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Defining the Borderlands: Sino-Soviet Border Talks and the Nationalities Issue (1987–1991)

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Abstract

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union and China resurveyed their border in order to restart their long-stalemated border negotiations. These negotiations resulted in only a partial border settlement: the agreement was signed in 1991. By the end of 1989, nationalities openly expressing their wish to secede from the Soviet Union caused the Soviet government to slow down the negotiation process, and Moscow insisted on setting aside the most contentious sections. China's nationalities issue had the opposite effect on Zhongnanhai: Chinese leaders wished to settle the entire Sino-Soviet border as quickly as possible. However, once the collapse of the Soviet Union became imminent, the Chinese saw advantages of delaying the negotiations on the disputed sections of the border. They calculated that would allow for China to negotiate with weaker, newly independent countries.

Keywords: Sino-Soviet border; China; the USSR; nationalism; borderlands

By the late 1980s, China and the USSR were heading towards diplomatic rapprochement, and the unsettled bilateral border became one of the most pressing issues requiring immediate attention. In the early 1980s, both countries had already started unilaterally surveying the border, and by 1987 the formal talks began. At the same time, domestically, both Beijing and Moscow saw the rise of nationalism in their borderland regions. In response, the Chinese chose to accelerate the pace of negotiations; they proposed a *quid pro quo* – granting the islands close to Khabarovsk to China in exchange for the Chinese concessions in the Pamirs. The Soviets, overwhelmed by the nationalist sentiments of ethnic groups in Central Asia and Russia, chose to postpone the negotiations over the disputed territories, thus slowing down the progress of the talks.

The ethnic unrest in Xinjiang and Tibet, along with complicated political atmosphere of student demonstrations culminating in the Tiananmen Square protest, left a significant impact on the Chinese leadership. Beijing placed the rapid resolution of the Sino-Soviet border issue at the top of country's political agenda. Disinterested in partial resolution of the border issue, the Chinese refrained from holding further negotiations with the USSR for several months, hoping Moscow would agree to resolve the issue in full. By the early 1990s, the "Parade of Sovereignties" in the USSR had already begun and the preservation of the Union was in question; this led the Chinese to believe that, should the Union dissolve, the Soviet member-states would be easier to negotiate with. Thus, on May 16, 1991, the Chinese and the Soviets were able to sign the Sino-Soviet border agreement even though it excluded the contentious islands around Khabarovsk and did not stipulate the position of the western part of the bilateral border that included the Pamirs.

Taylor M. Fravel argues that the ethnic unrest encouraged the Chinese to pace up the negotiations process with the Soviets (Fravel 2008, 138). Krista E. Wiegand (2011) believes that this complicated domestic situation could not account for the Chinese desire to make concessions in the

late 1980s. She argues that China assumed a more flexible position once the Soviets eliminated the “obstacles” in the bilateral relationship: Moscow began the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, the reduction of Soviet military presence along the Sino-Soviet border, and facilitated the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia (Wiegand 2011, 225). This article argues that in the atmosphere of rising ethnic tensions, China and the USSR chose to adopt opposite negotiation strategies as these two countries were on different trajectories of development. While the Soviet Union was being torn apart by the conflict among various interest groups, some of them united by a common sense of ethnic belonging, the Chinese state had not yet achieved the point when a nationalist movement could sustain momentum and have sufficient economic strength. Therefore, the use of military measures put an end to the civic movement in China and bought enough time for Beijing to continue negotiating the most disputed sections of the Sino-Soviet border with independent post-Soviet states.

The academic literature on the Sino-Soviet negotiations from 1987 to 1991 remains scarce; this is in part due to the secrecy around the related archival documents in both China and the countries of the former Soviet Union. Most works available at the moment are written by former Soviet and Chinese diplomats who participated in the negotiations, many of whom have now become academics. This article, nevertheless, uses these accounts as memoirs rather than a product of academic research. At the same time, the author recognizes that archival material of the Gorbachev Fond and digital archives of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, as well as the Digital National Security Archive, provide a wealth of information on the history of Sino-Soviet relations. Nevertheless, given the limitations of an academic article and a particular focus on the significance of the border talks, the author chooses to prioritize the use of less publicized archival documents from the local Russian and Kazakhstani archives, such as the State Archive of Khabarovsk Krai and Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as recently declassified archival materials from the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History.

The Origins of the Soviet Go-Slow and the Chinese Go-Fast Approach

A prominent scholar of Sino-Soviet relations in his recent work argued that bilateral normalization was a result of tactical considerations: the prospect of improved Sino-Soviet relations was used by both sides as a card against the US. At the same time, party patriarchs on both sides saw common ideology as an important reason for improving bilateral relations (Radchenko 2014, 49). The Sino-Soviet border – an issue inherited from the early 1960s – became a part of a military de-escalation effort: not only did it help reduce military expenditures, but it also created secure borders which allowed for a peaceful and rapid economic development.

The Chinese hoped to achieve a quick settlement of the entire border through signing a series of related agreements. Moscow too wished to resolve the issue promptly, since it remained an additional obstacle for the Sino-Soviet normalization. Remarkably, neither viewed the border issue as the borderlands issue. There is no evidence to suggest that there were any consultations at the early stage of the Sino-Soviet border negotiations between the highest leadership of either country and the local representatives of ethnic groups that populated the borderlands on both sides.

Although the actual negotiations started only in 1987, related preparations began much earlier. In 1982, the Soviets created a special commission to unilaterally clarify the Soviet-Chinese border, which, in the period from 1982 to 1984, conducted a survey of the entire of Sino-Soviet borderline. The commission, which consisted mainly of senior officers of the Soviet Border Guard Service under the operational authority of the KGB and the Military Topographic Service of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, carried out significant analytical work, studied archival materials, did the fieldwork to identify the exact locations of border signs that were installed during the demarcation of the Russian-Chinese border in 1870–1880 (Kireev 2006, 189; Amanzholova 2014, 42).

Based on the results of this work, the Soviet Government and the Central Committee of the CPSU received a written report, which noted the existence of 25 contested sections on the

Sino-Soviet border. For each section, the commission prepared a corresponding reference material that included a description of physical and geographical conditions, economic development, the presence of minerals and their valuable natural resources, as well as information on the history of the border section and its depiction in the Sino-Russian treaties old topographic maps (Amanzholova 2014, 42–43; Vereshchagin 1999, 219)

The members of the commission worked out a negotiation tactic for each section of the border. In this extensive reference material, the emphasis was placed on “a comprehensive approach to negotiations”; the disputed sections of the border could not be viewed in isolation from one another (Amanzholova 2014, 43). Presumably, “a comprehensive approach” meant a possibility of a territorial swap, when control over one swath of land is exchanged for another. In this regard, factors pertaining to military strategy and ethnicity of local population would have to play a crucial role.

