

How the Sino-Russian Boundary Conflict Was Finally Settled: From Nerchinsk 1689 to Vladivostok 2005 via Zhenbao Island 1969

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In Vladivostok in 2005, the exchange of ratification instruments of a historic but little-noticed agreement between Russia and China signed in Beijing in October of 2004 brought to an end more than three and half centuries of their struggle over territory and for dominance. This agreement, the last in a series that began with the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, covered only relatively tiny tracts of small river islands. But the dispute over these islands had been intractable for decades, long blocking wider agreement, and to resolve it, both sides had to compromise what they had until then regarded as an important principle. That they did thus compromise appeared to express the shared sense that no potential grounds for divisive quarrel should remain at a time in which they faced a common potential threat—from the US.

The history of the territorial contest initially between two great land empires and then between their residual modern incarnations is a saga of expansion and retreat, follies and misunderstandings, trickery, atrocities, battles and near-wars, and see-sawing rises and falls of state power, and that it has had its recent happy ending must make it a tempting subject for a new historian's full treatment: here, what is attempted is a synoptic account with sharpened focus on the twentieth-century phase and

especially the turning point that can now be seen to have been passed in the all-out battle on the ice of the Ussuri River between the armed forces of the USSR and those of the PRC on March 15, 1969.

Understanding of the development, crisis, and denouement of the Sino-Soviet conflict in the second half of the twentieth century of course requires reference to the wider political background. But the argument here is that the boundary issue was central to the dispute and that Beijing's policy towards settling it was consistent, even unwavering, so the focus of this article remains close, limited to the boundary issue itself, and within this area, mostly to the fluvial eastern sectors.

Beginnings

In the very beginning, there could be no conflict because there was no contact; indeed, in the little medieval Muscovite state, there was no awareness that far beyond the threshold of the Urals lay a great empire, another civilization. At the time of first contact in 1567, when two Cossacks reached Peking and unsuccessfully sought an audience with the emperor, China had been flourishing for centuries. But by the middle of the next century, the Russians' great thrust of expansion across the Urals and along the Siberian rivers had brought them to the Pacific seaboard and they had turned south. They penetrated the Amur Basin and worked down the river to its estuary; they founded a fortified township named Nerchinsk on the headwaters of the Amur, and built forts and set up trading posts for furs on the rivers. By the middle of the century, the new Manchu rulers had realized that the incursions into what they regarded as their domain were not the raids of freebooters, but represented an imperial challenge. In the 1670s and 1680s, there ensued a war of the marches, with Russian outposts and garrisons challenged and besieged. In 1685, the Russians proposed negotiations to delimit a boundary, and the two sides met in August 1689 outside Nerchinsk.

Each side, it appears, approached the conference confident of the rectitude of its position and expectant that it would have its way. The Russians' aim was a boundary that would at least legalize their settlements along the Amur and permit access to the river: the Chinese were there, however, under their emperor's orders to make sure of banishing intruders—"scoundrels who cross the frontier to hunt, plunder,

and kill,” as the preamble in the Chinese text described them.¹ The Chinese delegation (which included two Jesuit translators without whom communication was impossible) had brought an escort and retinue numbering several thousands, with cannon-armed junks on the river in support, heavily outnumbering the Russian side. The opening sessions showed the incompatibility of the two approaches, and deadlock brought a Chinese threat to destroy Nerchinsk, under which menace the Russians returned to the table and, at length, acquiesced to most of the Chinese claims.²

The Treaty of Nerchinsk laid down a frontier rather than a boundary, that is, a separation of sovereignties that was zonal rather than linear, using for delineation major geographical features such as mountain ranges rather than the precisely defined lines on maps and on the ground that modern states require. It ran from the Saiany Mountains, west of Lake Baikal, to the Sea of Okhotsk along the watershed of the Stanovoi Mountains. The Chinese had at first demanded a frontier further north, along the Lena River, and by settling for the more southern alignment, they can be said to have relinquished the claim to a tract of some 90,000 square miles: the chief Russian negotiator would certainly have emphasized this concession as his achievement—indeed, on his return to Moscow, he was ennobled. For their part, the Chinese, too, would have been well satisfied. The treaty provided for the destruction of the Russian forts and settlements in the Amur Basin, and its overall effect was to preserve imperial China’s territory from Russian encroachment for a century and a half.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the Chinese Empire was well advanced into its time of troubles, weakened by defeat in the Opium Wars and spent internally by the Taiping Rebellion, while the Russians had renewed their colonization of the Amur Basin and established settlements on what the Treaty of Nerchinsk had preserved as the Chinese coast of the Sea of Okhotsk. By the 1850s, repeated expeditions down the Amur to the sea had in effect restored and extended Russian control of the river, the

¹ Alexis Krausse, *Russia in Asia: A Record and a Study, 1558–1899* (London: Curzon Press, 1973), 40.

² These circumstances lend support to Soviet historians’ description of the treaty as “unequal.”

absence of Chinese resistance encouraging the Russians to enlarge their demands on a China now prostrate.

The Treaty of Nerchinsk having in effect been torn up, the Russians demanded a new boundary settlement. The outcome turned the tables. By the Treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860), China was cut off from the sea north of Korea, and from the entire Amur River below its confluence with the Ussuri. A new Sino-Russian boundary aligned on the Amur and Ussuri annexed to Russia huge tracts of what the Treaty of Nerchinsk had recognized as Chinese imperial territory. Furthermore, the Russians—or perhaps an individual Russian acting on his own initiative—not satisfied with this new deal that gave them so much, tucked another ace up their sleeve, so to speak. In 1861, Petr Kazakevich, chief Russian boundary commissioner, persuaded or coerced his Chinese opposite to accept and sign a small-scale map (less than 1:1,000,000) that he presented as giving expression to the terms of the Treaty of Peking: it did no such thing. Where that treaty had left the Amur and Ussuri as boundary rivers and therefore as shared international waterways, Kazakevich's map made them exclusively Russian by marking the international boundary along the Chinese banks. He went even further.

