A Geographic View of the Sino-Soviet Dispute

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The socialist honeymoon of the Chinese People’s Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was very short, and the separation proceedings seem to have been initiated by the Chinese. In 1954, Peking published a map of “China Unredeemed” showing areas in which her new rulers felt she had legitimate territorial aspirations.¹ China made a bold if understandable claim for much of Southeast Asia, considerable areas in India and Pakistan, and the mountain states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. The most surprising item on the map was Communist China’s obvious desire to readjust her border with the Soviet Union to that existing between the Russian and Chinese Empires in 1840. Deeply rooted Chinese resentment of Imperial Russia’s territorial encroachments in the nineteenth century had prevailed over the bonds of ideology, perhaps because the Soviet Union, while inveighing against imperialism, was loath to renounce its inherited benefits. As Sino-Soviet relations have deteriorated, the broad hint of the map has since been reinforced by more blunt denunciations of the treaties settling the present boundary.²

The growing rift between the two countries has received effective scholarly attention from political, historical, and economic viewpoints, but little work has been done from a geographical viewpoint.³ A brief indication of the geographical nature of the disputed border areas is germane to a discussion

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¹For a redrawn copy of this map see New York Times, September 10, 1963. See also page 158.
²Ibid. See also the issue of September 14, 1963.
³One of the most recent geographical works on the Sino-Soviet frontier sees it as a zone of tension that has been transmuted to one of cooperation through the cementing power of ideology. See: W. A. Douglas Jackson, Russo-Chinese Borderlands (Princeton, New Jersey: D. Van Nostrand Company, Inc., 1962), p. 110.
of the Sino-Soviet rift, but this essay endeavors to shed more light on the rift primarily by examining the thesis that among the causal factors are Soviet and Chinese attitudes toward space or area.

These attitudes may best be described by reference to the now unfashionable ideas of a nineteenth century German geographer, Friedrich Ratzel. Strongly influenced by the new and intellectually fascinating biological theories of Darwin, Ratzel saw state-area relationships in organic terms. The congeries of organic states in the world, like other organisms, ought to develop according to laws of natural selection. Each state was seen as competing for space or living room, the most viable state being that most successful in the acquisition of territory. The condition of the frontier, the sensitive peripheral organ of the living state, was seen to reflect the health of the state. Developing this thesis, Ratzel formulated seven "laws" of state growth. Because these ideas developed in warped fashion into the Geopolitik of the Third Reich, considerable odium has been attached to them. But when one strips away the biological symbolism and when one remembers that Ratzel wrote during the most vigorous period of Western European (and Russian) imperial growth, it is clearly seen that Ratzel's seven "laws" of state growth are in reality empirical descriptions of the ways imperial states grow.

Even a brief study of the Soviet Union and Communist China in the light of Ratzel's observations shows a definite correspondence between the activities of these two powers and those of the former colonial powers. The impetus to state growth in recent times has come from Communism, an external stimulus; the new and growing culture associated with Communism has expanded in space; missionary and commercial activities abroad have been followed by political expansion into the territory of weaker states; and successful expansion has whetted appetites for still greater expansion. By criteria frankly stated in an age when imperialism was respectable, the two primary Communist powers may be classed as imperialist powers.

A discussion of Ratzel, his ideas and seven "laws" of state growth may be found in most texts on political geography. For example see: Lewis M. Alexander, World Political Patterns, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1963), pp. 18 and 19.
Being imperialist powers, the Soviet Union and Communist China are especially sensitive to conditions on their frontiers. Both countries have publicized intentions of world domination, a course which would involve further territorial expansion. As these countries now face one another over a boundary which each has expressed or demonstrated a desire to expand, this border represents the juxtaposition of competing aims, a situation now contributing to the Sino-Soviet rift. The tension along the boundary zone is not lessened by an ostensibly common ideology, for neither state views the projected Communist world with a leader other than itself. Moreover, these border tensions, while they may be stimulated by the vigorous nationalism engendered by Communism, stem primarily from aims and resentments which have been part of the "iconography" of each state for more than a century. This sensitive border not only represents a confrontation of competing ambitions but also of greatly different cultures and historically conditioned responses emanating from the respective corelands. These border tensions may be more cause than effect in the diverging paths of Communism chosen by the two states.

But while territorial expansion represents power and prestige to both countries, very important matters for states that aspire to leadership of a Communist world, such expansion has more urgent geographical underpinnings in Chinese iconography. Whether or not Red China subscribes openly to the concepts of Geopolitik or its Japanese variants, the size of her population and her land-use patterns tend to resurrect the ghost of Lebensraum.

It is this land hunger which appears to be behind Chinese intransigence. Otherwise it seems odd that the Chinese would deliberately jeopardize their relationship with the Soviets, with whom they are ideologically identified against the West. Peking must have been cognizant that once a claim was openly made and fully publicized she could hardly back down and relinquish it. Whether or not concessions proved to be logical or prudent, yielding on such an issue would brand Peking as a proverbial "paper tiger." Why China would place herself in

"Iconography" is a convenient piece of jargon introduced by the geographer Jean Gottman to cover the complex of ideas and traditions, such as the Flag, Constitution, or the Crown, which form part of a nation's self image, and which condition national action.
such a difficult position can perhaps be partly understood by reference to the land and population relationship within the country.

