

The Soviet Union and Asia, 1940s–1960s

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*Part 1. Asia in Stalin's postwar calculations*¹

At Yalta in February 1945, Stalin and Roosevelt agreed that the Soviet Union would join the war against Japan two to three months after Germany's capitulation. The price exacted by Stalin: bases in China and the Soviet occupation of Southern Sakhalin and the Kurile islands. The Soviet Union declared war on Japan on August 8, two days after the Hiroshima atomic bombing. Stalin opted for an early entry, fearing that the atomic bombardment of Japan would end the war before the Soviet army could make the required territorial gains in the Far East. Meeting very limited resistance, Soviet forces advanced rapidly in Korea, Manchuria and Inner Mongolia and occupied Sakhalin and the Kurile chain. Stalin hoped that the Soviets would also capture Hokkaido from Japan, but the planned landing was curbed after U.S. President Harry S. Truman registered strong disagreement with the idea. Even Stalin's appetites had their limits; he did not want to jeopardize U.S. recognition of gains he had already made.²

But Stalin's failure to occupy Hokkaido had undesirable consequences from the Soviet perspective of the postwar settlement in the Far East. Japan was placed under American military control and so effectively beyond Soviet reach. The Soviet representative on the Allied Control Council, General Kuz'ma Derevianko, was in no position to challenge Douglas MacArthur's authority in Japan. Stalin complained bitterly about the situation. This issue was discussed in his meetings with the U.S. Ambassador Averell Harriman in October 1945. "In point of fact the Soviet Union had become an American satellite in the Pacific. This was a role it could not accept. It was not being treated as an Ally. The Soviet Union would not be a satellite of the United States in the Far East or elsewhere." Stalin proposed that the Soviet Union leave Japan altogether rather than

¹ Some of the following paragraphs regarding Soviet policy towards Asia under Stalin heavily draw on Sergey Radchenko's "Stalin's Mental Mao," in Steven Casey and Jonathan Wright, eds., *Mental Maps in the Cold War Era* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011), pp. 9–31.

² On the hasty Soviet entry into the war, see Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005), p. 177. On Stalin's Hokkaido plans, see *ibid.*, pp. 267–274.

be there as a “piece of furniture.”³ Furniture or not, Stalin knew that he had misjudged U.S. postwar intentions. It did not occur to him overnight, but came as a gradual realization: The Americans were in Asia to stay, as they were to stay in Europe. That required a re-thinking of Soviet policy.

Much as Germany was Stalin’s obsession in Europe, so Japan had been the object of his fears in East Asia. Soviet relationships with other regional players were ordered to address the growing security problem posed by Japan’s relentless expansionism in the 1930s. The most reliable platform in military terms was the Mongolian People’s Republic, which had been in the Soviet orbit since 1921. In 1936 the Soviet Union stationed military forces in Mongolia, then still *de jure* Chinese territory, by a special agreement of specifically anti-Japanese purpose. These forces were put to good test in the summer of 1939 in the battle of Khalkhyn Gol (Nomonhan), a border engagement effectively won by the USSR.

At the same time, the Soviets arranged a treaty of non-aggression with Guomindang China in 1937, a major breakthrough considering the sorry state of relations between the Republic of China and the USSR since Chiang Kai-shek’s anti-communist purges a decade earlier. Before Stalin opted for a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, effectively abandoning China, Moscow had supplied the Guomindang with military equipment and low-interest loans, and Soviet pilots even engaged Japanese forces in the opening battles of the Sino-Japanese War.⁴ Importantly, Stalin forced the Chinese Communist Party, then in deep retreat in Yan’an to adopt the “united front” strategy with the Guomindang. Proper ideological justification was of course immediately offered, but it hardly obscured the obvious: Stalin wanted a strong Chinese government to resist Japanese encroachment, which would afford a measure of security to the USSR in the East as it prepared for war in the West.

It was in the context of Stalin’s efforts to build up a buffer against Japanese incursion that one must understand his machinations in Xinjiang in the 1930s and the 1940s. One may draw parallels here with the Great Game of the 19th century, and in its time Soviet activities at China’s northwestern fringe inspired accounts of exactly such an orientation (e.g., the writings of Peter Fleming).⁵ A Great Game was certainly underway, but Stalin’s

³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945*, vol. 6: *The British Commonwealth, the Far East* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 789–790.

⁴ See Yu Miaochun, *The Dragon’s War: Allied Operations and the Fate of China, 1937–1947* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), pp. 11–14, 202.

⁵ E.g., see Peter Fleming, *News from Tartary: A Journey from Peking to Kashmir* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1936).

designs in the heart of Central Asia were targeted against potential Japanese moves in the same area. In the late 1930s, Stalin counted on the loyalty of Sheng Shicai, a Manchu warlord nominally under ROC authority but really a law unto himself. Sheng received generous aid from the USSR, both in materiel and in specialists, and in turn pledged a pro-Soviet orientation and even asked to be made a secret member of the Soviet Communist Party during his visit to the USSR in 1938. That Sheng Shicai's credentials were untainted by Marxism-Leninism did not worry the Soviet dictator. Ideology was the last thing he worried about when it came to channeling Soviet influence in Asia.⁶

Stalin's manipulations backfired when, after the German invasion of the USSR, Sheng Shicai abandoned his ally and sanctioned anti-Soviet pogroms in Urumqi. Soviet influence in Xinjiang collapsed overnight.⁷ On the other hand, the conclusion of the Soviet-Japanese neutrality pact in April 1941 ushered in an era of relative peace for the USSR in the Far East, while the war with Germany forced Stalin to shelve his plans for extending Soviet influence in Central Asia and the Far East until better times.