The text of the Treaty of Peking explicitly runs the boundary through the Amur/Ussuri confluence, but the line on Kazakevich's map takes a different route at that point. The rivers draw together at an oblique angle, creating a delta of land between them; but some thirty miles short of the point where their main currents merge, a minor channel connects the rivers, cartographically making an island of the land between the rivers. Kazakevich drew his boundary along this channel, thus making inland waterways of the river stretches between the mouths of the channel and the confluence Russian, and making the inter-connecting channel itself a boundary feature. Kazakevich's grateful government named the channel after him (the Chinese call it the Fuyuan Channel). The notional island thus created what the Russians call Great Ussuri, the Chinese Heixiazi, the word signifying a bear, so henceforth, "Bear Island." In due course, the Russians began depicting Kazakevich's version of the boundary on their maps, and over the years, authoritative European cartographers came to follow suit. From the early 1920s, Bear Island was occupied by Soviet citizens, coming with time to be regarded as an offshore development of Khabarovsk.

Feebly, the Chinese attempted to delay and deny ratification of the treaties, but the Russians treated the issue as closed: townships-to-be-cities replaced settlements, Blagoveshchensk on the Amur, Khabarovsk at the confluence, Vladivostok on the sea—the “Ruler of the East,” indeed. “The Soviet Union, by recreating the Russian Empire in the 1920s, also reproduced the same tensions with China that had existed under the Tsars.”³ In the Russian perception, there was still a manifest destiny to be fulfilled, however. The Outer Mongolian territory of China appeared as an anomaly, as did even Manchuria: both would, in the view from Moscow, naturally become Russian, and political geographers in Europe tended towards the same expectations. Japan’s irruption onto the Asian mainland in the 1930s, taking Manchuria for itself, blocked this ambition. The Amur and Ussuri became Russo-Japanese boundaries, already marked by constant friction breaking out in some sectors into major battles. China, though having achieved its own regime change from empire to republic in 1912, had in effect ceased to have a boundary with Russia in its northeast.

For China, there was a false dawn soon after the Russian Revolution. In 1919, the commissar for foreign affairs, Lev Karakhan, announced the Soviet government’s unilateral and unconditional renunciation of all the Tsars’ territorial seizures in China, and Lenin himself added color and emphasis to this sacrificial pronouncement. Moscow’s proclaimed magnanimity aroused intense gratitude and goodwill in nationalist circles in China, enthusing many who were throwing in their lot with the Communist Party, among them Mao and other leaders-to-be. But at the time of the Karakhan declaration, it so happened that much of the area that the new-born USSR promised to relinquish was out of its control, held by the counterrevolutionary White forces. As soon as this temporary adversity was corrected, Moscow tacitly revoked the Karakhan declaration and set about consolidating the tsarist empire, reincarnated as the USSR. The gratitude political Chinese had felt turned to rancor and resolve that when their country at last threw off its oppressors, it would regain, if necessary by force, the lost lands that the Russians themselves had momentarily admitted to be the Tsars’ booty. “For the Chinese, the boundary became the physical incarnation of China’s failure to fend off the predations of European civilization, while for the Russians, their

³ Sarah C. M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia and Their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 11.

expanded boundary enshrined their country's great power status. Thus, the border became a potent but antipodal symbol for both countries—for one, it represented failure, for the other, success.”⁴

By 1949 when, in the words of Mao Zedong, China “stood up” as the People's Republic, the epilogue of World War II had finally fulfilled Moscow's long-held aspiration: the Russians' swift defeat of the Japanese in “Manchukuo” had given them at last full control of Manchuria, Russia regaining the railway that crossed it and Port Arthur and developing extensive interests in Xinjiang, while Outer Mongolia had previously seceded to become a Soviet puppet state, the Mongolian People's Republic. On the border rivers, the USSR exercised control and claimed ownership up to the Chinese banks. But for the new government of the PRC, facing enormous difficulties in establishing control of a vast country war torn for decades while the old regime fought on and monopolized much of the state machinery, the overriding priority was to nourish and strengthen alliance with the USSR, the only potential source of the economic assistance and political alliance that China desperately needed.

Collision Course

That live territorial and boundary disputes with several neighboring states were part of the PRC's inheritance was immediately demonstrated by the raiding back from Burma, across a long-disputed boundary, of Guomindang forces revived and rearmed by agencies of the US. That neighbors' encroachments into Chinese territory were even now not at an end was forcefully shown in February 1951 when India, although acting as a friend and supporter of the PRC diplomatically, nevertheless deployed armed force to annex the Tibetan monastery center of Tawang and a significant swathe of territory around it. China, by then engaged in the Korean War, ignored the provocation.⁵ But beyond these immediate challenges lay a problem that affected all boundary sectors. Even where

⁴ Paine, *Imperial Rivals*, 9.

⁵ It is sometimes suggested that Beijing did not notice this annexation—its control of Tibet was at that time far from complete. But the Lhasa authorities were immediately informed of the Indian action and hotly protested to New Delhi; there was a faction within the Potala well disposed towards the Chinese, and it is unlikely that the latter were not informed of these important events. Furthermore, the PRC embassy in New Delhi would have reported to the Indian press accounts of the seizure of Tawang.

they had been delimited, the treaties or the surveys upon which they were based were deficient by contemporary standards. And with several neighbors, no formal boundary had ever been created.

The Central Committee of the CCP took up the task of establishing policy guidelines to be followed as China sought to consolidate and formalize its boundaries, and from a statement of Zhou Enlai at the 1955 Afro-Asian conference in Bandung as well as from Beijing's actions over the following half century, it is possible to infer its decisions.

With neighbors with whom there had been no boundary delimitation, China would carefully observe the status quo and, when both parties were ready, open negotiations to seek a mutually satisfactory territorial dispensation, based on the traditional and customary line or zone of separation. Burma was the outstanding instance: others were India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Mongolia. The boundary with Afghanistan was a special case: it had been delimited, but by Russia and Britain without China's participation.

Where there had been formal delimitation, China would observe the boundary thus legitimized, without regard to the historical circumstances in which diplomatic settlement had been achieved or imposed. This fundamental decision expressed recognition that the bequeathed irredentist commitment to regain "lost lands" would, if pursued, embroil the PRC in intractable dispute and likely conflict with many of its neighbors, the USSR first among them, while putting the new China at odds with the international community. "Under modern international law, the validity of treaties signed prior to the Covenant of the League of Nations is not affected by whether or not they were negotiated under duress."⁶ Thus, the PRC determined to observe its treaty obligations, however "unequal" in origin they might be.

