies in 1968–69, and concludes that by reducing its own hostile stance towards the People's Republic in the aftermath of the crisis the Nixon administration made it possible for the Beijing leadership to begin a major reorientation of its foreign relations.

The question of how the Sino-Soviet military clashes at Zhenbao (Damanskii) Island of March 1969¹ were related to Beijing's *rapprochement* with Washington has rightly received much attention in the study of China's contemporary foreign relations. It has been widely accepted by scholars that the incident played an important role in shaping the reorientation of China's US policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Yet crucial questions remain unanswered. What actually caused the incident? Did Beijing intentionally 'use' the clashes to improve its international diplomatic position? To what extent did the incident influence the overall direction of Chinese foreign policy and security strategy? Was the Sino-American *rapprochement*, in retrospect, a well-calculated outcome of Mao Zedong's 'brilliant diplomatic decision', of which the border clash with the Soviet Union was an integral part from the beginning? Or was the new relationship with Washington simply an unexpected result of a series of realistic diplomatic choices on Beijing's part in the wake of the Sino-Soviet border war?²

The documents that recently have become available on the crisis in Moscow and Beijing indicate that it was the Chinese who initiated the March 1969 border conflict with the Soviets. Some scholars therefore argue that the incident was intentionally designed by Mao for the purpose of 'dropping a hint to the Americans'.³ However,

while focusing on discussing Mao's diplomatic motives underlying his conflict management, these scholars fail to pay enough attention to several key issues – especially the war scare among Beijing leaders during the autumn and winter of 1969 – which, in retrospect, was unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic of China.

This article will use new Chinese documentation to discuss the Zhenbao Island incident within the context of both the development of the Sino-Soviet border conflict and China's changing domestic and international policies in 1968–69. It finds that the military clashes were primarily the result of Mao Zedong's domestic mobilization strategies, connected to his worries about the development of the 'Cultural Revolution'. The situation at the border quickly got out of hand and created, for Beijing, a perceived danger of war that Mao had never intended. By reducing its own hostile stance towards the People's Republic in the aftermath of the crisis, the Nixon administration made it possible for the Beijing leadership to begin a major reorientation of its foreign relations.

The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: A Brief Historical Review

When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened its Ninth National Congress in April 1969, the Cultural Revolution had been under way for nearly three years. In the hubbub of 'rebellion is by nature reasonable', China had witnessed a time of 'great turmoil under the heaven'.⁴ Although Mao had frequently asked his comrades not 'to worry about turmoil', when the 12th Plenum of the Party's Eighth Central Committee was convened in November 1968, he began to discuss whether or not it was the time to end the Cultural Revolution. At the Plenum's opening session, the CCP Chairman raised a question and then answered it himself: 'Almost everyone says that the Cultural Revolution should be carried through to the end. But what exactly is the end? In my view, the revolution should last for about three years, and should approach its end by next summer.'⁵

However, the transition from disorder to order was no easy matter. Before the internal turmoil was placed under control, a serious and unexpected external crisis emerged in the form of border clashes between China and the Soviet Union. As a result, the CCP leaders found themselves having to handle their substantial internal problems in an atmosphere where the threat of imminent war was dominant.

The Sino-Soviet border disputes had a long history, which can be traced back to the early 1960s. During the 1959 Sino-Indian border

clash, the Soviet Union virtually sided with India. In 1960, the Soviet leaders tore up the agreements on Soviet technical assistance to China, and recalled all Soviet experts working there.⁶ From then on, the relationship between Beijing and Moscow began to deteriorate as they, among other things, sharply criticized each other on issues related to their common border. This notwithstanding, it was not until after 1964 that the Sino-Soviet border disputes escalated into military tension.⁷

On 31 December 1963, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev issued an open letter to the leaders of all states, apparently appealing for the resolution of border problems not by force but by peaceful means. In Beijing's view, however, this letter had taken Chinese foreign policy as a target of criticism. In 1964, while China was conducting a series of limited direct talks with the Soviets on the border disputes, CCP Chairman Mao Zedong continued his criticism of Moscow's behaviour. When meeting a Japanese Socialist Party delegation on 10 July 1964, Mao focused on how to carry out the struggles against 'imperialism and international revisionism'. He claimed that 'the Soviet Union has occupied too much territory [of others]', citing Outer Mongolia, Kurile Islands, Bessarabia, parts of Germany, Poland and Finland as examples.

Whenever they can put something into their pockets, they will. It is said that they even want to occupy Xinjiang and Heilongjiang ... The territorial size of the Soviet Union is already more than twenty million square kilometers, and that is vast enough. More than one hundred years ago they occupied the entire area east of Lake Baikal, including Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, and the Kamchatka Peninsula. That account is difficult to square. We have yet to settle that account.⁸

Did Mao really mean to rake up old scores with the Soviet Union, demanding 'back' the 'lost territory' of 1.5 million square kilometres? This is very unlikely. Indulging in wide-ranging and sometimes rambling discourse was Mao's unique philosophical style, to which he often resorted when discussing international issues. Probably realizing that this discussion of territorial issues could be misread, Mao later found another opportunity to clarify what he meant. In meeting a group of guests from France on 10 September, the CCP Chairman emphasized that by bringing up matters of the past he meant nothing more than 'taking the offensive through firing empty canons', so that Khrushchev would be 'scared for a moment'.

It was not his intention to change the current border status; his purpose, the Chairman emphasized, was to reach a reasonable settlement of the border issues and, taking the *status quo* as the basis, to sign a new border treaty with the Soviet Union.⁹

However, Mao's rethoric was not lost on the Soviet Union, which continued to put pressure on China. For example, the Soviet leaders – making explicit reference to the Chinese threat – signed a new treaty of mutual defence with Mongolia, paving the way for moving more Soviet troops to that country. As a result, the conflict with China intensified, and the sections of the Sino-Soviet border which had not been clearly defined in the existing treaties increasingly became triggers for friction between Chinese and Soviet armed forces.

This prospect alarmed Mao. For a short period in 1964, the Chairman seemed very worried about the possibility of a Soviet invasion of China. In October 1964, shortly before Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's downfall, Mao twice asked the leaders of two fraternal Communist Parties while meeting them: 'In your opinion, will Khrushchev attack us? Is it possible that the Soviet Union might dispatch its troops to occupy Xinjiang, Heilongjiang, or even Inner Mongolia?'¹⁰ This concern, together with America's escalation of the Vietnam War, formed the background for Mao to call upon the whole country to construct a 'Third Front' late in 1964 and early in 1965, moving equipment and production facilities to the Chinese interior where they would be less directly exposed to an American or Soviet invasion.¹¹

The CCP leadership began the Cultural Revolution in 1966. At that time the Sino-Soviet border disputes became focused on the border's eastern portion, especially two small islands, Zhenbao and Qiliqin, on the Wusuli (Ussuri) River. It seems as if most of the small conflicts in this area were triggered by the Soviet side. According to the memoirs of Ielizavetin, a Soviet diplomat then in Beijing, several times in 1966–67 the Soviet embassy in China proposed that the Soviet border garrisons should 'attack and repulse' the Chinese patrol units appearing on the islands.¹² As the Soviets claimed that these river islands were Soviet territory and tried to prevent the Chinese from approaching them, military conflict became inevitable. The most serious clash happened on 5 January 1968, when the Soviet side dispatched a group of armoured vehicles to attack Chinese working on Qiliqin Island, causing four deaths.¹³ This was probably the first incident with major human casualties on the Sino-Soviet border in the late 1960s. After strong protest from the Chinese side, the Soviets

moderated their actions. Until late 1968, the Sino-Soviet border remained relatively quiet.