Although most studies argue that the Soviets initiated the Sino-Soviet normalization, China foresaw the possibility of bilateral border talks much earlier than the Soviets. In 1980–1983, China conducted extensive preparation for the possible future border negotiations. Many Soviet diplomats pointed out that, during the talks in 1987–1991, the Chinese diplomats demonstrated an unprecedented depth of understanding of the border issue (Kireev 2006, 190).

During the first round in February 1987, the Soviet delegation was led by the second-generation sinologist and leading Soviet expert on China, I. I. Rogachev. The representatives of the Soviet Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Border Guard Service were among the delegation members. At the same time, the Chinese delegation was headed by Qian Qichen, who by then had already become a seasoned diplomat. Chinese delegation also included members of various government agencies. Two parties conducted the first negotiations in Moscow (Vereshchagin 1999, 222; Qian 2003, 27). Notably, during these talks the Soviet negotiators did not have among themselves the representatives of union republics.

The two delegations began with an agreement on basic principles of border negotiations, the international law being the foundation for future bilateral agreements. Some scholars point out that, during the 1964 border negotiations, the Soviet side wanted to disregard the provisions of the international law and draw the borderline on the border rivers along the Chinese bank, which at the time was the line of actual control (Hyer 2015, 143). Other scholars maintain that in 1964 the Soviets had already accepted the necessity to conduct negotiations according to the international legal practices and the thalweg principle was accepted by Moscow early on. The thalweg principle stipulates that if the boundary between two states lays through a navigable river, the borderline should be drawn through the thalweg (the center of the main – i.e., the deepest, navigable channel) of said river (Galenovich 2001, 31).

When the second round of negotiations took place in August 1987, the two delegations decided to organize working groups that included representatives from both sides to discuss the rest of the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet border while the heads of two delegations focus on discussing the most complicated section – the Heixiazhi (Bolshoi Ussuriiskii) and Yinlong (Tarabarov) Islands. The delegations agreed to establish three working groups: one for the border negotiations, one for conducting joint aerial photographic surveying, and the final one for drafting the border agreement, thus taking on the legal aspect of the negotiation (Lu 2019).

The activities of the working groups did not begin until January 1988. The first round of negotiations mainly focused on the Heixiazhi (Bolshoi Ussuriiskii) and Yinlong (Tarabarov) Islands near Khabarovsk, and the two sides exchanged views, but no consensus was reached (Kireev, 2006, 220, 234). When describing the atmosphere during the negotiations, a member of Chinese delegation pointed out that, “Compared with the previous two [negotiation attempts in 1964 and 1969–1978, which were filled with mutual] criticism and big quarrels, this [time] was indeed much more ‘civilized.’ I found that after the first two trials of strength, the Soviets understood that the Chinese today were not easy to mess with, so they began to let go of the great power chauvinism and learned to treat [Chinese] people equally” (Lu 2019).

The border talks were only going to be possible if the Soviets were to demonstrate their desire to negotiate in good faith and on an equal footing, and for that Gorbachev had to eliminate the three obstacles. Not only did he institute a 20% reduction of the Soviet troops stationed in Mongolia in the spring and summer of 1987, but he also ordered the reduction of Soviet troops in the Soviet Far East near the disputed border (Radchenko 2014, 15). Political observers at the time believed that the reduction of troops was linked to the overall enhancement of Sino-Soviet relations: “The purpose of this withdrawal is to show that Gorbachev is sincere about improving relations with Beijing” (Wiegand 2011, 273).

At the second plenary meeting, Qian Qichen mentioned that China had agreed to maintain the status quo on the border during the 1969–1978 border talks. He emphasized that the two sides must take the understanding reached by the two Premiers in 1969 as the basis for further negotiation (Kireev 2006, 222). The Soviets supported this idea. This was mainly because China’s definition of the “status quo” had undergone significant changes since the 1970s. At the time, China divided the Sino-Soviet border into disputed and non-disputed areas. According to the Chinese, the status quo on the undisputed territories was consistent with the historical agreements between Qing Empire and Tsarist Russia, while on the disputed territories the “status quo” referred to the state of the Sino-Soviet border on September 11, 1969. Thus, Chinese negotiators in the 1970s had two different interpretations of the concept of the “status quo” (RGANI 1969).

For the first time, the Soviets agreed that there were disputed areas on the Soviet-Chinese border that required a special study and coordinated decisions adopted by both sides (Amanzholova 2014, 44). Prior to 1987, the Soviets simply did not recognize the existence of disputed territories. For the Soviet Union, the term “status quo” meant the state of the bilateral border on September 11, 1969, when the two Premiers had a meeting and decided that the armed conflict between two states needs to be prevented. Although the definition of “status quo” by the two sides was very different at the time, the boundary line they wanted to preserve was actually one and the same. Therefore, the Soviet diplomats had believed that the Chinese side applied two definitions of the “status quo” simply to insert the term “disputed territories” into the negotiation documents (RGANI 1973).

Although such changes in the negotiation vocabulary might seem insignificant, they were deeply rooted in the renewed state of the Sino-Soviet relations. By the mid-1980s, the PRC prioritized its relations with the US over the relations with the USSR. Gorbachev too was deeply engaged in reinventing Soviet relations with the West. Both parties realized that they did not constitute a viable military threat for one another. Both were too busy conducting reforms at home (Niu 2018, 553, 560–569).

In light of the push for improvement in Sino-Soviet relations, starting from the mid-1980s Moscow began a conscious effort to strengthen the ties between the Soviet and the Chinese borderlands. Several avenues of potential cooperation were being explored. In the Far East, the Soviets were going to employ historic connections created by the railroad to improve the economic and cultural relations. The local party organizations were instructed to organize the broadcast of special programs in Chinese language on trains, at the railway station, and at the airport and to arrange book and photo exhibitions about life and professional activities of the working people of the USSR and of the region of Khabarovsk (GAKhK 1985).

The ethnic composition of the borderlands was also considered an asset to successful completion of this endeavor. The authorities in Khabarovsk Krai were instructed to build contacts with bordering Heilongjiang Province and the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia (GAKhK 1984). The Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs thought that Turkic communities in Soviet Central Asia and Chinese Xinjiang could help to build cross-border connections. In 1987, the Soviet Ambassador to China O.A. Troianovskii suggested to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakh SSR M. Isinaliev that the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic establish direct contacts with the Office of Foreign Affairs of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In his letter, Isinaliev urged the Kazakh Soviet of Ministers to invite Chinese delegation from the XUAR to discuss this issue further (TsGA RK 1987).