When differences arose over treaty interpretation or implementation, again China would urge careful joint observance of the status quo pending negotiation to reconcile the differences. If there was a danger of patrol clashes that would envenom public attitudes, the parties should agree on mutual withdrawal of armed forces for an agreed reciprocal distance: such withdrawals would not involve civil administration nor have any bearing on the two sides' claims. Here, however, there was a crucial caveat. The

⁶ Louis Henkin et al., *International Law Cases and Materials*, 640, cited by Paine, *Imperial Rivals*, 99, note 19.

negotiation, taking as its basis the relevant treaty, could not be piecemeal but must be comprehensive, covering the entire stretch of the boundary concerned; it should also issue a new treaty, not a revision of the old one.

At Bandung, Zhou Enlai concluded his summary of his government's approach to boundary settlement with a pledge and a warning: "We shall use only peaceful means and we shall not permit any other kind of method." But the policy he had declared was primarily conflict averse and conservative. It was as if the new Chinese leadership had followed the advice of the nineteenth-century English statesman who enjoined officers on the Indian frontier to "bear in mind that it is not a strip of more or less barren or even productive territory that we want, but a clear and well-defined boundary."

An American scholar's illuminating categorization of the strategies governments may adopt for dealing with territorial disputes gives three:

- A delaying strategy involves doing nothing except maintaining a state's claims through official maps and public declarations.
- An escalation strategy involves the threat or use of force over disputed territory.
- A cooperation strategy excludes the threat or use of force and involves instead an offer to compromise by dividing control of the contested land or dropping outstanding claims.⁷

China's practice and record over half a century indicates that, at the beginning, out of a rational assessment of national self-interest, Beijing chose to follow the "cooperation strategy" and thereafter applied it consistently, lapsing into the "escalation strategy" only in the case of the dispute with Vietnam.⁸ Its two largest neighbors, however, for their own reasons, adopted the "escalation strategy" to resolve their territorial disputes with China, both thus imposing conflict on the PRC, India in the early 1960s and on the USSR in the latter 1960s. In both cases, China was victorious militarily but a loser in the contest for international understanding.

⁷ M. Taylor Fravel, "Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation," *International Security* 30, no. 2 (fall 2005): 52.

⁸ In this instance, territory was not the real issue: China attacked to assert hegemony over Vietnam.

Until the late 1950s, both Beijing and Moscow let the boundary issue lie. In the honeymoon period after the establishment of the People's Republic, Moscow appears to have made no attempt to enforce a claim to possession of the full breadth of the border rivers; indeed, there is an indication that the Soviets may at one stage have been minded to waive it.⁹

Moscow had recently been seized with this issue of the precise boundary alignment within a boundary river. An Anglo-Russian treaty of 1873 had made the Oxus River/Amu Darya a boundary between Russian imperial territory and Afghanistan: the text did not stipulate the boundary's exact alignment within the river, and thus implied that it would follow the center of the main stream, but over succeeding decades, first the Russians and then the Soviets succeeded in imposing their possession and rule over the entirety of the river, denying Afghans access to and use of its waters unless permission was sought and granted. Afghan protests over this situation were ignored or rebuffed until a renewed appeal from Kabul soon after the Second World War: renegotiation of the original treaty in 1946 made Afghanistan's equal rights on the river explicit. Moscow did not at that time, however, choose to apply this precedent to the river borders with China.

Soon after the formalizing of the navigation agreement, still in the early 1950s, Beijing requested and received from Moscow a set of maps covering the northeast border areas, and these maps marked the international boundary along the Chinese bank—and along the Kazakevichevo/Fuyuan Channel (henceforward K/F). This then was the first occasion on which Moscow played the Kazakevich card to the PRC, and it may have been the first intimation of the claim that the new Chinese leadership received. It seems unlikely that the exact alignment of what was then a *de facto* Sino-Japanese boundary would have caught the attention of the Chinese Communist leadership during their peripatetic years battling through insurgency to victory in civil war. Whether when the Chinese received Moscow's maps they were even aware of

⁹ A Sino-Soviet agreement on river navigation signed in January 1951 took it as given that the boundary line lay within the main stream. The agreement specified that citizens of each country were to enjoy rights of navigation and fishing on the boundary rivers "within [their country's] waters up to the state border line." If the boundary were taken to run where the water lapped the Chinese bank, then Chinese citizens would have no "waters" at all for navigation or fishing, nor access to any river island. The wording of the agreement therefore implies a boundary line within the main stream.

Kazakevich's cartographic amendment to the Treaty of Peking also seems uncertain. It was decades since Peking/Peiping had been the capital, and the GMT government had taken with it on its retreats all the archival material it could handle. Therefore, that the newly established leadership of China could have readily found the vexed map relating to the Treaty of Peking in the remaining imperial archives must, again, be uncertain, even unlikely.

Since the request for the Soviet maps had gone from the PRC's bureau of survey and mapping to the equivalent department in Moscow, the central Chinese government could feign unawareness of the ominous territorial implications the maps conveyed, and did so. Wholly dependent still on Soviet goodwill, with the Korean War exacerbating all their problems, the last thing the Chinese leadership could risk was a dispute with Moscow over a matter as invidious as territory, so Beijing did not challenge the boundary alignment depicted on the Soviet maps. The PRC's own maps, when it began to issue them, showed the boundary as running through the rivers' confluence, however,¹⁰ and an early verbal statement of China's opposing view of the boundary alignment on the rivers was made indirectly in the text of the 1961 Sino-Burmese boundary treaty: here, it is stated that wherever a boundary is aligned on a navigable river, it will follow the central line of the midstream. If the Soviet ambassador in Rangoon had been alert, he would have signaled Moscow that its boundary claim on the rivers was likely to be disputed.

Meanwhile, the rational efficacy of the cautious "cooperation strategy" for dealing with boundary problems that the Central Committee had decided on and Beijing's commitment to pursuing it were demonstrated in a series of mutually satisfactory settlements beginning with Burma in 1961 and following on in the next three years with Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mongolia.¹¹ But that Beijing had by no means

¹⁰ Beijing dropped a claim that the GMT's maps had always shown, however, to an area known as the "Sixty-four Villages Tract" on the Russian side of the Amur. The Treaty of Aigun had left that to China, but during the Boxer Rebellion, the local Russian authorities had "ethnically cleansed" it by driving most of the Chinese inhabitants into the river. At that time, Beijing did not publish any maps of a scale that would show just where on the rivers the boundary lay. In July 2005, however, it released on the Internet about four hundred detailed maps depicting the "politically correct" alignments of China's boundaries, lands, and waters.