The Zhenbao Island Incident

Late in 1968 the situation along the Sino-Soviet border deteriorated sharply in the wake of Soviet troops' invasion of Czechoslovakia and the CCP Central Committee's 12th Plenary Session. On 27 December 1968 several Soviet armoured vehicles landed on Zhenbao Island and Soviet soldiers used sticks to beat Chinese soldiers. On 23 January 1969 another violent conflict occurred on Zhenbao and, reportedly, 28 Chinese soldiers were wounded. From 6 to 25 February 1969 five more similar incidents occurred.¹⁴

Within this context, on 2 March, a major armed clash erupted between the Chinese and Soviet border garrisons on Zhenbao Island. An internal Chinese circular summarized the battle as follows:

At 8:40 a.m. on 2 March, our border patrol of 30 soldiers went to Zhenbao Island in two groups to carry out their duties. The moment they set off, the Soviet revisionists discovered them. They dispatched one truck, two armoured vehicles, one command car, and about 70 soldiers from two different directions to encircle our soldiers. At 9:17 a.m., ignoring our warnings, the enemy opened fire on our soldiers. ... Our soldiers were forced to begin a counterattack in self-defence. The enemy suffered heavy casualties. Our troops in the second tier fired as soon as they heard the gunshots, eliminating seven enemy soldiers immediately. At 9:50 a.m., the battle ended successfully. The enemy's casualties totalled over 60, including more than 50 deaths. One armoured vehicle, one command car, and one truck on the enemy side were destroyed; another armoured vehicle was damaged.¹⁵

Two weeks later an even fiercer conflict occurred between Chinese and Soviet border garrisons on Zhenbao Island, causing heavy casualties for both sides. The internal Chinese circular again provides a Chinese version of the story:

The second battle on Zhenbao Island happened on 15 March. The Soviet troops were supported by larger numbers of tanks, armoured vehicles, and heavy-calibre guns. They put one motorized infantry battalion, one tank battalion, and four heavy-artillery battalions into the battle. However, our soldiers,

following Chairman Mao's teaching that we should "fight no battle unless victory is sure", had made sufficient preparations in advance. On the night before, our soldiers landed on the island and laid out anti-tank mines. On the morning of the 15th, when the enemy dispatched to the island six armoured vehicles and more than 30 soldiers, we also transferred more troops there. At 8:02 a.m., the enemy launched the first attack. After one-hour's fierce fighting, we destroyed two enemy armoured vehicles. The remnants of the enemy escaped to the bank of their side of the river. At 9:40 a.m., the enemy launched the second wave of attack with the support of covering fire. Our soldiers dealt with the attack calmly by concentrating their firing on the enemy's tanks and armoured vehicles. They destroyed two enemy tanks and two armoured vehicles, and damaged another [armoured vehicle]. Two hours later the enemy's attack was completely repulsed. Beginning at 1:35 p.m., the enemy used heavy-calibre artillery, as well as tank and armoured vehicle guns, to shell our positions for two hours. At 3:13 p.m., they dispatched ten tanks, 14 armoured vehicles, and over 100 infantry soldiers to launch another attack on Zhenbao Island. Our soldiers on the island ... waited for them to get close and then suddenly opened fire on them. ... Our artillery units on the [Chinese] bank also took the opportunity to strike at the enemy, destroying one enemy tank and four armoured vehicles, and damaged two armoured vehicles. Then our artillery units continued to shell the enemy's border patrol stations and bunkers, killing a colonel and a lieutenant colonel. The enemy's casualties are estimated to be over 60. In addition, the enemy has lost two tanks and seven armoured vehicles, with another two tanks and four armoured vehicles being damaged.¹⁶

Three issues are particularly noteworthy as revealed by these Chinese accounts. First, although the account of the 2 March battle claims that it was the Soviets who opened fire first, it clearly was the Chinese who were better prepared for battle. This was why the Chinese troops, while landing on the island, had been divided into two groups, and the second group was able to open fire on the Soviets immediately after the Soviets fired the first shot. Second, both the Chinese and the Soviets were prepared for the 15 March battle, yet, again, the Chinese had made sufficiently better preparation. In reality, the Chinese side had prepared a trap for the Soviets, causing

heavy casualties among Soviet troops. Third, in terms of the weapons used by the two sides, it is apparent that the Chinese equipment was inferior to that of the Soviets. But the Chinese account emphasizes the superiority of the People's Liberation Army soldiers in spirit and intellect. Indeed, in Chinese propaganda related to the Zhenbao Incident the difference in equipment between the two sides became a matter of no consequence. On the contrary, following the Cultural Revolution slogan of 'politics must be put in command', the Chinese propaganda described the Soviet troops as 'politically degenerated and morally decadent', while emphasizing that Chinese soldiers, 'armed with Mao Zedong Thought and revolutionary spirit', easily turned the enemy's 'tortoiseshells' (meaning tanks and armoured vehicles) into 'a pile of scrap iron'.¹⁷ Even based on this propagandistic Chinese account, it seems likely that the Zhenbao Island Incident was indeed initiated by the Chinese side. The crucial question then becomes: what were Beijing's purposes?

Beijing's Decision to Teach the Soviets a 'Bitter Lesson'

According to recently available Chinese source materials, the Zhenbao Island battle was not simply a logical outcome of the long-existing tension on the Sino-Soviet border; it was a well-calculated attempt at a defensive counterattack on the part of Mao and other Chinese leaders. Repeated Chinese concessions in face of Soviet provocation had made the Chinese leaders feel that they had reached the limits of forbearance. By early 1969, Beijing found it necessary to strike back in a well-planned military attack.

As early as 5 January 1968, when Soviet troops provoked an incident on Qiliqin Island, the CCP Central Military Commission (CMC) headed by Mao Zedong had considered how to best control the situation. For the purpose of regaining the initiative in the border conflict and preparing for possible negotiations in the future, the CMC cabled the headquarters of the PLA's Shenyang Military Region and Beijing Military Region, instructing them to follow the principle of 'giving tit for tat', 'gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck', and 'use military operations to support the diplomatic struggle'. The CMC believed that the Chinese border garrisons should seize 'proper opportunities, make full preparations, and work out various operation plans in accordance with the changing situation'. If the Chinese troops were again attacked by the Soviets, they should launch a counterattack 'for the purpose of self defence'. In particular,

the CMC instructed PLA front commanders that they should 'fight no battle unless victory is certain'. Following the CMC's orders, the Shenyang Military Region organized a small detachment of select troops, dispatching it to areas around Qiliqin Island to prepare secretly for a counterattack against the Soviets.¹⁸ However, as the situation in Eastern Europe turned unstable in the spring and summer of 1968, the Soviets refrained from making new aggressive advances on Sino-Soviet borders. Consequently, although the Chinese troops had made every preparation for launching a counterattack at Qiliqin, they did not find an opportunity to carry out the plan.¹⁹

The PLA's counterattack at Zhenbao Island in 1969 was the continuation of the preparations for similar actions in Qiliqin in 1968. After the serious incidents at Zhenbao on 28 December 1968 and, especially, on 23 January 1969, the PLA's Heilongjiang Military Region immediately set in motion the CMC's instructions issued one year earlier to make plans for 'conducting counterattack for the purpose of self-defense'. According to the plan, the PLA would dispatch a squadron of select troops to take position secretly on the island, and if the Soviets tried to use force to intervene in the activities of the PLA's patrol units, the squadron should be used to teach the Soviets a 'bitter lesson'. The headquarters of the Shenyang Military Region approved the plan. However, as the CCP's Ninth Congress was about to be convened when the plan was sent to Beijing for approval, the CMC's attitude was cautious. Not until 19 February, when Soviet provocation again intensified, did the PLA's General Staff and the Chinese Foreign Ministry approve the plan. The General Staff issued specific instructions concerning how the counterattack should be conducted, emphasizing again that 'no battle should be fought unless victory is certain'. When the CMC finally approved the overall plan, the headquarters of the Shenyang Military Region immediately deployed an elite PLA squadron to the Zhenbao area. As a result, the PLA's 'counterattack for the purpose of self-defense' occurred on 2 and 15 March.²⁰

Information gained from interviews further confirms that the Chinese side had carefully prepared for the two battles at Zhenbao. According to the recollections of General Chen Xilian, who was then commander of the Shenyang Military Region, the CMC had approved the PLA's counterattack in advance. Chen Xilian recalled:

For two to three months, we had been preparing for the first battle (the battle of 2 March). From among the units of three armies, we selected three reconnaissance companies, each of

which was composed of two to three hundred soldiers and commanded by army staff members with combat experience. We provided them with special equipment and special training, and then dispatched them secretly to take position on the [Zhenbao] island in advance. When the Soviet troops attempted their provocation on 2 March, they actually were hopelessly outnumbered by us. We won a clear victory on the battlefield.²¹

Chen Xilian further recalls that he and other top Chinese military planners commanded the battle of 15 March directly from Beijing. As the second incident occurred on the eve of the CCP's Ninth Congress, all commanders of the PLA's Military Regions had gathered in Beijing to prepare to attend the Congress. The CMC had arranged a suite in Beijing's Jingxi Hotel and erected a special telephone line for Chen Xilian to establish direct communication with the troops on the front. Qiao Guanhua, the Vice Foreign Minister, was put in charge of supervising intelligence reports concerning international reactions to the battle and reporting them to Zhou Enlai whenever necessary. All important decisions were made by Zhou himself. Chen Xilian's recollections provide some details about how the Chinese fought the 15 March battle:

After the battle on 2 March, we were fully aware that the enemy would try to come back again, therefore we laid large numbers of mines at the promontory of the [Ussuri] river [bank]. [When the battle began on 15 March], a Soviet tank coming from the west was quickly blown up by us. They did not dare to come from the same direction [again]. Covered by supporting artillery fire, they dispatched more than thirty soldiers to launch an attack on the front. At that time, we did not deploy any troops on the [Zhenbao] island, but our artillery forces were ready to shell the enemy. Onto the small island with a size less than one square kilometre, the enemy dispatched dozens of trucks and other vehicles, and a dozen tanks and armoured vehicles. I asked Premier Zhou Enlai whether or not we should open fire. After the Premier said "yes", I immediately ordered our troops to open fire. The firing lasted for about thirty minutes, turning Zhenbao Island into a sea of flame. The enemy's trucks, tanks and armoured vehicles were all destroyed. They did not send more troops to the island but began using artillery forces to shell us. Our artillery forces also shelled them. After a while that day's battle ended.²²