Soviet involvement in Xinjiang intensified in 1944 and 1945, as the war in Europe drew to a close. As in Europe, Stalin's postwar designs in Asia were premised on the creation of as wide a buffer belt as possible. Xinjiang, by and large an underpopulated and unapproachable expanse of lifeless desert that was barred from China by a wall of towering mountains, was just the sort of buffer Stalin needed to protect the vulnerable underbelly of Soviet Central Asia. Now that his flirtations with Sheng Shicai had failed to pay off, Stalin played his trump card: the national question. In 1944 and 1945, the Soviet leader extended political and military support to the Uighurs and the Kazakhs, who had staged an anti-Chinese uprising in a bid to create an independent republic of Eastern Turkistan. By the summer of 1945, the rebels, aided by Soviet troops and with Soviet air support, captured much of Northern Xinjiang and the Altai district from the Chinese forces and threatened the capital city of Urumqi.

Then, in a remarkable volte-face, Stalin abruptly changed his plans for Northern China. The turning point was once again Yalta, where Roosevelt agreed to certain Soviet gains in China after the war with Japan – to be precise, a guarantee of the status quo for Outer Mongolia, Soviet control of the Manchurian railroad (which had been sold to Manchukuo in 1935), and a military presence on the Liaodong Peninsula. These

⁶ Andrei Ledovskii, *SSSR i Stalin v Sud'bakh Kitaia* (Moscow: Pamiatniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 1999), pp. 190–192.

⁷ V. A. Barmin, *Sin'tszian v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniakh, 1941-1949 gg.* (Barnaul: BGPU, 1999), pp. 24–44.

concessions were extremely important to Stalin. For one thing, Port Arthur, a warm-water port at the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula, which projected like a sabre into the Yellow Sea, was a *sine qua non* of any serious effort to defend Manchuria and Northern China from overseas incursion. The railroad was of course essential to supplying the Soviet forces at Port Arthur. It was in fact built by the Russians at the turn of the century precisely to supply Port Arthur, which had been a Russian military base until St. Petersburg's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Now Stalin had the unique opportunity to take back what Nicolas II had lost to Japan – and with U.S. acquiescence!

China was not a party to the Yalta discussions but had to abide by the results. In July and August 1945, the president of the Chinese Executive Yuan, Song Ziwen, held talks in Moscow with Stalin to conclude the Sino-Soviet treaty of alliance in order to set up a framework for the implementation of the Yalta decisions in China. The biggest obstacle to agreement was the status of Mongolia, for which Stalin demanded China's recognition as an independent state. In one conversation with Song, Stalin laid out the reasons: "Outer Mongolia is not wealth to you or us, but [its] geographical position is important ... Outer Mongolia is a question of defense. Siberian rail can be cut off from Outer Mongolia and the whole of Siberia is gone. Japan tried. We cannot station troops on Chinese territory. It is a graver question than Port Arthur."⁸

In view of China's resistance to the prospect of an independent Mongolia, Stalin put out a threat: The Mongols were nationalists, he said, and the sentiment for unification in Inner and Outer Mongolia was strong. If China resisted, it could be faced with a much stronger, bigger, independent Mongolia. It was not an idle threat. Stalin had encouraged pan-Mongolian sentiment, and the Prime Minister of the unrecognized republic, Khorloogiin Choibalsan, was full of anticipation of the coming war against Japan, which would have given him an opportunity to unite with the Inner Mongolian banners still under China's control. But Mongolia was only part of the problem. Chiang Kai-shek was no doubt aware of the extent of Soviet involvement in Xinjiang (even though Stalin feigned surprise every time he was asked about it). A Soviet invasion of Manchuria – then only a matter of time – was also fraught with undesirable consequences in the absence of a treaty regulating the Soviet presence. Most importantly, Chiang's nemesis, the Chinese Communist Party, enjoyed Soviet support, and that was a major problem for the Chinese President in light of the foreseeable collapse of the "united front."

⁸ "Conversation between T. V. Soong and Joseph Stalin" (July 2, 1945), Hoover Institution Archives, T.V. Soong papers, Box 68, Folder 6–9.

Chiang capitulated and surrendered Mongolia, but with conditions: no Soviet meddling in the affairs of Xinjiang, and no Soviet support for the Chinese Communist Party. Stalin agreed. A broad accord with the internationally recognized government of China, which guaranteed concrete Soviet gains and had implicit U.S. blessing through the Yalta agreements, outweighed any combination of ad hoc arrangements involving unreliable warlords, ethnic insurgencies or even self-proclaimed communists. In the following weeks, Stalin curbed Soviet support for the Xinjiang separatists and forced Choibalsan to abandon hopes for Great Mongolia at China's expense. Although the Soviet Union maintained a measure of support for the Chinese Communist Party, Stalin was in favor of a compromise between the Guomindang and the CCP, as well as being in favor of a coalition government in China. These would have left him with means to influence the Chinese internal political situation through the CCP.