¹¹ These settlements were followed by others, with North Korea, Vietnam (though in this

found a panacea for its border problems was sharply shown in the case of India: here, the Indians refused to negotiate, and China had to fight a short, fierce border war in 1962 to preserve the status quo against India's attempt to change it in its own favor by force of arms.¹²

Through the 1950s, the Sino-Soviet borders, thinly populated and little guarded, were for the most part peaceful, even tranquil. But the ideological divergence that began with Khrushchev's obituary repudiation of Stalin in 1956 quickly grew into a schism and played back with toxic effect into state-to-state relations, the most drastic early consequence being Khrushchev's treaty-breaking termination of development aid to China, with abrupt withdrawal of Soviet experts in 1960. As the 1960s began, the minor, even trivial disturbances that in the 1950s had irregularly occurred along the border rivers multiplied and changed in nature. Misunderstandings or disputes among local inhabitants over fishing or agricultural use of islands that had previously been pacified, as a rule, by local authorities, now began to number in the annual thousands and became matters for central government attention and reciprocal accusation and blame. Opting for what is defined above as an "escalation strategy" based on the threat or use of force, Moscow began physically to

case, only after a trivial dispute had been used by Beijing as an excuse for aggression), and Laos, the three ex-Soviet central Asian states. Thus, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, the PRC had settled all its boundaries except those with India and the latter's client state, Bhutan.

¹² The writer analyzed this dispute at length in Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, (London: Cape, 1970) and has updated the analysis often elsewhere since then, so here follows only a bald summary. The Indian government decided that it should define the boundary with China unilaterally on an alignment chosen in New Delhi, declaring that the boundary of its choice had been settled by historical process and was indisputable and consequently nonnegotiable. For over three years, it refused Beijing's calls for negotiation. From 1960, the Indians began describing Chinese occupation of Indian-claimed territory as aggression, thus convincing its political public that military action was needed to "repel the aggressors." First, New Delhi attempted a "forward policy" of military infiltration and encirclement to force the stronger and tactically advantaged Chinese positions out of Indian-claimed territory. When this failed, it mustered forces to mount a frontal assault: Prime Minister Nehru publicly proclaimed the intention to drive Chinese forces out of Indian-claimed territory, thus legitimizing an attack in anticipatory self-defense by China. Swift and overwhelming victory in this punitive foray was clinched by China's preplanned ceasefire and withdrawal. And although New Delhi's refusal to negotiate a settlement was—and remains—adamant, the de facto Sino-Indian border has remained more or less undisturbed since the border war.

assert what it perceived as its legal right to a China-bank boundary, and consequently to treat any Chinese use of the rivers as incursions unless permission had been sought and granted. And while up to that time, Beijing had been urging restraint on its border inhabitants who wished to assert traditional navigational and economic usages, it now appears that it gave them a green light in this regard. So from Moscow's point of view, what had been occasional civilian border infringements had now become a coordinated state challenge to its boundary on the rivers.

In 1967, Soviet gunboats intercepted the first Chinese vessel heading down the Amur after the spring thaw to pass through the confluence into the Ussuri, boarded it and turned it back. From then on, this Soviet blockade left Chinese vessels with the K/F Channel as the only connection between the rivers, a passage too narrow at the best of times for the biggest river boats and at times of low water, non-navigable.

The profound dispute over the lie of the boundary within the rivers, latent for generations, had now become open, critical, and explosive.

Moscow's claim to a China-bank boundary and consequent "exclusive right of possession and sovereign jurisdiction" over the entirety of the border rivers rested solely on Kazakevich's cartographic amendment to the Treaty of Peking. On its side, Beijing dismissed this map as having no legitimacy, suggesting that it had been drawn up by Russia prior to the signing of the Treaty of Peking and foisted onto the Chinese imperial boundary commissioners by trickery.¹³ The Chinese rested their legal case on the wording of the Treaty of Peking and argued from the long-established principle of international law that they had articulated in the treaty with Burma: that, in the absence of any alternative specification in the treaty, when a navigable river comprises an international boundary, the division of sovereignty will lie on the *thalweg*, an imaginary line along the deepest part of the main channel. Under the *thalweg* principle, the two parties become in effect co-owners of the rivers, enjoying equal rights to their use and sovereign authority over the waters and islands lying on their own side of the *thalweg*. That the text of the treaty placed the boundary through the rivers' confluence meant that the K/F Channel and Bear Island lay wholly within Chinese territory, and in

¹³ The Chinese would have felt they had met with this kind of thing before. The independent Indian government's northeast boundary claim rested on a map drawn by an English Kazakevich, so to speak, Sir Henry McMahon. See Maxwell, *India's China War*.

Beijing's reading, created the "inalienable right for Chinese boats to navigate the main channel through the confluence," which is to say on the waters offshore of Khabarovsk.

By this stage, the opposed policies adopted by the USSR and the PRC had already locked them onto a collision course. Moscow was bent on imposing on China its own reading of the boundary treaties and refused to enter into the comprehensive negotiations that Beijing sought. Beijing was determined to exercise what it considered to be its existing legal rights along and on the rivers. If these policies were not modified by one side or the other, they would ineluctably lead to armed conflict on the borders.¹⁴ While Moscow remained determined to deny that China had a legitimate right to river access and use and was prepared to exert force to prevent China's exercise of its claimed rights, Beijing would have to choose between acquiescence, in fact surrender, and resistance—which would ultimately have to be by force of arms. Since China had "stood up," there could be no course for the Chinese leadership other than resistance.

