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## 1969: RUSSIA AND CHINA – THE WAR THAT DID NOT HAPPEN

All is now quiet on the eastern front between Russia and China. But just over 40 years ago there were predictions of a coming war between Russia and China.

On March 2 1969 there was a violent confrontation on the Ussuri River, where dozens of Russian border guards were killed by Chinese soldiers. The Russians retaliated on March 15 with an artillery barrage that left the landscape on the Chinese side of the border looking like the Moon's surface. Veteran American journalist Harrison Salisbury wrote a best-seller that year called "The Coming War Between Russia and China".

Four decades later the relations are greatly improved and a war now seems most unlikely. There is a still scope for accidental violence but overall the situation is much better. There is one less war for the world to worry about.

The border is the world's longest border. For many decades it was also the world's most militarized. It was three times the length of Europe's "Iron Curtain". Four decades ago, the confrontation was absorbing about 25 per cent of each country's military effort.

Geography worked against Russia. The total length of the Russian empire was 10 time zones – almost half way across the globe. The Russians had felt vulnerable about their Asian rear end. Moscow is closer to New York than it is to Vladivostock.

The military confrontation was no sideshow. Although it cost three times as much to maintain a military division there than it did in eastern Europe, the Russian Asian units received the latest equipment, often before it reached the units in eastern Europe.

The cities and military forces in the area were dependent on the Trans-Siberian Railway, their main surface link with the rest of Russia, for food and military supplies. For 1,500 miles the railway ran 10 to 15 miles from the Chinese border, Military movements down the line could have been disrupted by artillery fire. Worse still, the lines could have been cut, isolating the Russian Far East and leaving it at the mercy of a Chinese invasion.

Russia was also militarily over-extended. It not only had to worry about its Asian rear end but it was also locked into an expensive nuclear arms race with the United States and it had forces deployed throughout eastern Europe to remind those countries that they were supposed to allies of Moscow.

Although Russia and China were then supposed to be Communist allies, in fact there were three major long-term divisions between them. First, deep in the Russia psyche is the fear of another Asian invasion. In 1221, the Mongol prince Temujin (1162-1227), better known as Genghis Khan (“Universal Ruler”) led his conquering army west out of central Asia. The empire stretched from the Pacific to the Black Sea.

Russia was invaded in 1237 by one branch of the army (other branches went into the Middle East). The Russians remained troubled by the size of China’s population compared with its own (about a quarter of China’s).

Second, Russia and China competed for territory in Asia. By the 1630s, Russia had managed to cross the whole of northern Asia through Siberia. The first treaty ever concluded between China and a European country was the 1689 treaty of Nerchinsk that demarcated the border between China and Russia. But as the Chinese empire gradually crumpled in the 19th century, so Russia saw an opportunity to grab additional territory. Russia revoked the 1689 treaty and claimed the Chinese land as its own.

The Trans-Siberian Railway to the Pacific, which gave Russia control over northern Manchuria and made it a great power in the East, was begun in 1891 and completed in 1903. It spurred industrialization, enabled eastward Russian migration and consolidated Russia’s hold on eastern Siberia.

The Chinese resented the Russian land grabs. Britain handed Hong Kong back to China in 1997 and Portugal handed Macao back in 1999. The only Chinese territory still in foreign hands is that taken by the Russian Czars.

Finally, although Russia and China were both communist allies in 1969, they were not good friends. Western politicians and commentators in the Cold War exaggerated the extent of the “unified Red threat” from Berlin to Beijing.

Russia saw itself as the main communist country. Mao Zedong did not accept that claim. He largely ignored the advice of Stalin on how to run his country. He refused Stalin’s request to work with the Chinese Nationalists to defeat the Japanese in World War II. He was also critical in 1959 when Stalin’s successor Nikita Krushchev tried to improve relations with the United States.

The Russians by contrast regard Mao as upstart with radical ideas, who was not afraid of a launching World War III (expecting that at least some Chinese would survive). They were troubled by his creation of nuclear weapons in 1964 (and he was angry with them because they had not helped him do it).

During 1968 there was a major increase in Russian troop deployment along the Chinese border. Besides the March 1969 border clashes, there were rumours of an August 1969 Russian nuclear strike on the Chinese nuclear facility at Lop Nor.

But in September 1969 Krushchev's successor Alexei Kosygin made a secret visit to Beijing for talks with the Chinese leaders on how the situation could be cooled down. In October talks about the border took place. Russia refused to hand back the territory but at least there was now some form of diplomatic communication.

The military confrontation remained. In 1973 there were almost double the number of Russian troops as there were in 1969.

The major improvement began in 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the Russian leader. He needed money to reform the country and so he needed to reduce its military commitments. He unilaterally removed some of the forces.

Then in 1990, the Soviet Union collapsed. Rather than a massive Soviet invasion, the Chinese were more worried about US intervention in support of Taiwanese independence.

Russia wants to develop Siberia and its Far East region. This is Russia's new frontier. Siberia floats on an ocean of gas. The natural gas fields in Siberia are the world's largest.

That end of Russia is also a treasure house of other raw materials: 60 per cent of the country's timber, 60 per cent of its coal, and 80 per cent of its water. Gas is called "blue gold", fur is "soft gold", coal is "black gold" and salmon "red gold".

But Russia cannot get the wealth by its own means. It is not technologically advanced enough. For example, the ground is frozen to resemble concrete 1,000 feet deep for most of the year. During the summer months the top five feet may thaw and so some vegetables can be grown.

Building foundations are installed by thawing the ground by steam, inserting the foundations and letting the ground refreeze. Grave-digging is impossible; cremation is the only way to dispose of bodies.



Therefore to cope with all these mining and drilling challenges, Russia needs foreign investment and expertise. These need to be reassured that there will be no war between Russia and China.

Meanwhile, China also wants more foreign investment and expertise and so it also has an interest in avoiding a war with Russia.

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