The changing international situation forced Stalin again to rethink his policies in Asia, first and foremost in China. Some of these changes were the result of deepening Soviet-U.S. contradictions or, it may be said, the beginning of the polarization of Asia in line with the logic of the Cold War. Other changes, by contrast, stemmed from local contradictions, none as serious as the raging civil war in China. Stalin was slow to take sides unequivocally, not least because he did not believe in the inevitability of the CCP's victory against the larger, much better equipped armies of the Guomindang. But the Communists won, and by 1949 Stalin had to ponder once again the future Soviet role in China, the nature of the Soviet relationship with the CCP and the meaning of this relationship for the broader Soviet strategy in the Cold War.

Stalin was willing to make some allowances for the Chinese communists. For example, he readily offered to withdraw Soviet troops from Port Arthur, because the agreement he had wrung from Chiang Kai-shek in 1945 had not been "equitable." Stalin later found a pretext (the Korean War) to keep the troops where they were but, on the other hand, Mao was not particularly demanding on this point, arguing time and again that the Soviet military presence on the Liaodong Peninsula was in the interest of China's security. The Soviet leader was also willing to permit greater Chinese involvement in the running of the Manchurian Railroad; on the other hand, he forced the Chinese to grant the Soviets the right to transport troops in Manchuria in wartime (while resisting reciprocal requests from China).⁹

⁹ For a useful analysis, see Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China, 1945–1950: The Arduous Road to the Alliance* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004).

Stalin categorically endorsed the CCP's control of Xinjiang and, in the spirit of his ruthless ethnopolitics, even urged the Chinese leaders to increase the percentage of Han Chinese residents in the region to 30% from its then 5%, in order to strengthen border security and oppose British intrigues in Xinjiang: "They [the British] can activate [sic] the Muslims, including the Indian ones, to continue the civil war against the communists, which is undesirable, for there are large deposits of oil and cotton in Xinjiang, which China needs badly."¹⁰ In the same spirit, Stalin urged Mao to consolidate Chinese control in Tibet by building a road and bringing in troops to keep an eye on the hostile lamas who, as he put it, "are selling themselves to anyone – America, Britain, India – anyone who will pay the higher price." By contrast, Stalin rebuffed Mao's approaches on Mongolia (the Chinese leader sought reunification with the breakaway republic). He also obtained Mao's agreement to exclude third-country nationals from Xinjiang and Manchuria as a measure to guarantee Soviet influence in the buffer belt. Thus, there was a constant quality to Soviet geopolitical interests in the region, despite the remarkable political transformation of China and the conclusion of the formation of the Sino-Soviet bloc.

The third player in this security arrangement was of course the United States, and not Japan as in former times. The creation of the Sino-Soviet bloc was an act of polarization of international politics in the Far East; in Stalin's mind, the rationale for this bloc was intricately connected to his Cold War imperatives. China received certain responsibilities in this new arrangement – the task of leading the revolutionary struggle in Asia just as the Soviet Union led the world revolutionary struggle. In early 1949, the Soviets advised Mao Zedong to form a "bureau" of communist parties of East Asia, headed by the CCP, which would include, for a start, the Chinese, the Japanese and the Korean parties, but would later expand its membership. This was the kind of subordination that Stalin had in mind when he advised North Korea's Kim Il Sung to seek Mao Zedong's approval of Kim's plan to invade South Korea or told Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh to rely on Chinese support in Ho's national liberation struggle instead of asking for Soviet help.¹¹

Of course, this sort of attitude did not prevent Stalin from sanctioning Kim Il Sung's attack on South Korea without prior consultation with the Chinese or forcing an unrealistic revolutionary strategy on the Japanese Communist Party, nor did Stalin desist from advising national liberal movements, from India to Indonesia, about the conduct of

¹⁰ Sergey Radchenko and David Wolff, "To the Summit via Proxy Summits: New Evidence from Soviet and Chinese Archives on Mao's Long March to Moscow, 1949" *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 16 (2008), p. 171.

¹¹ On Vietnam, see Ilya Gaiduk's *Confronting Vietnam* (Washington D.C. & Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press and Stanford University Press, 2003).

their struggle. It is interesting that Stalin tended to downplay the significance of the Chinese experience for these Asian countries. Mao Zedong, Stalin liked to remind, only scored victory in the Chinese Civil War once his peasant armies abandoned the stronghold of Yan'an and moved to Manchuria, where they had a firm "rear," the friendly Soviet Union. India, for example, had no such rear to fall back upon, and was also much more industrially developed than China, so Stalin advised the Indian communists to combine guerilla warfare with workers' strikes in the cities.¹² The same advice was proffered to the Indonesian communists.¹³

In any case, revolution in India, if and when it was accomplished, would have to be a bourgeois-democratic revolution, an agrarian revolution and an anti-feudal revolution, but not a socialist revolution. "Questions of revolution are solved in stages," Stalin would say. "It is impermissible to mix up all the stages." The first task of national liberation movements, in Stalin's view, was anti-imperialism but, once again, not anti-Americanism. Thus, Stalin called on the Indonesian communists to create a "national front" "aimed at expelling the Dutch imperialists with their military forces, nationalization of their property and declaration of independence for Indonesia." In the meantime, the British and the Americans were to be left alone in Indonesia, so that enemies might be eliminated one by one. The same applied to India, except there Stalin singled out the British as the object of the "national front." He also advised the CPI to demand India's reunification with Pakistan and Ceylon, calling the division of India "a swindler's trick, organized by the British." Stalin did not demonstrate any awareness of the importance of religious and ethnic tensions on the subcontinent, whether because he had an ideological blind spot in this respect, or simply because did not know enough about the local conditions in South Asia.