Collision

Sino-Soviet diplomatic exchanges about developments on the border rivers in the early 1960s revealed that their differences over the meaning of the Treaty of Peking were going to be compounded and exacerbated by differences over how understanding might be reached. The Chinese, by now with experience in successful boundary negotiations, argued that if the two sides sought agreement in a spirit of "mutual understanding and mutual accommodation," differences that appeared intractable could be negotiated to mutual satisfaction. But they insisted that negotiations must take the Treaty of Peking as the starting point and basis—and here, from Moscow's point of view, was the rub. To accept Beijing's suggestion of negotiation on the basis of the Chinese reading of the Treaty text would be to relinquish the China-bank claim in advance. Moscow argued that the boundary line was already clearly established as running along the Chinese bank and through the K/F Channel by the Treaty of Peking when

¹⁴ Moscow's maps and China's diverged much more markedly in the western sector of their borders, creating very large disputed areas over which, unless differences were peacefully negotiated, there would again inevitably be conflict. This article will leave that area of dispute aside, concentrating on the border rivers.

read with its “related documents” (i.e., Kazakevich’s map), and that there was therefore no need for further negotiation. The Sino-Soviet boundary was already settled, and “in reality, there is no territorial question between the Soviet Union and China.”¹⁵ Moscow would consent only to discussions aimed at ironing out differences that might remain on particular sections of the borders—and it would specify just which sections would be open to discussion. Thus, China’s offer to negotiate the boundary as a whole was refused, Moscow in effect arrogating to itself the right to unilaterally define China’s boundaries, just as New Delhi had done a few years before.

By this time, Cold War developments, feeding into the Sino-Soviet confrontation, had introduced a new element into the border dispute—one that was extraneous in essence and largely rhetorical but that nevertheless complicated it. Beijing accused Khrushchev of “adventurism” and “capitulationism” in the 1962 Cuba missile crisis: Khrushchev retorted by accusing China of craven acquiescence in Britain’s retention of Hong Kong. In Beijing’s perception, it was behaving regarding Hong Kong as should any responsible member of the international community; rather than simply taking over Hong Kong, as it could easily have done in 1950, it had scrupulously observed its treaty obligations and allowed the imperialists to stay on.¹⁶ So Beijing snapped back at Moscow in words to this effect: “You taunt us that we should have broken a treaty and used force to seize back Hong Kong, but how would you like us to break the Treaty of Peking and seize back the lands the Tsars stole?” Moscow took—or pretended to take—this rhetorical rejoinder as revealing that a serious threat of irredentist aggression lay beneath Beijing’s description of the Treaty of Peking as “unequal.” So while in fact the Chinese position and approach were unaltered, its consistency became obscured by the hotly debated side issue of “unequal treaties.”

In Beijing’s account, China began urging negotiations in 1960, and in 1963, put forward a detailed proposal for freezing the situation on the borders and separating armed forces so that local conflicts could be avoided, pending a negotiated settlement. But the first parley on the

¹⁵ Soviet statement of June 13, 1969. See, *Pravda*, June 14, 1969.

¹⁶ In this case, patience was certain to be rewarded because the treaty in question was a lease, the termination of which would necessarily result in Britain’s retroceding the island colony—as it did in 1997.

growing conflict over the rivers, when it opened in Beijing in 1964, was schizophrenic in nature, the Chinese regarding the occasion as the opening of boundary negotiations and the Russians insisting that they had come only for “consultation” over some local problems on the rivers. By then, furthermore, real enmity had developed between the once fraternal allies, and the meeting achieved nothing and was not followed up. A faint gleam of light can now be seen to have shone, however, in the intimation by the Soviet side that Moscow might show magnanimity by allowing the *thalweg* principle to be applied to the rivers—but only downstream as far as the K/F Channel. Whether the Chinese appreciated it at the time or not, this showed that what fundamentally mattered to Moscow, the ultimately nonnegotiable nub of the dispute, was its permanently continued possession of Bear Island, the island formed at the confluence, offshore of the now great city of Khabarovsk. To the Chinese in 1964, however, the hint that decades later was to develop into the great compromise that finally closed the whole dispute, passed unnoticed, or was anyway ignored. As Beijing saw it, the Soviet side could not “concede” what by law already existed, a *thalweg* boundary, so its offer was meaningless.

The fruitless 1964 meeting left the border rivers as the stage for a continuing struggle, unequal at first. All along the rivers, Chinese civilians, their numbers much increased since the early 1950s and their morale enlivened to audacity by the Cultural Revolution, sought to exercise rights of access to and use of the islands and waters on their side of the main stream, and they were no doubt now encouraged to do so by their government. And all along the rivers, Soviet border guards, military units under ultimate KGB control, moved to thwart them. Fishing nets and boats were seized, wooden craft were rammed by Soviet gunboats, high-pressure hoses were played on their crews. On the winter ice, troops in armored personnel carriers harried Chinese civilians on the islands, sometimes running them down, sometimes abducting them.

This one-sided struggle, passive civilian resistance to nonlethal military force, was regularly filmed by official Chinese cameramen, to be printed in a propaganda booklet, “Down with the New Tsars” and shown in a film of the same name. But, it often appeared to the confusion and anger of the victims of Soviet strong-arm methods that the Chinese state stood by, making no effort to intervene to protect its citizens. By the late 1960s, the Soviet border guards had largely carried out their orders to keep what Moscow held to be their national territory inviolate against

incursions by Chinese civilians. While there could always be an occasional furtive but successful foray to fish or forage for hay, where guards were absent or looking the other way, by and large, Chinese civilian access to the rivers had been cut off. The cost of the dispute to the Soviet Union had, however, already become very high, and promised to continue indefinitely. Moscow apparently had by now come to believe that Beijing's approach, its insistence on negotiation, was cover for an ulterior irredentist intention, and had therefore greatly increased its concentration of military forces in the Soviet Far East and Mongolia. Clearly, it was becoming urgently necessary for Moscow to bring the issue to a showdown, which is to say to demonstrate that China's attempt to gainsay the Soviet reading of the legal situation was useless. Only when Beijing acceded could the onerous burden of the Soviet Army's far-eastern deployment be eased.

By the winter of 1968/9, the crux of the dispute had shifted. Chinese civilian use of the rivers having been effectively terminated, what continued as a provocation to Moscow was the persistence of the Chinese frontier guards in maintaining regular patrols as if the river surfaces and islands up to midstream belonged to China. While this continued, the matter could not be considered closed, the dispute frozen, enabling troop concentrations to be thinned out. So the methods of coercive but nonlethal deterrence the Soviet frontier guards had successfully used against Chinese civilians were now turned against their opposite numbers on the Chinese side. And although the Chinese frontier guards (PLA, though not of the main force) were no match in their equipment for the Soviet border force, they were armed as light infantry, trained, and of high morale.