On July 21, 1987, the CC CPSU issued a decree “On the development of border ties between the Far Eastern regions of the RSFSR and the corresponding regions of the PRC,” in which the Central Committee instructed the Khabarovsk Krai, Primorskii Krai, Amur Oblast and Chita Oblast regional executive committees of the Soviets of People’s Deputies to take steps to establish regular contacts with the governments of the bordering provinces of the PRC and friendly relations with educational institutions, research institutes, and labor collectives (GAKhK 1987).

The Chinese too realized the importance of historical ties between these regions, so friendship associations spearheaded the movement to reconnect with the Soviets on the local level. Soviet visitors who arrived to China in the mid-1980s pointed out that the Chinese hosts used every opportunity to express their hope that “the visit will stimulate deeper contacts between the two border regions in the economic and cultural spheres.” Many believed that, under the pretext of cultural exchanges, the Chinese pursued a purely economic agenda (Urbansky 2020, 254–255).

Meanwhile, in order to guarantee successful completion of border delimitation and border demarcation, both parties agreed to survey the border using aerial photography and create topographic maps (Galenovich, 2001, 33). In November 1987, the two delegations exchanged maps so that they could further study and discuss them. Thus, during the first and the second rounds of negotiations, two delegations completed their preliminary work and understood their respective positions on various issues (Vereshchagin 1999, 228).

The working group that was to work on negotiating the border spent a lot of time discussing some disputed sections of the border, while other sections were agreed upon immediately. For instance, a triangle of land next to Mutnaya Protoka anabranch (Dalan Eluomuhe), 7.5 square kilometers in size, was recognized as the Chinese territory in accordance with the Protocol of Qiqihar. Another important section was the group of Menkeseli Islands. Because the thalweg through which the border was to be drawn was close to the Soviet bank, the Soviet delegation recognized that these islands were situated on the Chinese side of the river and thus belong to the Chinese. The aerial photographic survey demonstrated that two of those islands had, with time, become directly attached to the Chinese riverbank (Kireev 2006, 232–233).

However, in some areas, the two sides could not reach an agreement, especially in the area of the Abagaitu (Bolshoi) Shoal. The key problem was that the Chinese position on this issue during the 1987 talks changed; it was different from the position in the border negotiations of 1964. According to the Protocol of Qiqihar, Abagaitu belonged to the Tsarist Russia (Miasnikov 2014, 327–342). In 1964, the Soviet side mentioned the role the shoal played in the water supply for the city of Zabaikalsk, so the Chinese negotiators decided to make concessions and recognize it as a Soviet territory. Nevertheless, the Chinese delegation in the 1980s pointed out that, since the Protocol of Qiqihar was signed, the waters in the Argun River slightly changed direction. Therefore, the two sides had to draw their borders through the thalweg, which meant that Abagaitu Shoal was situated on the Chinese side of the river. During the 1987–1991 negotiations, the two delegations were unable to resolve this issue, so they had to put it aside (Vereshchagin 1999, 228–229).

In February 1988, the working groups reached a consensus and drafted the first agreement, which covered the boundary between the first point (the eastern trijunction of the Soviet, Chinese, and Mongolian borders) and the sixth point. In April 1988, the working group initialed the agreement on the borderline which ran from the Bailing River to the left bank of the Tumen River. During the same month, the two sides reached a consensus on the division of the Songacha estuary. In October 1988, the heads of the two delegations approved the agreements signed by the working group. In this way, all problems, except the Heixiazi and Yinlong Islands and the Abagaitu Shoal in the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet border, were resolved through preliminary agreements on the working group level (Kireev 2006, 249–251).

By 1988, China and the USSR began to negotiate the western part of the Sino-Soviet border, and the majority of the borderline in the West had to go through the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik republics. In the same year, the Soviets invited some representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kazakh SSR to be present at the negotiations table. The Chinese encouraged this

decision and possibly had given related recommendation. The head of the Chinese delegation made it clear in his opening speech in 1988 that they were worried whether the representatives of the union republics would recognize the agreements between the delegations of the USSR and the PRC. Only if the union republics would recognize the agreements were the Chinese ready to continue. Having received a positive response, the Chinese side continued the negotiations (Amanzholova 2014, 44–45).

As the border talks continued, the leadership in two countries scheduled a summit in Beijing. The plan for Gorbachev's visit to China had been in the works for several years. On December 23, 1985, when Gorbachev received Li Peng in Moscow, he proposed to hold a meeting between two leaders. In October 1986, Deng Xiaoping signaled through Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu that he was ready to meet with Gorbachev in China. On December 2, 1988, Qian Qichen met with Gorbachev and, on behalf of Yang Shangkun, President of the People's Republic of China, invited the Soviet leader to visit China. In February 1989, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Shevardnadze arrived in Beijing to make preparations for the Sino-Soviet summit (Qian 2003, 6–20).

On February 16, 1989, after his return to Moscow, Shevardnadze reported to a Politburo meeting that the Chinese hoped to secure Soviet territorial concessions in the Khabarovsk region in exchange for 27 thousand square kilometers in the Pamirs. Shevardnadze advised the Soviet leadership to accept the offer. Gorbachev recognized that the Sino-Soviet relationship arrived to a point where most contentious issues would have to be resolved (*In the Politburo* 2006, 450).

During the summit in May 1989, Gorbachev was to give the Chinese a response about their proposal to swap territories. Eric Hyer, citing an interview with Russian Foreign Ministry official, claims that the Soviet leader explained to Deng Xiaoping that the domestic political constraints made it impossible for him to accept China's demands on the Heixiazi and Yinlong Islands. Deng Xiaoping expressed his understanding of the situation and suggested that the discussion on the Heixiazi and Yinlong Islands be postponed so that other issues could be resolved (Hyer 2015, 146). Many Soviet diplomats at the same time wrote that, in May during the summit, the Soviets were still inclined to continue negotiations on these islands and had not yet excluded the possibility of making concessions (see Galenovich 2001; Kireev 2006; Vereshchagin 1999).

Therefore, presumably during the summit, Gorbachev did not decline to negotiate about the islands altogether but instead turned down the proposal to swap the territories around Khabarovsk for the territories in the Pamirs. The border talks nevertheless continued, if only for a short period of time. The disruptive events of 1989 were soon to interfere with the Soviet ability to make any concessions at all, and thus the Sino-Soviet negotiations had to be placed on hold.