By contrast, Stalin's interest in the Near East was more than academic. Here, not unlike the British and the Americans, Stalin set his sights on Iranian oil. In September and October 1944, Soviet representatives asked Tehran to grant the Soviet Union an oil concession in Northern Iran. Moscow's probes were rebuffed. Embittered, Stalin played the ethnic card. After all, northern Iran was home to a large population of Azeris, who shared ethnic and linguistic ties with Soviet Azerbaijan and resented Tehran's ruthless assimilation policies. As in the case of Xinjiang, by supplying weapons, training and economic aid to ethnic insurgents in Iran, Stalin intended to establish an independent state

¹² "Conversation between Joseph Stalin and a CPI delegation" (February 9, 1951). RGASPI: fond 558, opis' 11, delo 310, listy 71–85. The author would like to thank David Wolff for sharing this document.

¹³ "Joseph Stalin's draft letter to Aidit" (January 1951). RGASPI: fond 558, opis' 11, delo 313, listy 45–50.

of Azerbaijan with a clear pro-Soviet orientation, possibly (actually, quite likely) followed by its accession to the Soviet Union. Stalin's trump card in 1945 was the presence of Soviet troops in northern Iran, deployed there several years earlier by wartime agreement with the Allies.¹⁴

Under close Soviet supervision, the Azerbaijani Democratic Party (ADP) captured power in northern Iran in December 1945. It is interesting, though by no means surprising, that Stalin's support for an ethnic-based but certainly not Marxist-Leninist ADP took precedence over Soviet investments in the Marxist-Leninist-oriented, pan-Iranian People's Party (Tudeh), whose leadership complained to the Soviets of being sidelined. To consolidate his gains in northern Iran, Stalin resisted a military pullout, triggering a showdown with the West. In March 1946, facing the prospect of a confrontation with his erstwhile allies, the Soviet leader suddenly reversed course and ordered a full withdrawal (completed in May 1946). In return Stalin obtained Tehran's promise of oil rights (never realized). Robbed of Moscow's support, the Azeri insurgency collapsed in December 1946. Stalin's Great Game of oil geopolitics was a complete fiasco and one of the first serious setbacks to Soviet expansionism in the early Cold War.

The other major setback was Turkey. Here, the forbidden fruit was the Turkish straits, connecting the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Stalin had been dissatisfied with the 1936 Montreux Convention, which granted Turkey the right to control the strategic passageway. After the conclusion of the Soviet-Nazi Non-aggression Pact he unsuccessfully attempted to revise the convention with Hitler's acquiescence, citing historical grievances: "All events from the Crimean war of the last century to the landing of foreign forces in Crimea and Odessa in 1918 and 1919 speak to the fact that the security of the Black Sea coastal regions of the USSR cannot be provided for without resolving the straits question."¹⁵ Stalin returned to the same question during the postwar negotiations with the allies and put pressure on the Turks by issuing a set of territorial demands that would have seen large sections of Eastern Turkey sliced off and "returned" to the Soviet republics of Armenia and Georgia. Molotov recalled years later: "In his last years Stalin became a little bit arrogant and in foreign policy I had to demand what Miliukov used to demand – the Dardanelles! Stalin: 'Come on, push! As joint ownership.' I told him: 'They

¹⁴ For the best account to date of Stalin's policies in Iran, see Dzhamil Gasanly, *SSSR-Iran: Azerbaidzhanskii krizis i nachalo kholodnoi voiny, 1941–1946* (Moscow: Geroi Otechestva, 2006).

¹⁵ V. P. Naumov, ed., *1941 god*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratii, 1998), p. 374.

won't give them.' – 'But you must demand!' ”¹⁶ Stalin's probes predictably facilitated Turkey's close alignment with the West. Here, as in Iran, Stalin overplayed his hand.

Thus it is not fair to say that Stalin was oblivious to the situation in Asia, or that he simply did not care about national liberation movements in the colonial and semi-colonial world, a charge later leveled by Nikita Khrushchev. On the other hand, it is undeniable that, with the exception of Iran, China, Mongolia and North Korea – all in the immediate proximity of the USSR – Stalin was not interested in offering practical aid to these national liberation struggles. His interest in what would later be called the “third world” was a purely academic one, an exercise in theoretical analysis. For Stalin, the Cold War was not the global phenomenon it would later become for Khrushchev, nor was it a struggle for the liberation of the world from the double yoke of colonialism and American imperialism. It was primarily an issue of maintaining Soviet security interests in the face of U.S. pressure, and these interests lay much closer to home than India or Indonesia did, let alone Africa or Latin America.

Part 2. Khrushchev and the challenge of decolonization

Stalin's death in March 1953 offers a convenient turning point in my analysis of the Soviet Union's policy in Asia. In one sense, any claim of a thick dividing line between Stalin and Khrushchev is bound to be somewhat artificial and overly Kremlin-centered. It is important to keep in mind the changes in the international situation, in particular, the impact of decolonization, which happened exceptionally quickly in ways few could have foreseen, including Stalin who, for all his interest in the colonial struggles in Asia, did not think that the end of colonial empires was so near. But by the mid-1950s, with decolonization in full swing, Moscow reached out to Asia, Africa and Latin America far more ambitiously than Stalin considered, much less attempted.