The orders given to the two sides must have mirrored each other: Moscow to its border guard units, "Use all necessary force short of gunfire to keep the PLA off the rivers"; Beijing to its force, "Avoid confrontation, but at all costs maintain your patrolling; fire only if fired upon." In this contradiction, the issue came to its climax—irresistible force meeting immovable object, each side perceiving its policy as defensive of an inalienable national interest. The winter months of 1968/9 saw the troops on the two sides doing their best to carry out their mutually exclusive orders. The Soviet force would use its far greater mobility through helicopters, trucks, and armored personnel carriers on the ice to confront PLA patrols with superior forces: if the Chinese did not respond to orders and threats to get back to their bank, they would be physically

driven back. When Chinese patrols were cornered, they would be beaten up to discourage return. So it went on, with the contest of wills showing no sign of ending. The Chinese border guards persisted in patrolling, and Beijing began military preparations for a conflict it recognized as unavoidable.

So on March 2, 1969, near a little island that hugs the Chinese bank of the Ussuri known to the Russians as Damanskii and to the Chinese as Zhenbao, the inevitable clash between the border guards of the two sides duly occurred. Confronting each other at close quarters on the ice, both sides opened fire, each inflicting fatal casualties on the other.

As would be expected, the two sides' accounts of how the skirmish began contradict each other. The question of who fired first has minimal historical significance: if the clash had not occurred on that day and at that place and in that precise manner it would certainly have occurred somewhere else on the rivers, somehow, before the winter ended. Nevertheless, academic argument about it has continued to the present. Here, it is necessary only to summarize the two opposing accounts.

The Soviet version tells of their small force, armed of course but not expecting combat, intercepting an intruding Chinese patrol on the ice near Zhenbao/Damanskii to exhort or force them to return to their own territory. When the Soviet troops were close to the Chinese, the latter opened fire without warning, instantly killing several of the Soviet troops. The Soviets began to shoot back but found themselves enfiladed by a previously unseen secondary PLA force lying under cover on the island itself. Taken by surprise and outnumbered, suffering more casualties, the Soviet troops nevertheless successfully fought back, receiving some reinforcements by armored troop carriers. The fighting ended with their having driven their enemy back and taken control of Zhenbao Island [since it is now formally recognized as Chinese, this name will henceforth be used here].

In the PLA participants' account,¹⁷ the troops in one of their patrols had been given a brutal beating a few weeks before when outnumbering Soviet troops who had cornered them on Zhenbao Island, and had been warned that if they tried to return, they would be fired upon. To safeguard his men, the local commander began covering the patrols on the ice by preplacing a force on the island. True to their previous threats, when the

¹⁷ Given at length to the writer by participants, at the site of the battle, in 1973 and reported in *China Quarterly*, no. 56 (October/December 1973).

Soviet troops disembarked from their vehicles on the day of the clash, they came with weapons loaded and at the ready and wearing steel helmets—and quickly opened fire on the PLA patrol on the ice, killing several. The immediate intervention of the covering troops on the island meant that the Soviet force was outnumbered, and at the end of the skirmish, the PLA was left in control of the island.

Two observations may be made:

First: That the Soviet government, its patience exhausted, had changed its orders to its border forces so as to free them to use lethal fire if nothing else would end Chinese provocations is by no means improbable; indeed, exactly such an “escalation” was inherent, even mandatory, in Moscow’s approach to the dispute.¹⁸ Beijing later claimed to have received intelligence confirming that Moscow had thus changed the rules of engagement set for its border guards.

Second: Since the PRC leadership was determined not to acquiesce to Soviet use of force, it would have accepted that ultimately, pressure would have to be resisted by force of arms. Thus, for the Chinese, it was crucial that when the inevitable conflict broke out, it was on grounds and in circumstances favorable to a decisive Chinese victory. The terrain around Zhenbao Island exactly suited this essential requirement, and since it can hardly have been coincidence that the fighting broke out there, it is most likely that it happened through Chinese planning and maneuver. The firefight may have begun either when the Soviet troops, having fallen into a trap, sprung it by opening fire, or when the Chinese side, having lured the Soviets into the trap, sprung it themselves by opening fire. So the question of “who fired first?” must remain open, but it is of little importance.

The essence of the matter is that for several years, the USSR had been on the strategic offensive, using overwhelming local superiority in the attempt to force upon the PRC a boundary claim profoundly inimical to China’s interests, and one that had weak, even spurious, legal justification. At Zhenbao, the Chinese stood their ground and fought an

¹⁸ How an “escalation strategy” can entrap governments that adopt it is illustrated by the Indian experience. The original Indian intention was to use force peacefully, as it were, aiming to extrude the Chinese from Indian-claimed territory without driving them out with gunfire. But the logic of this approach meant that when it failed, India had no other resort but to prepare an all-out frontal assault.

action that in their view was wholly analogous to the “counterattack in self-defense” that they had launched against India in October 1962. Accounts reflecting later interviews with high-ranking PLA officers contradict parts of what the writer was told by low-ranking participants in 1973. General Chen Xilian, area commander in 1969, told an interviewer that the PLA had been preparing for a decisive clash for months, and as the Soviets increased their pressure in the Zhenbao area, had deployed crack, combat-tested troops to confront them there. Direct communications were set up to Beijing from what would become the battlefield so as to give the national leadership ultimate control. “When the Soviet troops attempted their provocation on March 2,” General Chen recalled, “they actually were hopelessly outnumbered by us. We won a clear victory on the battlefield”—a victory that was to be confirmed on March 15.¹⁹ This outcome taught Moscow the lesson Beijing intended: that if China was to be forced into bowing to Soviet territorial claims, it could only be through all-out war—a prospect at which, the Chinese believed (rightly as it turned out), Moscow would ultimately balk.

The Chinese claim that they won that first skirmish, never losing control of the island, is apparently confirmed in the Soviet reaction. If the Soviet troops had beaten the Chinese back off the river and the island, as Moscow claimed, then they might have decided that their opponents had been taught the necessary lesson and been content to continue their watch for another intrusion. But in the event, the Soviet side immediately began a rapid and heavy build-up of forces, reaching far beyond the usual light armament of the border units. It included strong infantry units of the regular army in at least brigade strength, a detachment of T62 tanks, recoilless rifles, and artillery, including multiple rocket launchers: the purpose of this concentration could not have been other than to launch a punitive and decisive attack that, by regaining Zhenbao, would teach the Chinese that winning a skirmish by surprise attack was one thing but facing the resolute might of the Soviet Army in prepared battle, quite another.