Mao Zedong's reaction was interesting when Zhou Enlai reported to him about the battle on 15 March. On the one hand, he repeatedly pointed out that 'we should let them come in, which will help us in our mobilization'. He also emphasized that 'in face of a fierce enemy, it would be better for us if we are prepared and mobilized'. On the other hand, the Chairman issued an explicit order: 'We should stop here. Do not fight any more!'²³

Following Mao's instructions, the PLA units on the Sino-Soviet border area reduced combat engagement after the 15 March battle, leaving only a small number of troops on Zhenbao Island while at the same time continuously using artillery fire to prevent the Soviets from dragging back a T-62 tank that had been damaged by anti-tank mines and trapped on the island. When the Soviets came back to clean up the battlefield, though, the Chinese troops did not engage in further fighting with them. When the Soviet artillery forces, as retaliation, shelled Zhenbao Island, Chinese troops did not react directly, so as to avoid the confrontation from escalating further. For Mao Zedong, the whole thing was over. In addressing a meeting attended by members of the Cultural Revolution Group on 22 March, the Chairman claimed: 'I am optimistic about [the consequences of] this incident on the [Sino-Soviet] border. It seems that their leaders at the top knew little about the battle on 2 March. Their Politburo, like ours, did not discuss the matter. Many people on their side do not even know where Zhenbao Island is.' The Chairman believed that the political report of the CCP's Ninth Congress, while mentioning the border conflict, should not take it too seriously.²⁴

Mao's remarks, as well as the restrained Chinese actions following the Zhenbao incident, revealed Beijing's true purposes. In ordering Chinese troops to fight the Zhenbao battle, Beijing's leaders, Mao in particular, had no further military aims beyond teaching the Soviets 'a bitter lesson', so that Moscow would stop further military provocations on the Sino-Soviet borders. Mao and his fellow Chinese leaders did not intend to provoke a war with the Soviet Union; nor did they, as sometimes claimed by the Chairman himself, intend to 'lure the enemy deep into Chinese territory'. No statement was more revealing than the one made by Mao himself – 'Do not fight any more' – which clearly indicated that what the CCP Chairman had pursued was a controllable military conflict that would serve his larger political purposes, that is, the mobilization of the Chinese Party and people on his terms.

Not surprisingly, when Mao issued the order to limit the Chinese military operations, in Chinese propaganda he loudly advocated

‘preparing for fighting a war’. Indeed, the Chairman even claimed that China should be ready ‘to fight a great war, an early war, and even a nuclear war’. He also mentioned that in fighting a war against the Soviet revisionists, China should be prepared to lure the Soviet enemy deep into Chinese territory. At the same time, however, the Chairman pointed out that when he argued for the need for ‘preparing for fighting a war’, he meant that ‘we should be prepared to fight a war this year or at anytime in the future’. In particular, the Chairman emphasized that ‘whether or not the enemy is to invade [our country], we should be prepared, especially in a spiritual sense’.²⁵ In explaining the Chairman’s instructions at several Party cadre meetings, Zhou Enlai asked his comrades not to be scared by the prospect of a general war. He emphasized that it was impossible for the Soviets to launch a large-scale invasion of China in the near future, as they still had a long way to go before they could turn the relatively undeveloped Soviet Far East into the bases for attacking China. In commenting on the Zhenbao battles, Zhou emphasized that the Soviet soldiers were unable to conduct effective fighting at close range or at night, and that the superior Soviet artillery power, as well as Soviet superiority in tanks and armoured vehicles, only played a limited role in the fighting.²⁶ It is apparent that, in Zhou’s opinion, a general war was not going to break out between China and the Soviet Union.

Moscow’s Reactions

The battles at Zhenbao Island went beyond Moscow’s expectations and astounded the Soviet leaders. As revealed by recently available Russian archival sources, Moscow’s overall reaction to the border clash was quite different from that in Beijing.

When fighting erupted at Zhenbao Island on 2 March, the Soviet leaders were uncertain what to expect. On the one hand, they immediately notified various Communist parties in Eastern Europe, condemning what they saw as a premeditated attack against Soviet soldiers by Chinese border garrisons.²⁷ On the other hand, they planned to take limited retaliative actions. In the meantime, though, Soviet leaders continued to carry out a series of official visits abroad. It seemed that the Soviet leaders did not regard unwanted escalation of the military conflict as a serious possibility.

Following the orders from the Soviet Defence Ministry, the Soviet border garrisons secretly dispatched troops to Zhenbao Island at around 3:00 am on 15 March, hoping to launch a surprise attack on the

Chinese patrol units. When the fighting began in the morning, the Soviets found that carefully prepared Chinese soldiers were already hiding on the island. When the Soviet commander, Colonel Leonov, found that his troops were superior neither in numbers nor in firepower, he immediately telephoned to request reinforcements. However, the request was delayed by the complex decisionmaking system on the Soviet side. In Moscow, no one was able to make the decision as Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet Communist Party's General Secretary, was on his way to Hungary, and Marshal Andrei Grechko, the Defence Minister, was on an official visit to India. When the staff officer on duty at the Defence Ministry eventually established contact with Brezhnev and received approval for sending reinforcements to Zhenbao, the fighting had already ended, and Colonel Leonov was dead.²⁸

The second battle of 15 March shocked Moscow. When the Soviet Politburo held an emergency meeting that night to discuss the situation, the opinions among top Soviet leaders seemed divided. While some worried that China might launch a large-scale attack, others, especially the military leaders, were eager to retaliate. The Foreign Ministry strongly recommended instructing the Soviet embassy in China to begin withdrawing Russian citizens, especially women and children, from China, so that they would not be caught in case war broke out suddenly. Grechko, as one of the leading hard-liners, loudly argued the need for 'eliminating the China threat forever'. According to some sources, Grechko suggested considering a preemptive nuclear strike on Chinese nuclear facilities.²⁹

Among top Soviet leaders, Andrei N. Kosygin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, took the lead in recommending a more restrained approach in dealing with the crisis. On 21 March, using the Moscow–Beijing high-frequency telephone line, he personally called Beijing, requesting to be transferred to Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai. However, the Chinese operator refused to connect him.³⁰ Kosygin then called the Soviet charge d'affaires in Beijing, instructing him to contact the Chinese Foreign Ministry immediately. But the Chinese side, after a meeting chaired by Zhou Enlai, decided to reject Kosygin's proposal for Moscow and Beijing to conduct direct talks by telephone; instead, the Chinese suggested that direct talks should be held between China and the Soviet Union 'through diplomatic channels'.³¹ On 29 March the Soviet government issued a statement which, while implying that the disputes still might be solved through peaceful means, warned that Moscow was prepared to launch a military counterattack if China gave further provocation.³²

China neither responded to the Soviet artillery forces' continuous bombardment of Zhenbao Island nor immediately answered the successive statements and notes from the Soviet government. In the meantime, the Chinese media vigorously promoted 'preparation for fighting a war', which further irritated the Soviet hardliners. *Krasnaia Zvezda* (Red Star), the main organ of the Soviet military, published an article threatening to deal the 'modern adventurers' a crushing nuclear blow. Meanwhile, Soviet military leaders urgently deployed large numbers of troops to the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet border and made preparations for seizing any opportunity to retaliate against China.

On 24 May, the Chinese government issued a strongly worded statement to denounce the Soviet Union's 'policy of aggression' during and after the Zhenbao Island incident. Although Beijing proposed resuming negotiations between the two countries, the statement claimed that the 'Soviet revisionists' had been determined to make China an enemy while 'currying favour with the US imperialists'.³³ The Chinese attitude would have triggered further debates among top Soviet leaders, who had already been divided on whether or not it was necessary to carry out large-scale retaliative actions against China. As far as China's 24 May statement was concerned, top Soviet leaders had different interpretations. While Grechko read the statement as Beijing's declaration of war against the Soviet Union, thus insisting on retaliating even at the risk of general war with China, Kosygin emphasized that the Soviet Union should continue to try to reduce tensions between the two countries through high-level contacts with Beijing, so as not to drive China to take desperate actions.³⁴ In the end a compromise was reached. On 26 July, Moscow proposed to Beijing that the premiers of the two countries should meet in person.³⁵ Yet the Soviet military continued to assert publicly that 'only when the Chinese have been punished through a preemptive Soviet strike will it be possible for them to sit down at the negotiation table'.³⁶

Under these circumstances, China did not respond positively to the Soviet proposal.³⁷ As a result, the retaliation plan that had long been argued for by the Soviet military was approved by the Soviet leadership. While considering the target for retaliation, the Soviet military decided to avoid the eastern parts of the Sino-Soviet border, where its transportation capacity was relatively limited. Instead, after it had transported enough supporting units and equipment to the Soviet Far East, the Soviet military leadership decided to take action on the western Sino-Soviet borders, where the Soviet supply line was far shorter than China's.