To be sure, there was not much policy planning behind Khrushchev's dash for the “third world,” to use the controversial but useful term. It began largely as a sideshow in the Soviet power struggle, with Khrushchev seeking to build his credentials in foreign policy and so undermine his rivals in succession. Stalin's henchman Lavrentii Beria did much the same in the brief interregnum (before he was purged and shot), but he hoped to play the East German card to strengthen his political authority. The difficulty for both Beria and Khrushchev was that foreign policy had been monopolized by Stalin's former commissar for foreign affairs Viacheslav Molotov, and it was difficult for either of them to score a

¹⁶ Feliks Chuev, *140 besed s Molotovym* (Moscow: Terra-Terra, 1991), p. 103.

major success in relations with the U.S. or Western Europe while keeping Molotov out of the picture. Khrushchev could do this only once he had established himself more firmly in authority, i.e. not until 1956. But Molotov did not keep his finger in every pie. With the “third world” being largely off Molotov’s political radar, there was a clear opportunity for Khrushchev to exploit.¹⁷

It is difficult to judge when exactly Khrushchev “connected the dots,” but his outlook was likely influenced by Josep Broz Tito, with whom Khrushchev had met in May 1955 to mend fences.¹⁸ Tito by this time had visited both India and Burma, being in this respect a trailblazer for the “socialist camp.” Tito carefully cultivated a relationship of “non-alignment” with both Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Egypt’s Abdul Gamal Nasser, and advised Khrushchev to take them seriously.¹⁹ Khrushchev was initially cautious, even in the face of Egypt’s pleas for weapons, for despite Nasser’s anti-imperialist rhetoric, the Soviet leader was not convinced that the Egyptians, whose Marxist credentials were non-existent (Nasser was, on the whole, anti-communist in his domestic policies), could really prove worthwhile allies or at least fellow travelers. But, with the Yugoslav example as a point of reference, Khrushchev at last agreed to an arms deal with Egypt (carried out through Czechoslovakia), and rendered Nasser much-needed economic aid. The debacle of Anglo-French intervention against Egypt in the Suez crisis in the autumn of 1956 emboldened the Soviet leader and encouraged deeper Soviet involvement in national liberation struggles.

In November and December 1955, Khrushchev, together with Nikolai Bulganin, went on a tour of India, Burma and Afghanistan. These were all notable “firsts” for the Soviet leadership, a major geopolitical coup, given the meager Soviet contacts with South Asia until that time. Khrushchev left comic recollections of the trip: “Our knowledge of India was, to be honest, not only superficial, but simply primitive. I personally got a part of my knowledge about India – don’t laugh – from the aria of the Indian guest in the opera ‘Sadko’ by Rimski-Korsakov: ‘Innumerable are the diamonds in the stone caves.’”²⁰ Khrushchev knew even less about Burma and Afghanistan. The trip was an eye-opening

¹⁷ See an interesting discussion of this subject in Nikita Khrushchev, *Vremia, Liudi, Vlast'*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Moskovskie Novosti, 1999), p. 319.

¹⁸ “Memoranda of conversations between government delegations of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia and the USSR” (May 27–28, 1955), in V. G. Titov and B. Stefanovich, eds., *Sovetsko-Yugoslavskie otnosheniia, 1945–1956 gg.* (Novosibirsk: Alfa-porte, 2010), p. 641.

¹⁹ For an excellent analysis of this episode, see Jovan Cavoski, “Marshal and the Sphinx: Tito, Nasser and the Emergence of Strategy of Non-alignment in the Middle East, 1953–56,” paper presented at a conference on the Nexus Years of the Cold War, Montreal, October 2009.

²⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, *Vremia, Liudi, Vlast'*, vol. 3, p. 317.

experience for him, and it also signaled an important shift in Soviet geopolitical priorities. This was especially the case with India, where an excellent personal relationship struck up between Khrushchev and Indian Premier Nehru soon developed into a full-fledged Soviet effort to keep India “out of the arms of the imperialists,” as the Soviet leader liked to say.²¹ This noble effort proved fairly expensive for Soviet coffers.

As in the case of India, Khrushchev claimed that he discovered Indonesia for the Soviet Union. This was true in at least one respect: Unlike Stalin, who offered free advice, Khrushchev was willing to sell weapons to Indonesia, which had at last won independence from the Dutch in 1949. These weapons sales included fairly sophisticated equipment, such as submarines and surface ships that had been decommissioned in the USSR as a part of Khrushchev’s efforts to downsize the Soviet fleet. Helped by this generous aid and Khrushchev’s unswerving political support for Indonesia, Moscow’s relations with Djakarta prospered in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. This was made especially clear with the Soviet backing of Indonesia’s conflict with the Dutch in West Irian, and with the British in Malaysia, although in the latter case, Moscow acted with greater reserve and circumspection. Khrushchev was very proud of the Soviet involvement in Indonesia, recounting on many occasions how he had sent Soviet officers to man the submarines and the airplanes in the Indonesian confrontation with the Dutch. Reportedly, as many as 500 Soviet officers took part in the hostilities.²²

It is instructive that neither Egypt nor India, neither Burma nor especially Indonesia, and least of all Afghanistan, expressed great interest in adopting socialist ideas, but that did not dissuade Khrushchev from trying to win them over to the Soviet side in the Cold War and offer considerable economic and military support to this end. Indeed, Khrushchev’s attention to these faraway countries was far greater than to the Soviet Union’s socialist allies in the “third world,” meaning, in particular, Mongolia, North Korea and North Vietnam (and excepting China for reasons detailed below). Consider, for example, the following statistic: During his years in power, Khrushchev visited Burma twice but did not manage a single visit to Mongolia, North Korea or North Vietnam. In addition, compared to his successors in power, he was fairly stingy when it came to Soviet aid to these struggling socialist regimes. Gaiduk has written of Khrushchev’s lack of

²¹ “Note by the Prime Minister on the visit of the Soviet leaders to India in November–December, 1955,” with memoranda of conversations. Nehru Memorial Library and Museum: S. Dutt Papers, Subject File No. 7. The author is grateful to David Wolff for these documents.