It was impossible to hide this military concentration from the Chinese—their eyes and ears were sufficient to keep them informed and anticipatory of what was to come. They concentrated local border guard

¹⁹ YANG Kuisong, “The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: from Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement,” *Cold War History* 1, no. 1 (August 2000).

units but also called up regular PLA units with artillery and especially recoilless rifles and other anti-tank weapons, and could await the day of attack with confidence. This was because, for the original confrontation, the local PLA commander had well remembered the fundamental military injunctions of Mao Zedong: “Choose the battlefield”; “Fight only when you are sure of victory.” The topographical situation of Zhenbao is unusual, perhaps unique on the Ussuri at least, in that the ground on the Chinese bank beside the island rises immediately and steeply into a long, low ridge. Troops and light artillery emplaced on that ridge can dominate the island, which is only about a hundred meters from the Chinese bank, as well as the approaches to it from the Russian bank four hundred meters distant, and from up- and downstream. Military cadets presented with such a tactical problem at a sand table exercise would instantly grasp the answer: for a force attacking from the Russian bank to seize the island, it is necessary first to occupy the high ground beyond it.

But the unfortunate local Soviet commander and his troops had to ignore this tactical imperative and fight at a decisive disadvantage. Moscow’s very insistence on a China-bank boundary tied the hands of their military in this local action. It meant that to land troops on the Chinese bank admittedly entailed invading China—an act of war the consequences of which, Beijing had warned, would be all-out conflict on every front. Since the USSR was not then ready to go to war with China, the outcome of the battle on March 15, 1969 was a foregone conclusion: for the Soviet forces, it was unwinnable.

The telling tactical advantage enjoyed by the Chinese seems to have been compounded by ineptitude of the local Soviet commander. Rather than being concentrated for the assault, the strong Soviet forces were dissipated in three successive attacks, each stronger than the previous one. In the final attack, the commander of the Soviet troops lost control of the battle—and his life—by joining the crew of a tank. The long day’s fighting ended with the situation just as it had been since the night of March 2: Zhenbao Island remained under PLA occupation and control.

In its historical context, this Chinese victory was momentous, marking the closure of the era begun in the mid-nineteenth century during which Russia could exert military superiority to expand its borders over China’s resistance.

For Moscow to admit that it had accepted defeat in the second Zhenbao battle was unthinkable. “The events on Damanskii had the effect

of an electric shock in Moscow. The Politburo was terrified that the Chinese might make a large-scale intrusion into Soviet territory . . .”²⁰ The intensity of the shock caused to the Soviet public by news of the outbreak of fighting against China can be gauged by a reading of Evtushenko’s elegiac call to battle against the barbarian Asiatic hordes, “On the Red Ussuri Snow.”²¹ So every effort was made to convince the Soviet people—and the international community as well—that the battle ended in a crushing Soviet victory, won over “human wave” attacks that cost the Chinese thousands of casualties. (There are fifty-one graves in China’s memorial cemetery for those killed in the two days of fighting.) These efforts were largely successful, and their delusory effect lingers to this day, expressed in histories and sustained in academic papers in the West as well as in Russia. For its part, Beijing did not rub in its victory by boasting of it, this restraint being taken of course as admission of defeat.

There was an international predisposition to accept the Soviet version of events. As a contemporary observer put it, “so solidly built into our consciousness is the concept that China is conducting a rapacious and belligerent foreign policy that whenever a dispute arises in which China is involved, she is instantly assumed to have provoked it.”²² This conditioned response had served the Indian government well at the beginning of the 1960s, enabling it to spread the belief that it was Beijing rather than India that was refusing to negotiate a settlement, and even to present China’s final punitive response to India’s sustained military pressure as “unprovoked aggression.” Thus, in the general international perception in 1969 and long afterwards, the Chinese had tried out on the Russians in the first Zhenbao clash the bullying methods they had used

²⁰ Arkady N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 164 quoted by Christian Ostermann, “New Evidence on the Sino-Soviet Border Dispute, 1969–71,” *Bulletin: Cold War International History Project* 6/7 (Winter 1995/1996).

²¹ The text in translation is on 211–213 in *Studies in Comparative Communism: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2 no. 3/4, (July/October 1969). There is a full and most valuable collection of documents concerning the diplomatic and political repercussions of the Zhenbao clashes in this double issue.

²² Felix Greene, *A Curtain of Ignorance* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), 223. No one reading American publications on China even now would confidently conclude that Greene’s observation is no longer true. Even on the Zhenbao incidents, there is a steady trickle of American academic papers that, by removing the issue from the context of the boundary dispute, which alone makes it comprehensible, try to prove that the PRC was guilty of an aggressive and unprovoked deed of violence at Zhenbao.

against India, and the “defeat” they suffered in the Soviet counterattack was well deserved.

The battles on the Ussuri ice enflamed the whole length of the Sino-Soviet borders, with artillery fire and counter-fire in several sectors but no further infantry battles. In the western sector, Moscow took its revenge with annihilation attacks on isolated Chinese border force patrols, lethal little actions with no military or political significance: around Zhenbao itself, Soviet batteries continued fire for weeks, barrages extending deep into Chinese territory and only gradually becoming desultory. But the Chinese leadership, having in their view successfully taught Moscow a “bitter lesson,” was content to let that sink in, and saw no necessity to take further military action.

Settlement

Moscow immediately began to seek talks. Prime Minister Andrei Kosygin put through a telephone call to Beijing on March 21 asking to speak to either Mao Zedong or Zhou Enlai. Beijing declined to engage in “hotline” exchanges, advising the Soviets to “calm down” and communicate through normal diplomatic channels.