Transitions: Tiananmen Square, Eastern Europe, and Nationalities in China and the USSR

The Sino-Soviet border talks were held at a transformative moment in the world history. While the scholarly debate on the significance of 1989 continues, one has to consider the key factors that ultimately led to the disruption of political systems around the world at this particular moment, be it an accidental or a historically predetermined event. As Odd Arne Westad pointedly notes, the world experienced a swing towards beliefs in state control and planning in the early part of the 20th century and a swing away from these beliefs in the latter part, and 1989 is perhaps symbolic of the latter shift in the way that 1917 marked the former (Westad 2010, 274). In the late 1980s, democratization of political life and economic crises activated various interest groups in the USSR and Eastern Europe, weakened the state control, and brought nationalist agenda to the fore. The governments had to counter these influences and change their behavior accordingly, both at home and abroad.

By 1989, the Soviet Union was on a path of reforms under the leadership of Gorbachev. Since assuming power in 1985, Gorbachev placed the responsibility for modernization reform and economic development of Eastern Europe onto local communist governments, who were now allowed to rely on the support from the West. In exchange, he pledged non-interference in domestic

affairs of the Soviet satellites. In his 1988 speech to the UN, he pronounced the Brezhnev Doctrine a thing of the past. (Spohr 2019, 17). Meanwhile, the old communist guard remained at the helm of their respective countries. Ceaușescu continued to run Romania despotically and Honecker, Husák, and Zhivkov never intended to conduct a serious reform. East Germany by then had acquired an unpayable debt to West German banks. The communist leaders nevertheless remembered that Khrushchev's reforms led to the Prague Spring and hoped that Gorbachev's reforms would prove equally reversible (Service 2015, 317–318). Leaders in Beijing also felt that Gorbachev's approach to reforms was deeply flawed. Deng reportedly went as far as calling the Soviet leader an idiot (Engel and Radchenko 2016, 186).

At the same time, by the late 1980s, Washington, Moscow, and Beijing formed a strategic triangle, and the dynamics of the trilateral relationship were always in flux. Bush was well aware that, a year before he assumed office, Mikhail Gorbachev had already formally proposed a summit meeting with the Chinese leadership (Spohr 2019, 33). The Americans found themselves in a continued competition with the Soviets for the opportunity to engage with China. The Sino-Soviet rapprochement incentivized Washington to preserve and improve relations with China and the USSR, lest they restore their ideological alliance.

On April 15, 1989, the unexpected death of the reform-minded former General Secretary Hu Yaobang, just weeks before planned demonstrations to mark the 70th anniversary of May 4, 1919, mobilized a staggering number of Chinese youths to attend the demonstrations. An estimated 100 million people were involved in the public mourning and subsequent mass movement. After a standoff between the Chinese government and the protesters on Tiananmen square, on May 17, the Chinese government declared martial law. This ultimately led to the bloodshed of June 3–4 in and around Tiananmen Square and a public outcry from the international community (Sarotte 2012).

On the same day as the Tiananmen massacre, Poland held its historic elections of June 4, which resulted in a massive victory for Solidarity: it had won all but one of the hundred seats in the Senate. It also took 173 out of 460 seats in the lower house – the Sejm. Given the existence of an electoral law that prevented Solidarity from contesting 65 percent of Sejm seats, this was a significant achievement. (Service 2015, 401).

The events in Poland and China triggered the domino effect within the socialist camp. On November 9, 1989, Helmut Kohl was sitting at a grand banquet in the Radziwill Palace in Warsaw with the new leaders of Poland – Mazowiecki, Jaruzelski, and Wałęsa – when he received the shocking news that the Berlin Wall had fallen (Spohr 2019, 128–129). The rest of the Eastern Europe caught up with Germany within the span of few months. It is during this period in time that the USSR and China both experienced a rise of nationalism at home.

Soviet Nationalism and Soviet Response

With policies such as *glasnost* and democratization in full effect, the nationalist movements in the Soviet Union gradually turned into a force to be reckoned with. In December 1986, the Central Government of the Soviet Union appointed ethnically Russian Gennady Kolbin as the first secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, which caused strong protests from the local population. The student protests even resulted in clashes with the army (Murphy 2006). On April 4, 1989, on the streets of Tbilisi, demonstrations demanding independence for Georgia erupted; by April 7, a state of emergency was declared. On April 9, troops were used against Georgian civilians, but both Gorbachev and Shevardnadze claimed that troops were sent there only to maintain order by their presence, and it was the local authorities who gave the order to use force against the demonstrators (Gorbachev 2000, 94–95; Service 2015, 467).

In the summer of 1989, Uzbeks and the Meskhetian Turks had a series of ethnic clashes with more than 100 casualties in Uzbekistan. As a result, most of the Meskhetian Turks were forced to migrate to Russia (Lubin 1989). The same year, Armenian residents marched in Yerevan and asked the People's Congress to recognize Nagorno-Karabakh's right to self-determination, rendering the

Armenian-Azerbaijani border another point of contention. A violent, ethnically motivated riot devastated the city of Sumgait (Dash 1989). The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia also erupted during this period. Despite that, between 1986 and 1989 the Soviet leadership had presumed that the national sentiments in the Soviet Union would still remain within the control of the state if democratization of Soviet politics continued.

The Soviet government chose to allow for the first free elections of the deputies in the Congress of People's Deputies. The results demonstrated that the majority of the elected officials were not members of the CPSU. During a Politburo meeting on March 28, 1989, Gorbachev summarized the results:

It is wrong to say that they [the people] voted against the party. Do not confuse God's gift with scrambled eggs. What kind of unity do we need in the party? On the basis of perestroika, on the basis of new approaches, in conditions of democracy and glasnost, i.e., not [based] on duress, not [based] on fear that you will be removed and punished. Unity exclusively on the basis of the perestroika platform. This does not exclude, of course, the need to remember the statutory obligations of the communists. And we [often feel too] ashamed to talk about it. (*In the Politburo* 2006, 460)

However, by the second half of 1989, the leaders of the Soviet Union gradually began to discover that the nationalist movement had exceeded the scope of government control. In most republics, it was the intellectuals who were leading the trend (Suny 1993, 125–126). By May 1989, the party leadership acknowledged that “the news from the countries along the Baltic Sea were disturbing, the conservatives took advantage [of the situation], and the reformers were uneasy” (Gorbachev 1995). In response, the CC CPSU tried to address the nationalities problem within the framework of existing political institutions. It decided to hold a Plenary meeting of the CC CPSU in the midyear of 1989 and devote it to interethnic relations. In this regard, Khabarovsk, along with other borderland regions, was asked to

work out ways of realizing the basic requests of various national groups, to promptly remove acute issues that complicate the situation, especially in the social sphere, [assist] the development of national culture, language. In order to maximize the outreach to the public, it is recommended to consult with party organizations, labor collectives, with representatives of the public, scientists, writers, journalists, as well as specialists working on the problems of interethnic relations. (GAKhK 1988)