The retaliation came on 13 August 1969. After a succession of probing attacks, the Soviet military dispatched more than 300 soldiers into positions on the Soviet side of the border, adjacent to China's Tielieketi area, a part of Yumin County in Xinjiang. When a Chinese frontier squadron composed of some 30 soldiers entered the Chinese border zone, the Soviets, with the support of two helicopters and dozens of armoured vehicles, crossed the border to launch a surprise attack. Four hours later, the Chinese patrol squadron was completely eliminated.³⁸

In carrying out this action, the Soviet leaders certainly had considered the possibility that it might lead to a general war with China. Indeed, as the Soviet leaders viewed it, it was more than possible that Mao, who always believed that 'political power comes out of the barrel of a gun', would respond by escalating the military confrontation. Soviet media began issuing warnings about the immediate danger involved in a Chinese counterattack. After the Tielieketi incident, Soviet policymakers, who always believed in the principle of gaining the initiative by striking the first blow, not only speeded up the preparations for a general war, but also carefully considered the feasibility of taking further preemptive action against China.

It was against this background that the Soviet embassy in Washington was instructed to probe America's attitude towards a possible large-scale Soviet preemptive strike. On 18 August, a Soviet embassy official, while having lunch with the US State Department's Soviet affairs expert William Stearman, asked the American 'what the US reaction would be to a Soviet attack on a Chinese nuclear facility'.³⁹ Moscow also inquired of its East European allies about a scenario in which the Soviet Union would have to strike at China's nuclear installations. On 28 August, for the purpose of mobilizing Soviet and world opinion, *Pravda* published an editorial appealing to the whole world to realize how dangerous China had become. It even argued that 'no continent would be left out if a war flares up under the present conditions, with the existing present-day technology, with the availability of lethal weapons and the up-to-date means of their delivery'.⁴⁰

Although neither China nor the Soviet Union had originally intended to fight a general war against each other, when the situation had evolved to the level of tension of August 1969, the danger of all-out war became real and imminent. Indeed, even a small mistake could have detonated a powder keg on which the fuse had been burning for a long time already.

The War Scare in Beijing

It was beyond Mao's worst expectations that the situation should have deteriorated to such an extent. After the Zhenbao Island incident, the opinion among top Chinese leaders had also been divided. The Administrative Group of the CMC, headed by Marshal Lin Biao and composed of Generals Huang Yongsheng, Wu Faxian, Li Zuopeng, and Qiu Huizuo, believed that the Soviet Union would seize any opportunity to take action against China, most likely by launching a large-scale invasion. A different view, centred on the need for diplomatic action, was held by such veteran military leaders as Marshals Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen.⁴¹ For a while newspapers in Britain and the United States predicted that it was possible for the Soviet Union to invade China. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union conducted a major military manoeuvre in the Soviet Far East, sending its most serious warning signal to Beijing.⁴²

Mao was confused. He had firmly believed that the focus of the Soviet global strategy lay in Europe, which made it difficult for him to interpret the meaning of recent Soviet actions. As early as 19 February, he had instructed the four marshals, Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Xu Xiangqian, and Nie Rongzhen, to 'pay some attention to studying international issues'.⁴³ After the Zhenbao Island incident, Mao's basic attitude was optimistic and he did not believe that a general war would follow, but he still instructed the four marshals to evaluate the situation and present their opinions to the Party's central leadership. However, when nothing serious happened during the following months, it seemed that Mao no longer paid much attention to the marshals' discussions.⁴⁴ Not until June did Zhou Enlai again asked the four marshals to continue their study of the international situation with an emphasis upon analyzing the policy tendencies of the United States and the Soviet Union. In particular, the Premier instructed the marshals to assess the possibility of a war launched by the Soviet Union against China.⁴⁵ On 11 July, the four marshals presented a comprehensive report, 'A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation', to the Party's Central Committee, in which they basically argued that a great war was unlikely to occur for the moment.⁴⁶ It seemed that Mao shared the marshals' view. Therefore, in August, when the Soviets suddenly went on the offensive in Xinjiang and seemed to be preparing for a large-scale attack on China, Mao was surprised.

Despite Mao's repeated calls for 'preparing to fight a war' the simple fact was that China was not ready for war. During the spring and summer of 1969, the CCP leaders held a series of meetings to

discuss issues related to war preparations, at which Lin Biao and his associates strongly advocated doubling China's military expenditure. But the leadership made no specific military preparation for fighting a major war beyond these planning activities.⁴⁷ On several occasions Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai had mentioned that if a major Soviet invasion were to occur, it would be to China's advantage to lure the Soviet troops deep into Chinese territory and thus allow the Chinese people to encircle them. Mao had long believed that Beijing should not fear a nuclear war since China was a vast country with the largest population in the world. If the Soviet Union were to drop one or two atomic bombs in China, Mao argued, Moscow also needed to remember that China possessed its own nuclear bombs and could take a terrible revenge.⁴⁸

However, Mao's general design of fighting a people's war against invading Soviet troops would not fit the situation in Xinjiang, where the population was sparse. In case Moscow did decide to wage a preemptive nuclear strike against China, China had to evacuate its urban population and heavy industries, which were still concentrated in big cities, in advance, in order to reduce the damage created by a nuclear war. All of this made Mao aware that the threat of a nuclear attack was very grave indeed. On one occasion the Chairman commented in a very serious tone: 'It is not good for our Party's top leaders to gather in Beijing as one atomic bomb may eliminate all of us. We should evacuate.'⁴⁹

It is apparent that when Mao in early 1969 had argued that China should be 'prepared for a general war', he had done so for domestic mobilization purposes. His real belief at the time had been that as long as he would be able to take necessary precautions there would be no war. But the situation deteriorated so rapidly during the summer of 1969 that Mao was profoundly shocked. Especially after learning that it could be possible, without further warning, for Moscow to conduct a preemptive nuclear strike against China, Mao became extremely nervous. The Chinese leaders began to search for effective countermeasures.

The war scare in Beijing escalated further late in August 1969. When Chinese leaders received intelligence reports that Moscow had been making inquiries among East European countries about a possible nuclear attack on China, they found it necessary to take immediate action. On 27 August the CCP Central Committee and Central Military Commission jointly issued an urgent order for establishing a 'Leading Group for People's Air Defence' with Zhou

Enlai as the head, assigning to it the task of immediately organizing a large-scale evacuation of the Chinese population and main industries from the big cities. The CCP leadership also called on workers and residents in big cities to begin digging air-raid shelters and stockpiling everyday materials to prepare for a nuclear strike.⁵⁰

On 28 August the Central Committee, with Mao Zedong's approval, issued an urgent mobilization order to China's border provinces and regions, Xinjiang in particular. Party committees, government agencies, military commands, and ordinary citizens in provinces and regions adjacent to the Soviet Union were urged to be prepared for a large-scale Soviet surprise attack at any time. In the meantime, the CMC ordered PLA forces in northern, northeastern, and northwestern China to enter an emergency status of combat readiness.⁵¹ In Beijing's view, the situation was so serious that when North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh died on 3 September Zhou Enlai even could not stay in Hanoi long enough to attend his funeral. On 4 September Zhou flew to Hanoi to offer his condolences. He returned to Beijing later the same day.⁵²

The Zhou–Kosygin Meeting

It was the Vietnamese who supplied the first ray of light in the darkness. At the very moment when every sign looked as if a storm of war had been gathering, a report came from Hanoi indicating that the Soviets were willing to talk. On 6 September, a Soviet Party and government delegation headed by Kosygin arrived in Hanoi to attend Ho Chi Minh's funeral. A member of his delegation asked the Asian Section of the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry to convey a message to Li Xiannian, the head of the Chinese Party and governmental delegation to Ho's funeral, that Kosygin was willing to stop at Beijing to meet Chinese leaders on his way back to Moscow.⁵³

Li Xiannian immediately reported the message to Beijing via the Chinese embassy in Hanoi. Mao was suspicious of the motives of the Soviets and did not approve the plan for the premiers of the two countries to meet until 10 September. He also emphasized that the meeting had to be informal and would be held at Beijing airport, not in the city.⁵⁴ When the Chinese embassy in Hanoi received Beijing's response at 8:00 am on 10 September, though, Kosygin had already left Hanoi. In order to deliver the urgent message to the Soviets, on the one hand, the Vietnamese, at the request of Beijing, asked the Soviet ambassador in Hanoi to transmit the message to Moscow. On the

other hand, the Chinese Foreign Ministry urgently summoned Ielizavetin, the Soviet charge d'affaires in Beijing, informing him that Zhou Enlai was willing to meet Kosygin at Beijing airport.⁵⁵ By then Kosygin had already arrived at Tashkent. After receiving Zhou's message, he immediately changed route and flew to Beijing via Irkutsk.