²² Mikoyan quoted this number to Tsendenbal on July 21, 1964. Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party Archive: fond 4, dans 28, kh/ n 309, khuu. 121–135.

interest in Vietnam, but the same lack of interest also colored his relations with Ulaanbaatar and Pyongyang.

For example, in August 1957, after North Korea requested new credits in connection with the first five-year plan, Khrushchev demurred. “Tell Kim Il Sung,” he said at a Politburo meeting that was discussing this question, “that he should pay back [old] credits. Don’t give him new ones. Let’s move to a formula: keep an account of friendship.”²³ To be fair to Khrushchev, the North Koreans asked for new credits and gratis aid with predictable regularity, which was also characteristic of Mongolia’s relations with the USSR. Without going into great detail here, suffice it to illustrate Khrushchev’s attitude to these entreaties by the following anecdote. D. Molomjamts, a long-time Mongolian policy maker, recalled how, accompanying Yumjaagiin Tsendenbal to Moscow one time, he witnessed an interesting scene: When Tsendenbal entered Khrushchev’s office, the Soviet leader turned out his empty pockets with the words: “Look, I have nothing else to give – you can take my watch!”²⁴ Considering Stalin’s geopolitical preoccupation with Mongolia and North Korea, Khrushchev’s slight is quite remarkable. In the case of Pyongyang and Hanoi, the USSR soon paid the price in the form of damaged relations; Mongolia stood fast by the USSR.

Why was Khrushchev so keen on developing relations with the likes of Rangoon and Djakarta while neglecting Soviet friends just across the border? The logic here was slightly similar to that of Khrushchev’s domestic agricultural campaign called the “Virgin Lands.” In that campaign, he came up with the bright idea of dramatically increasing Soviet grain output by planting wheat in the unplowed vastness of Kazakhstan – in other words, increase quantity rather than quality. Enormous efforts were expended to this end, and there were even short-term boosts in harvests; in the long term, however, the campaign turned out to be a disaster with terrible environmental consequences for Kazakhstan. In foreign policy, Khrushchev spent heavily on “virgin” commitments in the “third world,” alas, with equally problematic results. For the most part, Soviet gains in the “third world” did not last, as the emerging states in Asia and Africa played the Soviets against the Americans in the Cold War context, expecting to benefit from this competition. Indeed, it was soon a three-way competition, with China joining in.

The decolonizing world was an unknown quantity to Khrushchev – in many cases *literally* unknown, as he was admittedly clueless about the domestic situation in these countries, or even basic facts of their geography or history. But he had a sense that what was happening in Egypt or Burma was of immediate relevance to the USSR as the flag-

²³ A. Fursenko, ed., *Prezidium TsK KPSS, 1954–1964* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003), p. 263.

²⁴ Author’s interview with D. Molomjamts.

carrier of the anti-imperialist revolution. Khrushchev was not exactly a theorist of Marxism-Leninism, but he knew enough of it to link the national liberation movements to the broader “struggle against imperialism” and so felt, intuitively more than through thorough investigation, that the Soviet Union had natural allies among the poor and destitute nations of Asia, Africa and Latin America. There was thus no real strategy to Khrushchev’s engagement with the “third world” and no real consistency. It was very much a touch-and-go undertaking, fairly opportunistic in important ways, but also rewarding if and when Khrushchev managed to ride the crest of history. In the 1950s, he was very much on top of this crest, not only in Asia and Africa but, by sheer luck, in Latin America, where he reaped the blessings of the Cuban revolution, which had never been imagined by the Soviet leadership. He felt good about it and made far-reaching commitments at Soviet expense, in the name of ideological solidarity with anti-imperialism. As Khrushchev put it, defending his record in the “third world” in rather unusual terms, “we are true Christians, so to speak, who obey Christ’s commandments.”²⁵

Unlike Khrushchev’s opportunistic gamble in the “third world,” his policy towards the People’s Republic of China logically followed from the direction of Sino-Soviet relations in Stalin’s final years. Yet even here Khrushchev infused the relationship with a flamboyant enthusiasm never observed in Stalin. There is no doubt that for Khrushchev the Sino-Soviet alliance was the single most important dimension of foreign relations of the “socialist commonwealth.” Soviet aid to the PRC increased dramatically with Stalin’s passing. This aid not only included credits (such as a new 520-million-ruble loan) but also blueprints for entire factories and a dispatch of Soviet instructors and experts to China.²⁶ In return, Chinese scientists and engineers were trained in the USSR and were permitted access to the most sensitive data and technologies, not least being those of the Soviet nuclear project. This close economic and scientific-cultural cooperation was matched by closely coordinated foreign policies. The highlight in this respect was Sino-Soviet cooperation during the Geneva conference on Indochina in 1954, high-level consultations on Poland and Hungary in 1956 and joint action to restrain Kim Il Sung in North Korea during the same year.