But the situation in the Baltics, in Lithuania in particular, had already spun out of Moscow's control. On August 22, 1989, the commission established in Vilnius by the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Lithuania to study the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its consequences issued a report, which declared that the Soviet-German treaty on the Baltic States was illegal, and therefore the Lithuanian Congress of the People's Deputies announced that the resolution of July 21, 1940 – establishing the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic – and the law of August 3, 1940 – concerning the accession of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Soviet Union – were null and void (Snyder 2003, 90–102). On August 27, 1989, the Central Committee of the CPSU expressed concern about the spread of separatism in the Baltics; they believed that the mass action carried out by popular fronts and affiliated organizations on August 23 when two million people held hands creating a human chain was aimed at having “the peoples of the Baltic republics secede from the Soviet Union” (DNSA Archive 1989). The standoff between Moscow and the Baltic states continued.

The democratization efforts were followed by a call for a more diverse party membership with elected representatives throughout the entire party apparatus, including the Politburo. Gorbachev pointed out that

the elections of delegates to the Congress of the CPSU [need to] be as alternative and businesslike as possible, so that the society knows, and so that the press knows how and whom they choose. People will appreciate it. We need to form a corps of perestroika delegates. It is necessary to thoroughly reconsider how to elect members of the Politburo, secretaries of the Central Committee, how to elect a general secretary. There are even proposals to elect him by almost the entire party, by an all-party vote. (*In the Politburo 2006*, 513)

On the heels of the discussion about party representation came a recognition of antisemitism and Russophobia, along with other forms of extreme nationalism, as significant issues (*In the Politburo 2006*, 523).

Notably, the development of separatism in the republics of Central Asia was rather slow, especially compared to the development of the separatist groups in the Baltics. Affected by civic movements and popular fronts in other parts of the Soviet Union, the intelligentsia in Central Asian republics mostly concerned themselves with the issues pertaining to culture (status of native languages, development of national culture, re-evaluation of history and rehabilitation of repressed writers) and issues related to the economy and environment (cotton monoculture, relationship with Moscow, environmental pollution, the desiccation of the Aral Sea, public health and infant mortality) (Suryakova 2011, 133).

At the same time, as the nationalist movements around the Soviet Union continued to gain strength, ethnic Russians felt attacked and began to exert additional pressure on Gorbachev. Gorbachev recalled that “Valentin Rasputin, a famous Russian writer, expressed these sentiments by saying at the First Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR: if everyone is so dissatisfied with Russia, they want to blame all their sins on her, then perhaps she should leave the Union herself?” (Gorbachev 1995). Despite this depiction of Russian nationalism as merely a reaction to the events in the Union republics, significant number of studies demonstrate that Russian nationalism was a fully formed movement long before 1985 and that it helped to round up a lot of support for public causes during the Gorbachev era (Brudny 1998, 194).

Under such circumstances, any action by the central government on the border issue was going to play a decisive role; and territorial concessions around Khabarovsk or in the Pamirs – or a swap between these contested territories – would have exacerbated the situation. Therefore, on the one hand, the Soviet government had to maintain the appearance of staying firm on their position during the talks, while, on the other hand, it had to try to win some time to improve the domestic situation; a sector-specific agreement that excluded contentious sections of the border seemed to be the only available choice.

Chinese Nationalism and Chinese Response

By 1989, both public and confidential statistics in the USA demonstrated “the big progress China has recorded during the ten years of reform.” The US government analysts raved that “the reform trend is irreversible in China” (George H.W. Bush Presidential Library 1989). However, the events of June 4 were quick to disappoint – the economic awakening seem to have come at a cost. Meanwhile, Soviet leaders remained sceptical of China’s reform program in the absence of a major political overhaul. The Chinese students who protested on the Tiananmen Square agreed (Engel and Radchenko 2016, 33–34).

Most strategies employed in Beijing on June 4 against the demonstrators were a repetition of the practices employed by the Chinese government earlier that year against the Tibetan protestors in Lhasa. Although the connections might not have been obvious to the Han population of China, the government had just had enough practice with the ethnic minorities around the country to be able to counter the opposition of ethnic majority (Brown 2021, 155–160).

The choice to use military against the Chinese demonstrators was rooted in the trajectory of Chinese economic and social development. Compared to China, economic interest groups in the

USSR were more powerful and more opposed to change. In the PRC, there was no agricultural lobby that opposed de-collectivization; instead, Chinese peasants actively fought for control over their farms. Chinese industries, like those in any country, pushed for subsidies and government support, but manufacturing played a smaller role in China's economy and politics than in the Soviet Union, so industries were unable to undermine change (Miller 2016, 179–181). To a certain extent, the nationalities issue followed the same pattern; local ethnic elites in China could not accumulate enough economic strength or public support to sustain an effective nationalist movement, while the various ethnic interest groups in the USSR were able to do just that.

Since the creation of the PRC, Chinese authorities compared and originally even copied some of the Soviet policies on the nationalities issue. Many scholars have argued that the Soviet Union promoted “ethnic particularism” through creating institutions that would later contribute to the Soviet disintegration, such as the elaborate system of native language education and native language media, formation of functional ethnic bureaucratic apparatus, etc. (Slezkine 1994; Suny 1993; Roeder 1991). Similarly, China adopted and continues to use the concept of “ethnic minority,” which refers to those of non-Han origin. As a result, terms like “ethnic minority cadres” and “ethnic minority students” became part of the Chinese bureaucratic lexicon. Ma Rong argues that this helped promote affirmative action policies, such as family planning, arrangement of cadre positions, bonus points for college entrance examinations, etc., but at the same time drew a wedge between the core Han population and the rest (Ma 2013). Another scholar, Zhang Haiyang, refers to the broken windows theory, saying that the existence of some minor problems led to a skewed perception of the reality by entire ethnic communities and further exacerbated the nationalities problem (Zhang, Ma, and Hao 2013).

Much like in the USSR, the ethnic tensions in China in the late 1980s were heightened. In April 1980, there were disturbances in Aksu, a town halfway between Urumqi and Kashghar. These involved the mainly Han military and state farm personnel of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, discontented “sent-down” (*xiafang*) youths and local non-Han people. Many lives were lost when the rioting was put down by PLA troops. On October 30, 1981, there were disturbances in Kashghar as a result of a criminal trial in which a young Han man was accused of killing a Uyghur youth during a fight (Dillon 2004, 59).