On 11 September, Zhou Enlai and Kosygin met at Beijing Airport for three and a half hours. At the beginning of the meeting, Zhou came straight to the point by asking Kosygin to clarify the rumour that the Soviet Union was preparing to launch a first strike at Chinese nuclear facilities. The Chinese Premier commented:

You say that we want to make nuclear war. In fact you are well informed about the level of our nuclear weapons [and you know that we will not do so]. You say that you will take preemptive measures to destroy our nuclear facilities. If you do so, we will declare that this is war, and that this is aggression. We will rise in resistance. We will fight to the end.

Concerning the border disputes, Zhou told Kosygin: 'We mention those unequal treaties [between China and Russia] not for the purpose of abolishing them. Rather, we are willing to recognize these treaties, and we believe that China and the Soviet Union should consider and settle the border disputes on the basis of recognizing these treaties.' Touching upon Moscow's claim about the 'war threat from China', Zhou argued: 'You say that we want to go to war. But now we have very many domestic problems to deal with. How can you believe that we want to go to war?'⁵⁶

Zhou's comments exemplify the frank discussions at the meeting. The two premiers in the end reached agreements on such questions as sending back their ambassadors to the other's capital, expanding trade relations as well as restoring regular train and air transportation between the two countries. At the conclusion of the meeting, Zhou proposed that formal diplomatic notes should be exchanged between the two governments to confirm the results of the meeting, to which Kosygin agreed. Almost immediately after Kosygin departed from Beijing, however, the Chinese Foreign Ministry telephoned the Soviet embassy in Beijing, informing the Soviets that when the Chinese media reported the meeting the next day, it would not mention, as had been agreed upon by the two sides, that 'the meeting, held in a frank atmosphere, is beneficial'.⁵⁷ After Kosygin's return to the Soviet Union, the Soviet side also informed the Chinese side that, as Soviet border garrisons had been ordered to avoid further conflicts with the

Chinese, it was no longer necessary for the two governments to exchange official notes.

We still do not know exactly how the top leaders of the two sides regarded the Zhou–Kosygin meeting. What is certain is that the meeting contributed to relaxing the extreme tension between China and the Soviet Union. On 18 September Zhou Enlai sent a letter to Kosygin in which the Chinese Premier summarized the main agreements they had reached one week earlier, emphasizing that both sides were committed to not using their armed forces, including nuclear forces, to attack the other side.⁵⁸ On 26 September Kosygin suggested in his response to Zhou's letter that 'strict supervision should be exercised so that the territorial air space of either the Soviet Union or China would not be violated', and that a Sino-Soviet nonaggression pact should be negotiated and signed.⁵⁹ Because of all of this, it seemed that a Sino-Soviet war was becoming less of a possibility.

However, top leaders in Beijing viewed the 'sudden' relaxation of tension between China and the Soviet Union with profound suspicion. Lin Biao and several of his associates preferred to interpret Moscow's diplomatic gestures in the context of the serious military actions that the Soviets had taken in recent months, and were convinced that behind Moscow's seemingly moderate attitude lay a well-prepared conspiracy.⁶⁰ Mao Zedong shared the suspicion. On 13 September, Zhou handed all files concerning his meeting with Kosygin to the Party's Politburo. Three days later, at a special Politburo meeting, the opinion of the majority was that Moscow's peace gesture was most likely a 'smoke shell' designed to cover a future attack. The next day, in reviewing the official 'Slogans for Celebration of the 20th Anniversary of Founding of the People's Republic', Mao added one more item:

People of all countries, unite and oppose any war of aggression launched by imperialists or social-imperialists, especially one in which atom bombs are used as weapons! If such a war breaks out, the people of the world should use revolutionary war to eliminate the war of aggression, and preparations should be made right now!⁶¹

On 18 and 22 September the CCP Politburo held two further meetings to discuss the threat of war. The opinion of the majority was that, just like Japan on the eve of Pearl Harbor – dispatching its special envoys to confuse President Franklin Roosevelt – the purpose of Kosygin's visit to Beijing was to camouflage Moscow's intention to

start a sudden large-scale invasion of China. The CCP leaders found enough clues to support the suspicion. In reviewing the minutes of the Zhou–Kosygin meeting, they found that Kosygin had never actually promised that Moscow would not launch a nuclear war against China. They also found that when Kosygin returned to Moscow not a single top Soviet leader appeared at the airport to greet him, which should be regarded as an indication that his attitude did not necessarily represent that of the Soviet Politburo. Further, they found that Soviet diplomats continuously asserted that a conflict between China and the Soviet Union was inevitable. In particular, intelligence reports informed the Chinese leaders that the Soviet strategic nuclear force had already completed preparations for conducting a surprise attack against China.⁶² Mao supported taking these clues seriously.

The Politburo decided immediately to adopt a series of emergency measures to deal with the danger of an all-out war. Accordingly, Zhou instructed the Foreign Ministry and other ministries to evacuate important archives immediately, while at the same time beginning China's own war mobilization.⁶³ On 22 September, the People's Liberation Army convened an urgent conference to discuss the war issue. Zhou told the conference: 'The international situation is extremely tense. We should be prepared for fighting a war. This is a new strategic decision. Preparedness averts peril. Therefore, we must be fully prepared.'⁶⁴

On 30 September, out of concern that the Soviets, as they had done in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, might launch a surprise attack on China's National Day (1 October), Lin Biao ordered China's entire military forces to enter 'first-degree combat readiness'. In particular, in order to prevent the enemy's airborne force from conducting an easy landing operation, he ordered that all planes in airports in the Beijing area should be evacuated immediately, that barriers should be established on runways, and that the units guarding the airports should be equipped with heavy weapons. Indeed, Lin's worry about a sudden Soviet attack was so deep that he even proposed emptying the water in the Miyun Reservoir located north of Beijing so as to prevent the Soviets from flooding Beijing by destroying the reservoir's dam. Lin only dropped the proposal because of Zhou's firm objection.⁶⁵

The Chinese leaders seemed almost surprised that no Soviet invasion took place on 1 October. But their suspicion that Moscow was planning to attack China did not disappear. They chose to treat the arrival of a Soviet delegation for negotiations on border issues on 20 October as a cover-up for a surprise attack on China.⁶⁶ Mao and

the Politburo decided that all Party, government, and military leaders had to leave Beijing before 20 October. Mao himself would go to Wuhan, and Lin Biao would leave for Suzhou. Zhou Enlai stayed, but he and other Party and government officials who stayed in Beijing, together with the PLA's General Staff, moved into the underground command centre located in Beijing's western suburb.⁶⁷ On 17 October, Lin Biao, who had already arrived in Suzhou, issued a 'Number One Order'. Without Mao's prior authorization, Lin instructed Huang Yongsheng, the PLA's chief of staff who then was still in Beijing, to order all Chinese military units to prepare for immediate action. Not only were the Chinese military forces moved up to forward positions throughout the country, but anti-air attack exercises and forced evacuations took place in many large and medium-sized cities. The army's redeployment involved more than 940,000 soldiers, 4,000 planes, and 600 naval ships.⁶⁸ All over China, Party and government cadre were transferred from cities to thousands of 'May 7th Cadre Schools' located in remote countryside areas; all universities and colleges were evacuated; important archives were transferred from coastal provinces and cities to the mountainous southwest of China; and a mass campaign of constructing air-raid shelters began in the cities, causing millions of ordinary Chinese citizens to be involved in 'preparing for the coming of war'. But the war did not come on 20 October either.

Turning to the United States

The war scare of 1969 was unprecedented in the history of the People's Republic of China. In retrospect, it also brought about two unexpected consequences. First, to a certain extent it stemmed 'all-out civil war' and great turmoil during the Cultural Revolution. Second, it created the possibility for two former enemies – the PRC and the United States – to begin communicating with each other, laying the foundation for a Sino-American *rapprochement*.

As early as the CCP's Ninth National Congress in April, Mao had issued instructions that the Cultural Revolution should enter the stage of 'struggle-criticism-transformation', by which the Chairman meant to bring the revolution to its successful conclusion. However, even with new 'Revolutionary Committees' having by then been established in every Chinese province, the 'all-out civil war' between different mass organizations did not end; in some provinces it became even more violent than before. In order to deal with this situation, the CCP

Central Committee issued a directive on 23 July ordering all mass organizations to stop fighting unconditionally or be dissolved. The directive also ordered the confiscation of weapons held by mass organizations, and destruction of military bases held by other organizations than the army. Any group that resisted the directive would be severely punished, the directive said.⁶⁹ There is little evidence, however, that this or other CCP directives in July and early August 1969 managed to end completely the 'civil war' in China.