The Sino-Soviet alliance was not without submerged tensions even at the best of times; however, overall the relationship had a positive dynamic, and for Khrushchev it

²⁵ Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy* (Washington D. C. & Stanford, CA: Woodrow Wilson Center and Stanford UP, 2009), p. 96.

²⁶ For a sample list of enterprises built with the Soviet aid see RGANI: fond 5, opis' 30, delo 164, listy 96–107. These enterprises were of a very wide range: from steel plants to car and tractor factories.

went quite well with Soviet policy in the decolonizing world. Until the early 1960s, China was not seen as a competitor but as a partner. PRC diplomacy, especially the inauguration of the Pancha Shilla principles and Zhou Enlai's performance at the Bandung Conference, was seen as basically compatible with the thrust of Khrushchev's policy towards post-colonial countries. There was an exchange of opinions between the Chinese and the Soviets before and after Bandung, which seemed to indicate Soviet satisfaction with Beijing's demonstrated ability "to speak with the Americans in a language that no Chinese government had ever dared to use" and praise for PRC international policies, which "embolden the governments of India, Burma and Indonesia in their relations with the imperialist countries."²⁷ For the time-being, one could speak of a joint Sino-Soviet policy towards the developing world.

Khrushchev misjudged the situation. The Sino-Soviet alliance fell apart. It seems fairly clear from the documentary record that both sides were to blame and, just as Mao Zedong was unhappy with the subordinate role he had to content himself with in the relationship, so was Khrushchev unwilling to recognize China as a great power in its own right, and certainly not as a power of equal rank with the USSR.²⁸ The Sino-Soviet split, however, had far-reaching consequences for Chinese and Soviet policies towards the "third world," an impact we are now only beginning to understand. To make this long and very complicated story short, it was Beijing that first challenged Soviet policy towards the "third world," which in this reading refers not only to the post-colonial countries but also to Cuba and the socialist states of Asia. Mao Zedong not only admired the great revolutionary potential of what he variously called the "intermediate zone" and the "third world," but also felt that China was well placed to out-compete the Soviet Union in the struggle for recognition as the true carrier of the anti-imperialist banner.²⁹

Compared to the Soviet Union, China was certainly poor and backward in material terms. Also, unlike the Soviet Union, it had a prolonged experience of being "victimized" by the West, including by tsarist Russia. Furthermore, Mao Zedong's appeals for a "revolutionary struggle" and his bitter ridicule of Khrushchev's notions of peaceful coexistence and peaceful competition with the West, an ideological byproduct of the

²⁷ Conversation between Pavel Iudin and Mao Zedong (March 30, 1955), AVPRF: fond 0100, opis' 48, papka 393, delo 9, list 74.

²⁸ I addressed some of these issues in a recent book, *Two Suns in the Heavens*.

²⁹ For the best treatment to date, see Chen Jian, "China and the Bandung Conference: Changing Perceptions and Representations" in See Seng Tan and Amitav Acharya, eds., *Bandung Revisited: The Legacy of the 1955 Asian-African Conference for International Order* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008), pp. 132–159.

nuclear age, fell on ripe soil in places where anti-colonial struggle had just ended or was still under way. The Soviet leadership was not entirely oblivious to the Chinese challenge in the “third world,” but it did not register in a major way until after the Cuban Missile Crisis. The events in Cuba in October 1962 offered a great opportunity for the Chinese to criticize Moscow’s capitulation in the face of U.S. threats. Khrushchev was badly embarrassed by the whole affair, but he was particularly worried by the fallout from the Chinese propaganda. In his public and private speeches in 1963 and 1964, he repeatedly brought up the problem of the Chinese challenge in the “third world” and, needless to say, defended his record, usually by pointing to the actual Soviet involvement in the liberation struggles in Indonesia and the Middle East – that is, combating imperialism by deeds not by words.

Fortunately for Khrushchev, Fidel Castro, for all his ill feelings towards Moscow following the Soviet withdrawal of missiles and bombers, was not inclined to side unequivocally with China in the Sino-Soviet split. He was undoubtedly persuaded by the generous Soviet aid extended to Cuba when Castro visited Moscow in the late spring of 1963. The situation in North Korea and North Vietnam, by contrast, deteriorated to a significant extent as both countries joined China in the criticism of Soviet “revisionism.” Both were actively courted by China with extensive economic and military aid, and were also unhappy with years of neglect on the part of Khrushchev. Another major Soviet setback was the “loss” of the Indonesian Communist Party to Chinese influence. Before too long, there was an uninterrupted flow of worrying reports from Soviet posts in Asia, Africa and Latin America, warning of the Chinese efforts to “subvert” Soviet influence. The message was driven home by the big guns of the Chinese propaganda machine in late 1963 and early 1964, including an especially damaging editorial in the *Renmin Ribao* called “Apologists of Neo-Colonialism,” which condemned Moscow for “sid[ing] with the imperialists and colonialists and repudiat[ing] and oppos[ing] the national liberation movement in every possible way.”³⁰

The onslaught of the Chinese propaganda and Beijing’s efforts to jump-start the Afro-Asian solidarity movement exclusive of the Soviet Union were interpreted in the Kremlin as an attempt to build a following in the “third world” on essentially a racial basis. To be fair, it was precisely what Mao Zedong intended to do, although he clearly underestimated the viability of this approach even among China’s neighbors, to say nothing of faraway destinations in Africa and Latin America. Khrushchev bent over backwards to