In an attempt to diffuse the ethnic conflicts, in 1984, the central government of China issued the Document No. 5, which stipulated that when ethnic minorities are involved in judicial cases as defendants, the police department and the court should offer them preferential treatment, make fewer arrests, give lesser punishment, and the verdict should be more lenient. The directive was colloquially referred to as the “two lessers, one leniency” (*liangshao yikuan*) policy. Thus, the inequality of various ethnic groups in the eyes of the law was legalized (Ma 2017). On May 31, 1984, the Second Session of the Sixth National People's Congress passed the “Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy,” which guaranteed the legal protection for the regional ethnic autonomy system that had existed since 1947 (Hao 2011).

On December 12, 1985, during local elections in Urumqi, over 2,000 students from seven universities and higher education colleges demonstrated illegally when the regional governor was replaced by Tomur Dawamat, a Uyghur but a protege of the Han CCP Secretary Wang Enmao. On November 12, 1985, Uyghur students at the Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing protested against the use of Xinjiang as a base for nuclear testing. There were also demonstrations in June 1988 against the publication of a book, *The White House in the Distance*, which allegedly contained racial slurs against Kazakhs and Uyghurs, and in Urumqi after racist slogans had reportedly been found on a toilet door at Xinjiang University (Dillon 2004, 59–60). The publication of another book called *Sexual Customs* was perceived by Muslim ethnic minorities as insulting Islam. Anger at the book sparked large protests in May 1989, which were separate from student marches but that influenced events nationwide. The top Chinese leadership was feeling that turmoil was coming at them from multiple directions (Brown 2021, 164).

Indeed, a wave of much larger demonstrations began in Tibet in October 1987. They arose as a result of partial loosening of control by the central government in Tibet and in response to major international diplomatic initiative to try to procure a definitive settlement to the Tibet question. The demonstrations were led by monks and nuns who supported the idea of a return to an independent state of Tibet under the Dalai Lama (Dillon 2012, 371). On October 1, 1987, about thirty monks of Drepung monastery were beaten in the streets, arrested, and taken into custody. Ordinary Tibetans then protested in front of the police station demanding the monks be released. This protest turned into a riot during which the police station and vehicles were set on fire; protestors were killed when the police shot into the crowds. The events were witnessed by tourists and covered by journalists, and soon the whole world knew what had happened (Van Schaik 2011, 260). An even more serious disturbance broke out in March 1988 after the Panchen Lama had visited Tibet in an attempt to ensure the success of the Great Prayer Festival, which is traditionally held during celebrations of the Tibetan New Year. Many monks felt that their festival had been hijacked by the CCP and what had started as a minor outbreak exploded into riots that were followed by mass arrests and a political and religious clampdown. Similar protests continued in the spring of 1989 (Dillon 2012, 371–374).

Some scholars viewed the Soviet rise of nationalism through the prism of class struggle, pointing out the importance of the formation of local elites and the rise of their socioeconomic role. (Sury 1993). Similarly, Chinese scholars tend to explain the events in Tibet as a result of controversial policy of the Chinese government aimed at the return of Tibetan aristocrats living in India in exile to the Chinese territories and reparations the Chinese government offered upon the aristocrats' return. This, presumably, caused a severe disfunction in the relationship between the poorer Tibetans who rose to power, many of them former serfs, and the Chinese Communist Party. The former reportedly failed to see why the latter were paying the class enemies for their return (Zhang, Ma, and Hao 2013).

Majority of Chinese scholars assume that, beyond the surface of ethnic disobedience, there always were economic issues involved. Hao Shiyuan presumes that a wealthy ethnic minority who profits from staying within the majority-ruled country does not engage in separatism (Hao 2011). The Chinese leadership in the late 1980s also hoped that the use of military force would be legitimized once the Chinese economic reforms begin to yield obvious results. A swift settlement of the entire Sino-Soviet border was going to pacify the borderlands and bring about a much-needed stability to these regions. It was while Beijing was making these kinds of calculations that the Soviets chose to make a significant change in their negotiation strategy and refused to make any concessions on the disputed islands around Khabarovsk and the Pamirs.

The Go-Slow Approach and the Partial Border Agreement

In late 1989, Eastern Europe continued to move away from communist control. By October, 1989, hundreds of thousands of East Germans were marching for reform, and by November the Berlin Wall came crumbling down. The drive for liberation also spilled over into Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. In December 1989, Gorbachev gave personal guarantees to Bush in Malta that the democratization process will not lead to any rash actions on Soviet part (Engel and Radchenko 2016, 198–199). While the bureaucratic structures continued to be dismantled in Europe, people fell back on the solidarity rooted in the familiar sense of ethnic belonging, and a rise of nationalism was recorded throughout Eastern Europe.

Demonstrations filled the streets of all Romanian cities. On December 25, Ceaușescu and his wife were captured and shot. The Politburo in Moscow had given recognition to the National Salvation Front two days earlier. The Soviets also approved measures to prevent Romanian-speaking Moldavians from crossing the Soviet border and joining in the protests (Service 2015, 429). Starting in 1984, Zhivkov's regime in Bulgaria recognized ethnic nationalism as a potential source of political dissent: the Bulgarian government prohibited the use of Turkish language in public, prohibited Islamic practices, and closed down many mosques. In 1989, as it came under pressure,

the Communist Party began forcibly deporting Muslim activists to Turkey. In the panic that followed at least three hundred thousand Bulgarian Muslims were expelled or fled across the border (Westad 2017, 539). The rise of nationalism thus was not a Soviet-only or Chinese-only problem, Communist Parties throughout Europe recognized nationalism as a threat; some even perpetuated ethnically motivated crimes under the pretext of preventive measures.

With nationalist movements gaining momentum across the country, the Soviets had to make significant changes to their negotiation strategy on the issue of Sino-Soviet border. In October 1989, on the eve of the fourth round of the Sino-Soviet border talks, the Politburo of the CC CPSU discussed the progress of the negotiations at the plenary meeting and decided that, under current circumstances, the Soviet side could not make any concessions regarding the Heixiazi and Yinlong Islands near Khabarovsk and the Pamirs. The Soviets wanted to sign sector-specific agreements and leave out the highly disputed territories so that they could be resolved later (Kireev 2006, 274).