After the Tielieketi incident on 13 August, this continuing domestic turmoil became a main obstacle in China's preparation for war. On 28 August the Central Committee declared that 'all mass organizations that are established across professions will be dissolved immediately', and that 'any attempt to establish an independent organization or to reestablish an independent organization is illegal'. In particular, it ordered that 'all professional groups that use violent means in their struggle should be dissolved; all strongholds for violent struggle should be eliminated; all weapons should be handed back ... and under no circumstance should anyone be allowed to attack the People's Liberation Army'.⁷⁰ Probably because of the tense international situation, this order was immediately put into action throughout China (not just in border provinces and regions), and, mostly through pressure from the army, 'struggle by violent means', factionalism, and the general anarchy of the Cultural Revolution began to be checked. As a result, while social order and stability in China were beginning to be restored to a certain extent, the nationwide 'preparation for the coming war' continued to be carried out on Mao's terms.

Another unexpected consequence of the Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969 was the effect on Sino-American relations. Two key factors underlay Mao Zedong's strategy toward the United States: His rationale of promoting world revolution according to the Chinese model, and his understanding of China's national security interests. With the escalation of the confrontation between the Chinese and Soviet parties in the mid-1960s, Mao's American policies became increasingly connected to the revolutionary rationale, as he wanted to form a sharp contrast with the Soviet 'revisionist' approach of compromise towards the United States. The beginning of the Cultural Revolution as a radical political process inevitably strengthened Chinese hostility towards America. In the Party Central Committee's political report to the Ninth Congress, which had been personally revised and approved by Mao, it was claimed that the Soviet revisionists and the American imperialists

‘colluded and vied with each other’, they were by essence against revolutionary China and therefore there was the danger that they would launch large-scale wars of aggression against China. Even though the report was drafted right after the Zhenbao Island incident, it still emphasized that US imperialism was ‘the most rampant enemy of the people of the world’.⁷¹

Behind this radical anti-American discourse, though, was Mao’s deep-rooted worry that China should not ‘hit out in all directions’. Even at the Ninth Congress, when an imminent Soviet invasion had yet to become a primary concern for Mao, the CCP Chairman had commented: ‘Now we are isolated. Nobody is willing to touch us.’ Mao was unhappy with those ‘genuine revolutionary parties or organizations’ in other countries which, in his view, had depended on China in the past and now were failing to provide the CCP with real support in return. The Chairman said that China needed to reduce its aid to these parties, revealing that his enthusiasm for promoting a world revolution following the Chinese model had waned significantly.⁷²

With the perceived danger of a major Soviet invasion of China increasing, Mao began reevaluating the threats posed by the Soviet Union and the United States. In the past, Mao had regarded imperialism as the external origin of the emergence of revisionism in socialist countries, and he always believed that the United States was the primary enemy of China and revolutionary peoples in the whole world, placing the Soviet Union as an ‘accomplice’ of US imperialism. But in the summer of 1969 his perceptions went through some subtle yet crucial changes. In June 1969, when the Swedish ambassador to China asked Zhou Enlai about which superpower, the United States or the Soviet Union, presented the most serious threat to China and world peace, the Chinese Premier’s reply was remarkably ambiguous: ‘Now the situation is changing; we should wait and see.’ This indicated that the CCP leadership’s perception of the world situation was in the process of a profound transformation.

Beginning in late May and early June, Premier Zhou had repeatedly emphasized the necessity of reevaluating the international situation.⁷³ He had called upon the four marshals whom Mao in February had taxed with estimating the international situation – and who in the meantime had been sent to receive reeducation at factories – instructing them to return to the study of international issues. He also told the marshals that if he found their opinions mature enough he would report them to Mao as reference. However, it seemed that neither Mao nor Zhou had predetermined purposes while organizing

the four marshals to make the study. In fact, when Zhou instructed the four marshals to study the international situation, he did not point them in a specific direction. He asked them to meet two to three times every month to discuss basics, and as a result the discussions by the four marshals were often free talks without a fixed focus.⁷⁴ The 11 July report, submitted to Zhou Enlai, shows that the marshals had not been able to go beyond the dominant political discourse which held that the two superpowers were competing while at the same time collaborating with each other. However, the marshals' experience and political sense also led them to conclude that as the competition between the two superpowers was the primary aspect in the relations between them it was unlikely for them to collaborate with each other in a joint effort to launch a war against China.⁷⁵

In retrospect, China's changing policy towards the United States was initiated by Washington's changing attitude toward Beijing. But the four marshals' report, although failing to make a clear distinction between the United States and the Soviet Union, contributed to conditioning Mao and Zhou for such a development by arguing that it was unlikely for the two superpowers *together* to enter a major war with China.⁷⁶ In late July 1969 Beijing was closely studying the policy of the United States towards the East Asian region. On 21 July Washington declared that the United States would lift certain restrictions on conducting trade with or travelling to China. Five days later, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's head of state, conveyed a message from Mike Mansfield to Zhou Enlai, in which the American Senate majority leader said that he regretted that hostility between China and the United States had lasted for over 20 years, and that he hoped to visit China.⁷⁷ Late in July and early in August, President Richard Nixon, when travelling abroad, told Pakistani and Romanian leaders that China's continuous isolation was not good for Asia and the world.⁷⁸ On 8 August, William Rogers, the US Secretary of State, declared in Canberra that the United States was willing to open channels of communication with China.⁷⁹ In the meantime, information from the Pakistani government indicated to Beijing that Washington was willing to establish direct contacts with China. Under these circumstances, the four marshals' study group began to consider the possibility of using the Soviet-American contradiction to serve China's interests. Still, however, they concluded that the American gestures had been designed to use the Sino-Soviet clashes to put pressure on Moscow. They thus recommended that, in order not to let the Americans reap the benefit, China should *not* respond

to these American initiatives, but let them hang in the air and wait to see what further changes would happen.⁸⁰ There was no indication that the four marshals would propose contacting the Americans.

It was the new crisis after the Tielieketi incident that pushed the four marshals, as well as Mao and other Chinese leaders, to reconsider the necessity of playing the American card. At the end of August, while the war scare was on in Beijing, the four marshals began to emphasize in their discussions the need for allying with the less dangerous enemy in order to confront the more dangerous enemy. One historical case they cited to support their argument was that during China's Three Kingdom period in the third century, the Shu Kingdom, directed by the great strategist Zhuge Liang, had successfully carried a policy of allying itself with the Wu Kingdom to deal with the Wei. They also quoted the example that on the eve of the Second World War, for the purpose of best serving the Soviet Union's security interests, Stalin had signed a nonaggression pact with Hitler's Germany. Many officials at the Chinese Foreign Ministry generally shared these views. However, they and the marshals both had concerns over the serious political implications of Sino-American *rapprochement*, and especially its impact upon China's solidarity with Vietnam, which was then engaged in a life and death struggle against the United States. Therefore, when the four marshals were preparing their next major report, 'Our Views about the Current Situation', they were advised by the Foreign Ministry that they should only mention the possibility of utilizing Soviet-American contradictions in general terms, but that they should not touch upon specific strategies and tactics. The effect of the advice was to dampen the tone of the second report, which was presented to the Party's central leadership on 17 September. The marshals emphasized that in struggling against the United States and the Soviet Union, China should be firm in principle yet flexible in tactics. But in discussing the specific measures that could be taken they only proposed that strategically it would be beneficial for Beijing to consider resuming the Sino-American ambassadorial talks at an opportune time.⁸¹

According to the memoirs of Xiong Xianghui, Marshal Chen Yi once during this period said that if he had the opportunity he would personally propose to Zhou Enlai that Sino-American talks should be held at ministerial or even higher levels. Chen Yi believed that taking such an 'extraordinary measure' would allow China to utilize better the contradictions between the Soviet Union and the United States, thus creating a new basis on which to develop the relationship between China and the United States.⁸² However, there exists no evidence that Chen Yi ever did make such a report to Zhou Enlai.

The significance of the marshals' study group lies in putting on paper what others in Beijing at the time did not dare utter: that there was no necessary community of interest with regard to China between the two superpowers, and that China could make use of the new American signals. In their reports to the Party's central leadership, they made it clear – in August 1969, when it mattered most – that they found it necessary for China to play the American card. Although we do not know exactly how these suggestions influenced Mao's thinking, we do know that it was at the same time as the marshals presented their reports that the Chairman began to pay special attention to the strategic significance of a new relationship with the United States. Indeed, it was the perception of an extremely grave threat from the Soviet Union that pushed Mao to decide to break up all existing conceptual restrictions to pursue a Sino-American *rapprochement*.