Despite the unreliability of statistics for large areas in China, the careful student can infer a good deal about her land use. A study of climatic, physiographic and soil maps indicates that little more than one fourth of the country has physical conditions suited to agricultural exploitation. That this land is potentially suited to agriculture does not mean that it is used. A Communist source gives the estimated cultivated area as 206,000,000 acres in 1932 and 255,000,000 acres in 1946. Recently it was reported that the Communist agricultural program had expanded the tilled area to approximately 300,000,000 acres.\(^6\) This figure taken alone is meaningless, but when considered with a population figure of approximately 750,000,000 people, this means that there is only 0.4 acre of tilled land per person. With double and even triple cropping in the most favored locations, the average Chinese can expect little but bare subsistence even in a good crop year. Adding to the woes of an incredibly high nutritional density is the fact that much of this productive land is subject to the natural disasters of drought, river flooding or devastating typhoon damage.

The pressure of subsistence production is shown further by demographic patterns. Some eighty percent of China's people live in farm villages and market towns, and about seventy-five percent of China's gainfully employed are directly or indirectly in agricultural pursuits.\(^7\) The dependence of so large a proportion of the population on the soil only reinforces Red China's spatial problems. Furthermore, China's population is not static, for every year an estimated 15,000,000 persons is being added to the already staggering total. Her food resources are severely taxed.

China's leaders are aware of her geographical insufficiencies, and much of her internal and external policy is conditioned by her leaders' interpretation of her geography. Red China wants more land. Thus, to her a boundary is not simply a line but a shifting zone of contact. It exists as a temporary phenomenon on the landscape and ought to move in response to the


\(^7\)Ibid.
state's needs. The frontier area is a peripheral organ of the state and reflects the growth, strength, and changes of the same.

The influence of power, prestige and geographic pressure on China's attitude towards space is most clearly shown in Southeast Asia, and brief reference to the area offers a partial clue to the Sino-Soviet rift. The Chinese feel the area to be part of their sphere of influence, and any intervention or meddling by the Soviets is seen as a direct threat to Peking's position and interests. Moreover, more than 10,000,000 overseas Chinese are settled in Southeast Asia and are thoroughly diffused in the economic structure. They control money lending and most of the rice marketing. The ties that bind China to this area are strong, and any Soviet operations here are bound to elicit a strong reaction from Peking. Thus, the expansionist policies of Moscow and Peking cause friction in other places than their common boundary.

Very important to China is the fact that the countries of Southeast Asia have relatively rich agricultural and industrial resources, in the light of which these countries are underpopulated. The Irrawaddy-Sittang, Chao Phraya and Mekong drainage basins have long produced rice surpluses for their respective states. Nearly 25,000,000 tons of rice are produced here annually, a substantial proportion of it being available for export.\(^8\) In addition, one finds here maize, copra, pulses, and rubber, as well as minerals such as tin, bauxite, and iron ore. Although the present production of agricultural products is very desirable, the Chinese are aware of the much greater production possible if land which is now being cropped but once a year is used to produce two or in some cases three crops a year. Were this production available to China, she would have agricultural surpluses that would enable her to pay more attention to her much-cherished industrial sector.

However, even a brief examination of the geography of Soviet territory claimed by Peking shows that this territory is relatively remote and unprofitable. In the 1954 map, claims were made for some rather extensive territory along the Amur drainage, including the Soviet maritime area and the territory extending beyond Sinkiang to Lake Balkash. Including Outer

Mongolia, the area claimed along the Sino-Soviet border is about 500,000 square miles and has but 10,000,000 inhabitants.

Nevertheless the boundary claims against Moscow are serious, open clashes having taken place. This has been especially noted regarding fishing in the Amur where a tiny island, Hsia Heitzu, in the middle of a fork where two tributaries meet, has been the object of claims and counterclaims. Infiltration both ways across the border in the Sinkiang region has also been noted.

Why China would make these claims and spoil her relationship with her Communist partner is then not a matter of logic but of iconography. As an imperially-minded power and in common with the Soviet Union, Communist China feels a need to expand. These opposing desires over a common boundary were bound to create friction. The condition has been exacerbated, however, by Chinese views of territory, conditioned by her geography. For China, land in terms of living space and productivity is crucial. Without remediing this land-space deficiency, China, even with her manpower reserves, will remain vulnerable. Her critical margin of subsistence means that she may be unable to sustain power for a period long enough to attain her objectives. When viewed from this felt need for space, much of what seems dangerous and almost irrational at least becomes understandable. The attitude toward space which is part of China's iconography has been applied even though it does not completely suit the geographical circumstances of the Sino-Soviet border.

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Note: See map on page 158 of this issue.

*Interview with Professor Koretada Sakamoto of Tokyo Foreign Language University, 11th November, 1965. Professor Sakamoto is Japan's leading expert on Inner Asia and particularly on Mongolia.