In an attempt to soften the blow from an obvious shift in Soviet position, the head of the Soviet delegation I.I. Rogachev had a private conversation with Qian Qichen and the senior members of the Chinese delegation on October 24, 1989. He emphasized that the negotiations were held in an unprecedented atmosphere. The two delegations not only discussed the issues on which they agreed but also exchanged views on topics about which they held different opinions. Rogachev went on to point out that the union and autonomous republics of the Soviet Union were growing very sensitive to the possibility of territorial changes. He added that this affected the border resolution process and stressed that the islands near Khabarovsk and the Pamirs were the primary concern. Rogachev expressed hope that the Chinese side will understand the concerns of the Soviet government. Despite these hopes, the Soviet statement left the Chinese deeply disappointed and dissatisfied; Qian Qichen said that the Soviet behavior was in serious violation of the joint communique signed during the summit in May 1989 (Kireev 2006, 275–276; Vereshchagin 1999, 237).

Although the fourth round of negotiations was successfully concluded, the two delegations did not discuss the issues of the Pamirs and Heixiazi and Yinlong Islands situated near Khabarovsk at the working group level. At the same time, after the end of the fourth round of negotiations, China decided to suspend the border negotiations between the two countries in order to reassess the status of Sino-Soviet relations (Vereshchagin 1999, 238). In private conversations, Chinese representatives said that the new Soviet approach presented the leadership of the PRC with a difficult political dilemma since settling the border in its entirety was viewed in China as one of the highest priorities. The question was unofficially raised as to whether the Soviet position on the islands near Khabarovsk and on the Pamirs was no longer subject to any further discussion (Kireev 2006, 278).

For the Soviet leaders, complete diplomatic failure during the talks was just as dangerous politically as the possibility of public dissatisfaction about territorial concessions on the Sino-Soviet border, so the diplomats had to put a lot of effort into persuading the Chinese side to leave the most disputed sections out and sign a partial agreement. As a way to initiate contacts on the higher level, on December 15, 1989, the Soviet government sent a letter to Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping respectively, detailing the contents of Gorbachev's recent meeting with President Bush in Malta, the letter also put forward some suggestions about how the Sino-Soviet border negotiations should proceed. The Soviet side expressed its willingness to continue negotiations on the areas where consensus was not reached and to prepare partial agreement for signing (Kireev 2006, 278–279).

Meanwhile, on April 5, 1990, in the town of Baren, close to Kashgar, Xinjiang, the regular prayers at a mosque turned into demonstrations against the CCP's policies towards ethnic minorities. Some protestors called for a jihad against the unbelievers, and there were demands for the establishment of the state of Eastern Turkestan. It took the intervention of units for the People's Armed Police and regular troops from the Kashgar garrison to subdue the demonstrators. Scholars believe that the Baren rising was the result of a carefully planned and organized operation by a group that identified itself as the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Party and explicitly linked politicized Islam with the call for the independence of Xinjiang. The incident revealed the depth of anti-Chinese feeling, the degree of

organization of the rebels, and the Islamicisation of the independence struggle, which had previously been dominated exclusively by Uyghur nationalism (Dillon 2012, 379–381).

These domestic disturbances seem to have changed the Chinese position; the Chinese leadership apparently decided that continuing the negotiations with the USSR was crucial to pacifying its borderlands in Central Asia. Party hardliners like Li Peng blamed glasnost for triggering ethnic unrest inside the USSR, especially the Caucasus, and for stirring up the political upheavals in Eastern Europe and warned that such recklessness might lead to the total breakup of the Soviet empire and spread this contagion to China itself (Zhang and Li 2010). By 1988, Chinese leaders had also figured that if Gorbachev's nationalities policy was to lead to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, then the republics would become independent: "the Soviet Union would only have one Russia, and it could not be called a superpower" (Li 2008, 233).

Several weeks after the protests in Xinjiang, on April 24, 1990, Gorbachev met with Li Peng in Moscow. During the talks, Gorbachev proposed to sign the agreement on the eastern section based on the existing consensus and promised to continue discussing the border-related issues that had not yet been resolved. For the Soviet side, the timing was very fortunate; by March of the same year, Gorbachev had already been elected president of the USSR, his political position thus more secure. As a result of these strategic considerations on both sides, on April 25, 1990, Ye.A. Shevardnadze and Qian Qichen decided to continue negotiations at the working group level (Kireev 2006, 280).

The Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR also proposed signing an agreement about maintaining the status quo on the territories where the two sides had not yet reached consensus, but the Chinese eventually decided that an understanding reached during the summit about the foundational principles of the Sino-Soviet border negotiations was enough to maintain the status quo and no additional agreement was necessary. Perhaps the Chinese considered this to be a counterproductive measure, since a lot of time and effort was spent discussing a short-term document during the 1969–1978 border talks. As Kireev points out, only after the Soviets agreed to continue actual negotiation, putting the sections around Khabarovsk and the Pamirs back on the table, were the two parties able to move the talks along (Kireev 2006, 280–281). Thus, the Soviets started out with the "no concessions" position on the two sections in October 1989, but under Chinese pressure they had to agree to discuss it on the working group level, while Beijing was forced to accept that the swift resolution of these issues was not feasible for Moscow at this time.

Although two parties decided that a status quo agreement was not necessary, in November 1989, diplomats and military experts from both sides convened a conference on the military reduction measures in the border areas in order to strengthen mutual trust between the countries. On April 24, 1990, the two foreign ministries signed relevant agreements and included among the provisions the requirement to "strictly observe the status quo at the border, take all necessary measures to maintain normal order at the border and prevent violations of the status quo" (Agreement 1990).

The next round of negotiations between China and the Soviet Union was held from July 12 to August 8, 1990. Nine months after the Rogachev-Qian 1989 October meeting, on July 12, Rogachev and Tian Zengpei decided to sign the agreement on the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet border, which excluded the sections near the Khabarovsk and the Abagaitu Shoal (Kireev 2006, 283).

On October 5, 1990, experts from the legal working groups began drafting the content of the agreement. The head of the working group on the Soviet side was Ye. R. Sveridov, and the Chinese team of experts was led by Li Qingyuan. The legal working group encountered several problems along the way. The Soviet side suggested that the agreement signed by the two sides should have the status of an international document, while the Chinese side proposed to sign the intergovernmental document because the international document would require an approval by the National People's Congress, and the intergovernmental documents did not carry such a requirement. The Soviet side proposed that they sign an "agreement," to which the Chinese side responded that, according to the Chinese law, the agreement must be ratified by both parties, so it would be easier to sign this document as a "protocol." The Soviet side also stressed that this agreement shall be based on all

previous treaties and agreements so that the agreement does not include provisions that render these historical documents invalid. The Chinese side accepted. (Kireev 2006, 283–287).