In studying Mao's changing thinking about Sino-Soviet and Sino-American relations, many Chinese scholars have cited the memoir of Wu Xujun, Mao's head nurse at that time. According to Wu, Mao commented after reading a report: 'Now China and the Soviet Union are fighting a war against each other, [and] the Americans are given a good chance to develop new policies.' Wu asked: 'Do you mean that the Americans are happy about the split between China and the Soviet Union?' Mao said: 'Isn't it true that the American global strategy has been sending out signals? The Americans used to say that they were prepared to fight "two and a half wars" on a global scale. If now they can reduce it to "one and a half wars", how do you think they will feel?' Wu commented:

The split between China and the Soviet Union will greatly decrease the pressure from these two European and Asian powers on the United States, while at the same time reducing the possibility for them to join forces to attack the United States. This will inevitably change America's existing strategic theory, and eventually change its foreign policy and policy toward China. Isn't this what you mean? It seems that it is impossible for China, the Soviet Union and the United States to maintain equal distance between each other. Is that correct?

Mao replied: 'Sometimes the distance is equal, and sometimes not equal, and will change along with the changing situation. All of this will be determined by the practical interests of each side. We must not be blind towards reality.'⁸³

Some scholars have used Wu's recollections to argue that Mao intentionally designed the Zhenbao Island incident for the purpose of 'dropping a hint to the Americans'. I am not convinced by this argument. For one, the reliability and accuracy of Wu's recollections are questionable – it is hard to believe that Wu, a nurse, was invited to converse with Mao on diplomacy and global strategy. In addition, Wu does not tell us exactly when this conversation took place. Was it in March? Or August? On this depends the whole significance of Mao's comments, if Wu is to be believed.

If Mao did indeed have the above conversation with Wu, it is almost impossible that it could have taken place before July 1969, when the Chairman began receiving information that the United States was willing to improve relations with China. In the spring of 1969 Beijing simply did not register such information – indeed, it was believed that the new Nixon administration was committed to an extremely hostile policy toward China. Even during the period around the Zhenbao Island incident policymakers in Washington had continued to declare that China was a dangerous source of war in Asia and that the United States would go all out to deal with the 'China threat'.⁸⁴ Against this background it is unlikely that Mao could think of improving relations with the United States. It was after Washington demonstrated a willingness to improve relations with China in July, especially after the Tielieketi incident in August, that Mao found both opportunity *and* danger. Being threatened with war by Moscow and enticed by diplomatic overtures by Washington created a new environment in which Mao would change some of his fundamental views about China's external relations. Although at the bottom of his heart Mao was probably still resisting the direct pursuit of Sino-American *rapprochement*, the unprecedented war scare from August 1969 pushed him to alter Chinese foreign policy in unprecedented ways, and allowed him to go beyond previous ideological restrictions to adopt new policies.

Therefore, the key here is to understand *how* serious China's external situation in the autumn and winter of 1969 was perceived to be by top Chinese leaders. Even Zhou Enlai was forced to change his working routine completely. Since the early days of the People's Republic, the desk calendar in Zhou's office in Zhongnanhai (the location of the CCP's central headquarters) had continuously held records of the Premier's daily activities. However, from 20 October 1969 the calendar was left empty. For more than three months the Premier had to evacuate his office. Not until February 1970 would Zhou return to Zhongnanhai.

Throughout 1970, Mao continued to believe that the danger of a major Soviet invasion of China existed. He repeatedly called upon the Chinese people to remember the importance of relating everything to preparing for a coming war. When that year's national economic planning conference was held in Beijing from 15 February to 21 March, the question of how to deal with a 'large-scale sudden attack' by the Soviet Union was placed at the centre of the conference's agenda. Although by early 1970 the war threat as perceived by Mao was much less serious than that of the autumn and winter of 1969, the Chairman continued to warn the Chinese people to guard against the possibility of a Soviet invasion. It was against this background that Mao continued to pursue improvements in China's relations with the United States.

Already in December 1969 Chinese diplomats in Poland had received approval from Beijing to establish direct contacts with American diplomats.⁸⁵ On 8 January 1970 Beijing and Washington had announced that the Sino-American ambassadorial talks would be resumed. The Chinese diplomats told the Americans in Warsaw that China was willing to discuss improving Sino-American relations. When the Americans responded favourably, China gradually began opening its doors to the United States.⁸⁶ Eventually, less than three years after the Zhenbao incident, President Richard Nixon visited China in February 1972. A new page of the Cold War had unfolded.

Concluding Remarks

The Sino-Soviet border conflict of 1969 was a result of the increasing tension that had accumulated along China's northern borders during the Cultural Revolution years. Although Beijing's policymakers and military planners in 1969 had prepared to use armed 'counterattacks' to teach the Soviets a bitter lesson, they had not intended to enter into a major military conflict with Moscow. If Mao had any 'strategic intention' in pushing for a conflict with the Soviets it was not the 'far-sighted calculation' of using it to pave the way for a *rapprochement* with the United States. Rather, the Chairman's motives were mainly connected to his desire to change the tension created by an international conflict into a new source of continuous domestic mobilization. Indeed, coming at a time when Mao had attached overwhelming priority to bringing the Cultural Revolution to a successful conclusion, his most important foreign policy decisions have to be understood in that unique domestic context.

However, the process soon got out of hand and the tensions of the Sino-Soviet border conflict began to go far beyond Mao's expectations. After the Zhenbao incident Mao and his fellow CCP leaders suddenly found that they had to deal with the danger of a real 'great war'. This was a danger they had not perceived and by which they were profoundly shocked in the summer of 1969. The result was the unprecedented war scare prevailing in Beijing, which forced Mao and other top Chinese leaders to evacuate the Chinese capital. It was the war scare that – both in a strategic and a psychological sense – created the necessary conditions for the CCP leaders to reconsider the PRC's longstanding policy of confrontation with the United States. It was against this background that the reports by the four marshals served as important and definite first steps in the process that on the Chinese side would eventually lead to Sino-American *rapprochement*.

Nevertheless, if the Nixon administration had not taken the initiative in summer and autumn 1969 to improve relations with the PRC, the actual process of the *rapprochement* could have been much delayed. Beijing's leaders noticed the signs that Washington was relaxing its hostile attitude toward the PRC at the very moment when they were experiencing the worst war scare in the history of the People's Republic. It was the concomitance of these two developments – which to begin with were unrelated – that formed the stage on which the encounters of the early 1970s were to be played out.

Translated by Chen Jian

NOTES

1. On 2 and 15 March 1969 two military clashes occurred between Chinese and Soviet border garrisons at and around Zhenbao Island (Damanskii Island in Russian), causing a serious crisis between China and the Soviet Union.
2. Among recent scholarship on this issue, the most notable include former Chinese diplomat Xiong Xianghui's memoir, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao* [CCP History Materials], 42 (1992), pp.56–96; S. Goncharov and V. Usov, 'Introduction' to former Soviet minister to China A. Ielizavetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', *Problemy Dalnego Vostoka* [Far Eastern Affairs] 5 (1992), pp.39–63; Xu Yan, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969', *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao* [Party History Research Materials] 5 (1994), pp.2–13; Li Danhui, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: Origins and Consequences', *Dangdai zhongguoshi yanjiu* [Contemporary Chinese History Studies] 5 (1996), pp.39–50.
3. Despite the differences in their perspectives, both Chinese and Russian scholars, including Xiong Xianghui, Li Danhui, and Ielizavetin, generally reach the conclusion that the incident was intentionally triggered by Mao to woo the United States, and that the Sino-American *rapprochement* was a result of Mao's grand strategy.
4. On the Cultural Revolution, see Jin Chunming and Xi Xuan, *Wenhua dageming jianshi* [A Concise History of the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing: Zhonggong Dangshi, 1996); Wang Nianyi, *Dadongluan de niandai* [The Years of Great Chaos] (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin,