³⁰ *The Polemic on the general line of the international communist movement* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), p. 188.

exploit this “un-Marxist” philosophy, both in the Soviet counter-propaganda and, with greater clarity and passion, in his conversations with the leaders of the “third world.” As he told Sukarno on September 29, 1964: “We are people of the white race, but we have come to the aid of the yellow race, because we are not guided by the racist policy, not by the policy of the racists, but we are guided by the reasonable progressive national policy of Lenin. ... What else is needed? We do more than those who blabber about the struggle with imperialism. We blabber less, but do more. .. Think about the other policy, which you are being sold and which is being praised highly. Is it as parallel to your interests as ours is? Perhaps not. I am only saying this because none of this will be published. I did not tell you anything, and you did not hear anything.”³¹

In the mid- to late-1960s, the Sino-Soviet competition for the “third world” (and for the loyalties of the developing countries already in the socialist camp) turned decisively in the Soviet favor. This outcome resulted from two developments: China’s progressive radicalization during the Cultural Revolution and a more consistent policy on the part of Soviet post-Khrushchev leadership to provide aid and expertise to needy clients. This was most effectively demonstrated during the Vietnam War: By 1968, Hanoi’s former leanings in the Chinese direction had given way to a more nuanced policy of equidistance which, however, was shortly abandoned for closer alliance with the USSR. Sino-Vietnamese competition for hegemony in Indochina played a key role in this reorientation. On the other hand, the Soviet leadership reversed Khrushchev’s record by providing better equipment and more generous credits to North Vietnam from 1965, which China could not match. Similar circumstances defined Soviet relations with clients in the Middle East, especially after the debacle of the 1967 war, when Moscow acted promptly to rebuild the military potential of the defeated Arabs. Soviet relations with India were actually helped by the Sino-Soviet split, although the Kremlin attempted to diversify its ties in South Asia by posing as a mediator in the Indo-Pakistani conflict of the mid-1960s. And of course, Indonesia was “lost” to both Moscow and Beijing after the rightist coup and the massacre of the communists in September 1965. But this was more of a Chinese than a Soviet loss.

Conclusion

This wide-ranging review of Soviet foreign policy towards the non-Western world from the 1940s to the 1960s reveals important changes but also certain continuities in Moscow’s

³¹ Conversation between Nikita Khrushchev and Sukarno (September 29, 1964), in *Nikita Khrushchev. 1964. Stenogrammy Plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi Fond Demokratsiia, 2007), pp. 151–153.

attitudes. For Stalin, geopolitics determined policy priorities. For him, countries bordering the USSR were far more important than Western colonies like India or Indonesia. Under Stalin, the Soviet Union could provide arms and train insurgents in Xinjiang but not in Kalimantan, and for good reason. After all, the USSR of the 1940s was a regional power, although a large one. It was only in the 1950s that it became a global power. This change happened not so much because of an upgrade of Soviet capabilities (although having nuclear missiles helped), but primarily as a result of changing perceptions on the part of the Soviet leadership. Khrushchev, especially impressed by what seemed like the solid bedrock of the Sino-Soviet alliance, was nowhere as paranoid as Stalin had been about Soviet security in Asia. Where Stalin had been on the defensive, Khrushchev could go on the offensive and, alongside his cultivation of the Sino-Soviet relationship, develop unlikely ties with anti-imperialist countries halfway around the globe.

To these nations – the likes of Egypt, India, Burma and Indonesia – all of which have been briefly discussed, Khrushchev could offer his creed of socialist anti-imperialism. Although it was vaguely appealing to as diverse a set of characters as Nasser, Nehru, U Nu and Sukarno, there is no doubt that in ideological terms the concept of non-alignment championed by Tito struck a more agreeable chord. But these leaders, and even more so other leaders in Asia and Africa who often hailed the Soviet banners for entirely opportunistic reasons, were willing to pay lip service to some of the ideas peddled by Khrushchev, if this made them eligible for Soviet credits or military aid. Nevertheless, there was a real sense in Moscow from the 1950s and through the end of the Cold War, that the future of socialism hinged on the outcome of these battles for hearts and minds in the “third world,” and Moscow spent lavishly to assure a favorable outcome.

The train of events, which brought the Soviets from the modest and reasonable border politics of the 1940s to bizarre commitments in Asia, Africa and Latin America, cannot be mapped out with precision, and it was certainly not underpinned by any blueprint. It started as Khrushchev’s intuitive dash for the unknown riches of South Asia but became regularized in part in response to the development of the Sino-Soviet split (when suddenly it started to matter whether, let’s say, the Queen of Burundi felt pro-Chinese or pro-Soviet sentiments), and in part because of a change-over of leadership in the Kremlin and the emergence of the more consistent and more ideologically coherent line of Brezhnev and Kosygin.³² Before long, the Soviets felt bound to offer aid and support to any and every developing regime in the “third world” that was willing to take such aid. Doing anything

³² On the Queen of Burundi, see Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens*, p. 83.

less than this amounted to a neglect of “proletarian internationalism.” Doing precisely this led, by the 1980s, to what Gorbachev’s advisers Georgii Shakhnazarov and Anatolii Cherniaev aptly described as the “inertia of proletarian internationalism.”³³

³³ See Anatolii Cherniaev, *Shest' let s Gorbachevym: Po dnevnikovym zapisiam* (Moscow: Progress-Kul'tura, 1993).