Meanwhile, China and the Soviet Union continued to discuss the western section of the border. The fourth and fifth rounds of negotiations continued between February 1989 and April 1991. By April 1991, on the eve of the signing of the eastern section agreement, there remained six points of contention between the two countries regarding the western section. These included two locations in Kazakhstan (the area close to Sarychildy river and Chogan-Obo passage), one relatively large section in Kyrgyzstan (the area close to Bedel passage), and three sections in Tajikistan (Uz-bel Mountain Pass, Karazak Mountain Pass, and Markansu River Section). Sensitive to the rise of nationalism in the Soviet republics, the Soviet ambassador to China Rogachev proposed to set up a committee composed of the leaders of the Soviet republics bordering China and thus include them in the negotiation process for the western section of the border (Kireev 2006, 252; Alimzhanov 2009, 60)

On May 15, 1991, General Secretary Jiang Zemin arrived in Moscow with an official five-day visit. During his meetings with the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, the two stated their intention to improve bilateral relations despite having different views on the future of communism. (Randolph 1991). The greatest achievement of the meeting was the signing of “The agreement on the eastern section of the Sino-Soviet state border” on May 16, 1991 (Agreement 1991).

By summer 1991, Gorbachev seemed to have secured another important win on the domestic front: he announced that by August 20 the delegations from the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan were to sign the New Union Treaty, which was meant to redefine the relationship among the republics of the Soviet Union. With that in mind, Gorbachev left Moscow for his August vacation (Gorbachev 2000, 130–132). The coup ensued. The instigators of the coup apparently counted on a strategic partnership with China. Already on August 20, Gennadii Yanaev met with Chinese Ambassador to the USSR Yu Hongliang. Jiang Zemin and the Chinese Politburo predicted that the West will exert pressure on the Soviet Union and lessen the pressure on China. The Chinese leadership decided that the Chinese media would report on the developments in the USSR with a bias in favor of the instigators of the coup. As it became clear that the coup failed, PLA forces in Xinjiang were put on alert to watch for signs of possible unrest spreading across the border from Soviet Central Asia (Radchenko 2014, 186)

The Chinese tacit support for the coup would undoubtedly have complicated the subsequent negotiations on the western part of the Sino-Soviet border, as well as over the islands near Khabarovsk and Abagaitu Shoal. However, in 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, leaving behind a complicated legacy. Many among the new Russian leadership harbored conflicting feelings towards the Chinese. Yeltsin, for one, felt offended that Jiang Zemin, during his visit to Moscow in May 1991, in contrast to other top visitors to the Soviet Union, had declined to meet Yeltsin and had emphasized the role of Gorbachev as the head of the Communist Party in ensuring good relations between the two socialist states (Kozyrev 2019, 139). Deng did not feel much sympathy for Yeltsin either (Radchenko 2014, 186–187). The next stage of border negotiations promised to be a strenuous process.

Conclusion

The notion of 1989 as a watershed moment in world history continues to receive a lot of scholarly attention. Unfortunately, insufficient recognition is given to the global rise of nationalism and the role that the sense of ethnic belonging played in the dismantlement of malfunctioning institutions within the communist states. National freedom, the right to self-determination, ethnic pride, and preservation of one’s territories, ecological environment, and so on were placed at the center of the political discourse in many countries. The USSR and China unwillingly became a part of this global trend.

In the mid-1980s, Deng Xiaoping and Gorbachev initiated the normalization of bilateral relations in an attempt to pacify the border regions, reduce military expenditures, and create a

favorable environment for the economic development of the two countries. The economic and cultural contacts between the borderland communities were going to be an indispensable part of their foreign policy. The rise of nationalist movements and public protests in both countries rendered the implementation of these policies extremely challenging and, at the same time, even more pressing.

The 1987–1991 Sino-Soviet border negotiations were conducted against the backdrop of the creation of separatist movements in the Soviet republics. At the beginning of the reforms in the USSR in the mid-1980s, Gorbachev did not take interest in the nationalities problem. Many nationalist organizations and groups were led by local intellectuals; the majority of these entities continued to remain under the direct control of the Soviet state system. Therefore, until 1986, the national sentiment within the Soviet Union and the situation in the Soviet republics of Central Asia were presumed to still be under direct control of the central government. At the same time, within the framework of *glasnost*, ethnic minorities gained the freedom of expression. Only with the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988 did Gorbachev finally acknowledge the gravity of the nationalities issue (Beissinger 2009). In October 1989, the Soviets decided that in an explosive atmosphere of heightened ethnic tensions, they could not make any concessions on the Sino-Soviet border.

In China, by 1989 the Chinese government had already used violence in suppression of ethnic unrests in Tibet and Xinjiang and had a violent clash with the students on the streets of Beijing. Although the Chinese leadership remained fairly confident that it could maintain control over the situation, the events in Xinjiang in 1990 led Beijing to believe that a partial border agreement with the USSR would become an important step toward securing the border with the Soviet Central Asia and help curtail the spread of separatism in the Chinese Muslim borderland. At the same time, the Chinese leadership recognized that, should the Soviet Union cease to exist, they would have the opportunity to negotiate the most disputed sections of the border with the much weaker newly established states.

As both China and the USSR experienced almost simultaneous political crises tied to nationalities issue, they reacted differently: the Chinese believed that the domestic turbulence rendered the settlement of the entire border more urgent, while, in the USSR, the highest leadership chose to slow down the negotiation process, postponing the resolution of the most disputed sections – even if that entailed serious risk for the progress in the bilateral relations. The Chinese were not willing to renegotiate terms of engagement with their ethnic peripheries or grant them more freedom, so they used military to put an end to the protests and secure continued implementation of economic reforms. The Soviets were forced to try renegotiating their relations with union republics – an attempt dubbed as the *Novo-Ogarevo* process – and the struggle to preserve the state ensued, but the severity of internal crisis ultimately led to the downfall of the regime. The two countries were on different political trajectories. If one was torn apart by various interest groups and bound for dissolution, the other tightened its grip on the public opinion at home and was on a path to produce an unprecedented economic growth.

Ultimately, the Chinese decided that a partial agreement was better than no agreement at all. Thus, on May 16, 1991, the Sino-Soviet border agreement on the eastern part of the border was signed. This agreement caused dissatisfaction among the Russian public circles both during its ratification and the demarcation of the border (Wischnick 2001; Ivasita 2006). The post-Soviet states in Central Asia had to face the consequences of commitments made by the Soviet delegation during the bilateral talks. The complexities of the subsequent border resolution forced the post-Soviet states to negotiate with China within a framework of a joint delegation. However, the newly established governments clearly recognized the disproportion in strength between themselves and the Chinese state and chose to behave accordingly. China, hoping to secure long-term partnership with the new governments, tried to appear magnanimous. By 2012, after a series of negotiations, China and the post-Soviet states finally achieved a complete resolution of the Sino-Soviet border issue.

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