- 1991); Barbara Barnouin and Yu Changgen, *Ten Years of Turbulence: The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (London and New York: Graduate Institute of International Studies, Kegan Paul International, 1993).
5. Jin and Xi, *Wenhua dageming jianshi*, p.209.
 6. See, for example, Chen Jian and Yang Kuisong, 'Chinese Politics and the Collapse of the Sino-Soviet Alliance', in Odd Arne Westad (ed.), *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945–1963* (Washington, DC and Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Stanford University Press, 1998), pp.272–7.
 7. From 1960, when the relationship between China and the Soviet Union began to deteriorate, to October 1964, more than 1,000 incidents occurred along the Sino-Soviet border. From October 1964 to March 1969, the number of incidents increased by 150%, amounting to 4,189. See 'Statement by the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Sino-Soviet Border Issue', *Renmin ribao* [The People's Daily], 25 May 1969.
 8. Minute, 'Mao Zedong's Conversations with Sasaki, Kuroda, and other Middle-Leftist members of the Japanese Socialist Party', 10 July 1964. The original of this document is kept at the Chinese Central Archives in Beijing, hereafter cited as CCA.
 9. Minutes, 'Mao Zedong's Conversations with the Director of French Technology Exhibition in Beijing and the French Ambassador to China', 10 Sept. 1964, CCA.
 10. Minutes, 'Mao Zedong's Conversations with Choi Yong Kun', 7 Oct. 1964, CCA (Choi Yong Kun was North Korea's number two leader at that time); minutes, 'Mao Zedong's Conversations with Beqir Balluku', 9 Oct. 1964, CCA (Balluku was then Albania's Defence Minister). But then, with the escalation of the Vietnam War, Mao's central attention moved away from the increasing Soviet military presence on the Sino-Soviet border, and he began paying more attention to the threat from the United States and the combined threat from the United States and the Soviet Union. He said: 'We are now preparing for dealing with an American invasion. We are preparing [for the eventuality] that they may invade our east coast, landing on such places as Shanghai, Guangzhou, Qingdao, and Tianjin.' see minutes, 'Mao Zedong's Conversations with the Delegation of the Indonesian Communist Party', 4 July 1966, CCA.
 11. For discussions on the 'Third Front', see Barry Naughton, 'The Third Front: Defense Industrialization in the Chinese Interior', *The China Quarterly* 115 (Sept. 1988), pp.351–86.
 12. Ielizavetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', pp.41–2.
 13. Xu, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969', pp.4–5.
 14. *Ibid.*, pp.5–6.
 15. The People's Liberation Army Chief of Staff (comp.), *Zhenbaodao ziwei fanjii zuozhan jieshao cailiao* [Introduction Materials about the Combat for Self-Defense and Repulsing the Enemy at the Zhenbao Island], distributed to CCP top-level cadre in 1969.
 16. *Ibid.* (emphasis not original).
 17. *Ibid.*
 18. Xu, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969', p.5.
 19. *Ibid.*, pp.5–6; Li, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: Origins and Consequences', pp.46–7.
 20. PLA Chief of Staff (comp.), *Zhenbaodao ziwei fanjii zuozhan jieshao cailiao*; Yan, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969', p.6.
 21. Interview records with Chen Xilian, July 1995.
 22. *Ibid.*
 23. *Ibid.*; see also minute, 'Mao Zedong's Talks at a Meeting of the Cultural Revolution Group', 15 March 1969, CCA.
 24. Wang Yongqin, 'A Chronicle of Events in Sino-American–Soviet Relations', *Dangdai zhongguo shi yanjiu* 4 (1997), p.119.
 25. Minutes, 'Mao Zedong's Speech at the First Plenary Session of the CCP's Ninth Central Committee', 28 April 1969, Cold War International History Project [CWIHP] *Bulletin* 11, pp.163–5.
 26. Interview records with Chen Xilian, July 1995.
 27. Christian F. Ostermann, 'East German Documents on the Border Conflict, 1969', *CWIHP Bulletin* 6–7 (Winter 1995–96), pp.186–91.

28. Ielizavetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', p.62, n.12.
29. Arkady Shevchenko, *Yu Mosike Juelie* [Breaking with Moscow] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi, 1986), pp.194–5; Ostermann, 'East German Documents on the Border Conflict, 1969', p.187.
30. Interview records with Chen Xilian, July 1995; Ielizevetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', p.49.
31. Li Ping *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976* [A Chronicle of Zhou Enlai, 1949–1976] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1997), Vol.2, p.286.
32. See *Provda*, 29 March 1969.
33. *Renmin ribao*, 25 May 1969.
34. Shevchenko, *Yu Mosike Juelie*, pp.194–5.
35. Ielizavetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', p.51.
36. *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 15 Feb. 1992.
37. On 11 Sept. 1969 Zhou told Kosygin: 'At that time the relations between our two countries were most tense. Therefore, we could not receive you.' See Ielizavetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', p.52.
38. Xu, 'The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969', p.10.
39. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), p.183.
40. *Pravda*, 28 Aug. 1969.
41. Zheng Qian, 'The War Preparations in the Whole Country around the CCP's Ninth Congress', *Zhonggong dangshi ziliao* 41 (1992), p.211.
42. *Renmin ribao*, 2 June 1969.
43. Materials now available indicate that on 19 February 1969 Mao asked the four marshals to study international questions for the first time. After the Zhenbao Island incident, Mao mentioned this matter again, asking Chen Yi and others: 'How is your study coming along?'
44. During the CCP's Ninth Congress, Mao, while addressing a brief meeting of the Cultural Revolution Group, mentioned that he hoped the marshals would provide their advice on issues related to the international situation and national defence. However, when commenting on the marshals' activities at the First Plenary Session of the CCP's Ninth Central Committee on 28 April, Mao did not touch upon their study of the international situation. Instead, he asked them to go down to the factories to see whether or not political power there had been seized by true Marxists. *CWIHP Bulletin* 11 (1998), pp.163–5; Wang, 'A Chronicle of Events in Sino-American-Soviet Relations', pp.120–21.
45. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.301; Wang, 'A Chronicle of Events in Sino-American-Soviet Relations', p.121; Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.61–2.
46. *CWIHP Bulletin* 11, pp.166–8; Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.69–75.
47. Zheng, 'The War Preparations in the Whole Country around the CCP's Ninth Congress', pp.212–13.
48. *Ibid.*, p.210.
49. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.80–81.
50. The CCP Central Committee and the Administrative Group of the CMC, 'Report on Measures Needed to Be Taken to Enhance Air Defense', 27 Aug. 1969, CCA.
51. 'CCP Central Committee's Order for General Mobilization in Border Provinces and Regions', 28 Aug. 1969, *CWIHP Bulletin* 11 (1998), pp.168–9.
52. *Renmin ribao*, 5 Sept. 1969.
53. *Wang Youping riji* [Wang Youping's Diary, unpublished manuscript]. Wang Youping was Chinese ambassador to Hanoi at that time.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.81–2.
56. Jin *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1949–1976*, pp.1,083–4; Ielizavetin, 'Conversations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai at the Beijing Airport', p.58–62.
57. Jin *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1949–1976*, p.1,084.
58. Letter, Zhou Enlai to Alexei Kosygin, 18 Sept. 1969, *CWIHP Bulletin* 11 (1998), pp.171–2; see also Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, pp.321–2.
59. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.323.

60. Zheng, 'The War Preparations in the Whole Country around the CCP's Ninth Congress', p.219.
61. *Renmin ribao*, 17 Sept. 1969; see also Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, pp.321–3.
62. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.83–4.
63. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.329.
64. Wang, 'A Chronicle of Events in Sino-American–Soviet Relations', p.124.
65. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.325; Qian, 'The War Preparations in the Whole Country around the CCP's Ninth Congress', pp.219–20.
66. *Zhonggong dangshi dashi nianbiao* [A Chronicle of Important Events in CCP History] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi, 1987), p.327.
67. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, vol.3, p.329; Zheng, 'The War Preparations in the Whole Country around the CCP's Ninth Congress', pp.219–20.
68. Li Ke and Hao Shengzhang, *Wenhua dageming zhong de renmin jiefangjun* [The People's Liberation Army in the Cultural Revolution] (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi ziliao, 1989), pp.124–5.
69. Zheng, 'The War Preparations in the Whole Country around the CCP's Ninth Congress', pp.214–15.
70. 'CCP Central Committee's Order for General Mobilization in Border Provinces and Regions'; see also Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.317.
71. *Renmin ribao*, 28 April 1969.
72. Minute, 'Mao Zedong's Talks at the Meeting of The Central Cultural Revolution Group', 22 March 1969, CCA.
73. Zhou Enlai indicated that Mao believed it necessary for the marshals to continue the study of the international situation. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.301.
74. Zhou specifically defined the tasks for the marshals as: (1) to stay at a selected grassroots unit to help improve its work and gain firsthand experience for guiding the work in the whole country; (2) to discuss international questions; and (3) to assess issues related to national defence. The marshals would go to the grassroots units three days a week, read materials on international situation during the rest of the week, and discuss international issues three times a month. See Xianghui, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.60–61.
75. Report by Four Marshals – Chen Yi, Ye Jianyin, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian – to the CCP Central Committee, 'A Preliminary Evaluation of the War Situation' (excerpt), 11 July 1969, CWIHP *Bulletin* 11 (1998), pp.166–8.
76. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.70–71.
77. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.312.
78. Kissinger, *White House Years*, pp.180–81.
79. *Ibid.*, pp.181–2.
80. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.70–75.
81. Report by Four Chinese Marshals – Chen Yi, Ye Jianying, Nie Rongzhen, and Xu Xiangqian – to the CCP Central Committee, 'Our Views about the Current Situation', 17 Sept. 1969, CWIHP *Bulletin* 11, p.170.
82. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.86–7.
83. Wu Xujun, 'What Mao Zedong Had in His Mind', *Mian huai Mao Zedong* [Cherish the Memory of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian, 1993), pp.644–5.
84. Xiong, 'Prelude to the Sino-American Rapprochement', pp.58–9.
85. Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.338; Jin *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai zhuan, 1949–1976*, pp.1086–8.
86. *Renmin ribao*, 8 Jan. 1970; see also Li *et al.*, *Zhou Enlai nianpu, 1949–1976*, Vol.3, p.344.