It was only after six months that Beijing agreed to Soviet calls for a summit meeting, and Kosygin went to meet Zhou Enlai at Beijing Airport, a journey to Canossa if ever there was one. While Beijing saw this September meeting as itself marking a “great victory” for China, its sole achievement seems to have been a joint “no war” understanding, which, however, Moscow did not confirm. Zhou took the opportunity to restate the consistent Chinese approach in border disputes, quickly confirming his oral persuasions in a letter to Kosygin: strictly maintain the status quo; avoid further armed conflict by withdrawing armed forces for an agreed, reciprocal distance (this was understood to be without implication for sovereignty); and resume negotiations to resolve all disputes.²³ There is evidence of a “hawks v. doves” division within the Soviet leadership at this time. For example, the Chinese noted that Kosygin was given a demonstratively low-grade airport reception on his arrival back in Moscow from his visit to Beijing. At all events, the Zhou/Kosygin

²³ Felix Greene, *A Curtain of Ignorance*, 223.

meeting by no means produced the breakthrough that, his letter suggests, Zhou hoped had been achieved. Moscow did not accept the proposals Zhou had put to Kosygin, and although negotiations were resumed in Beijing in October, no progress was made. The borders, the dispute unresolved, only gradually relaxed into an uneasy and protracted stalemate. A turning point in a slow and wary return towards normality may be seen in the lifting of the Soviet blockade at Bear Island in 1976.²⁴ During this period, however, Moscow greatly increased its military concentrations along the borders and in Mongolia, and encouraged the belief that it was ready to launch war with China that could begin with a nuclear strike.

A breakthrough did come at long last, however, in 1986 when Moscow gave up the aggressive “escalation strategy” and opted instead for cooperation. It accepted the basic Chinese argument: that negotiations must be based on the Treaty of Peking, with its implied provision that the *thalweg* principle be applied to the border rivers, and should be comprehensive, covering all boundary sectors. The new Kremlin leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev, seeking to ease the exhausting burden of the huge military concentrations in the Far East as well as the war in Afghanistan, appears to have accepted that the claim to “exclusive right of possession and sovereign jurisdiction” over the border rivers was unsustainable, if not unreasonable (Perhaps the 1946 renegotiation of the Oxus boundary was recalled). Furthermore, it may have been appreciated in the Kremlin that the China-bank boundary claim was not the essence of the issue from Moscow’s point of view: as far as the river sector was concerned, it was retention of Bear Island that was critical, indeed nonnegotiable.²⁵ While there were thus pressing considerations in favor of a radical reconsideration of policy on the boundary issue, Moscow, perhaps Gorbachev personally, should be given full credit for a notable act of statesmanship—such a reversal of policy, with its implied admission of previous error, is historically rare.²⁶

²⁴ See the writer’s article “Why the Russians Lifted the Blockade at Bear Island” *Foreign Affairs* 57, no. 1 (fall 1978).

²⁵ Why this has throughout been an absolute sticking point for Moscow seems explicable only by Russians’ historical experience with “threats from the east.” When a river serves as an international boundary, it is natural that river-side cities will have a neighbor—and potential enemy—on the opposite bank. Blagoveshchensk is such an example.

²⁶ India still awaits its “Gorbachev,” a politician with the wisdom and courage to repudiate

Gorbachev announced Moscow's reversal in a much-heralded speech delivered in Vladivostok in July 1986. First expressing Soviet "understanding and respect" for the "great Chinese people" in their drive for modernization, he went on to declare that the Amur frontier should not be a barrier but "a means of uniting the Chinese and Soviet people." And then came the crucial sentence: "The official border could pass along the main stream." Small keys can unlock massive doors.

Beijing responded promptly and positively, and boundary negotiations proper began in a few months. Now that both sides sought agreement, from the common ground of the *thalweg* principle and the text of the treaty, progress could be made—but it was never easy. Settlement meant that Moscow was waiving its claim to all the hundreds of river islands (except Bear Island) that lay on China's side of the main current, an act of territorial relinquishment that naturally aroused angry resentment in local populations and governments. That the new approach meant giving up the claim to Zhenbao was especially bitter, rendering the sacrifice of Soviet troops' lives there futile. Boundaries have been called the cell walls of national identity, and their successful negotiation demands patience, cool heads, and consistent observance of the principle of "mutual understanding and mutual accommodation": it appears that both sides in these protracted negotiations observed this principle.

Although this was not made publicly explicit, it appears that Beijing at this stage introduced a critical modification to its basic rubric for boundary settlement where, when an intractable issue about a particular area arose and all attempts to resolve it failed, it should be put aside, not allowed to halt or sour the negotiations on other sectors. "A wiser generation" might in the future find a solution at present unthinkable. Just such an intractable issue lay in ownership of Bear Island: that, the Soviet side made clear, was still nonnegotiable.²⁷ The Chinese position was that the division of territory must be in accordance with the text of the treaty, and by stipulating that the boundary ran through the confluence, the wording indisputably assigned Bear Island to China. Therefore, Beijing

Nehru's folly and agree to negotiate a boundary settlement with China. New Delhi still refuses to adopt the "cooperative strategy," holding to the "delaying strategy"—and retaining the option to return to the "escalation strategy."

²⁷ There was one other such sticking point, concerning an island in the Argun River: the scale of this article allows it to be "set aside" for treatment by a more inclusive writer.

maintained that the Soviet Union must return it to China—“in principle.” This expansive phrase of course allowed for circumstances in which China’s “understanding” of its neighbor’s position and wish to “accommodate” it would in due course lead to a different outcome.

The delimitation and demarcation processes proceeded more or less simultaneously, with a series of agreements being announced through the 1990s.²⁸ By the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse, the river sections had been finalized bar the intractable “set-aside” issues. The governments of the three Central Asian Socialist Soviet Republics bordering China (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) had from the beginning participated in the Sino-Soviet discussions of the western boundary sector (which was far more complex and difficult than the river sectors), and they agreed to continue jointly when they became sovereign states, at first in a tri-national commission under a Russian chairman (seed of the future Shanghai Cooperation Organization). In due course, these negotiations separated, and by the beginning of the next century, the western boundary had been agreed and legitimized in three treaties, while the entirety of the Sino-Russian boundaries²⁹ was also covered by treaty. Detailed protocols protected the two sides’ interests in the set-aside areas, Bear Island and another island on the Argun River, with China’s right of navigation past Khabarovsk guaranteed. Moscow and Beijing joined in mutually congratulatory celebrations of the peaceful resolution of a centuries-old and deeply conflicted dispute—and that seemed to be the end of the matter for the present.

Then, to the astonishment of those who had followed these developments in detail, in 2004, Moscow and Beijing jointly proclaimed that continued negotiations, previously unannounced, had produced solutions to the last two “set-aside” problems. The parties had found it unnecessary to wait for that future, “wiser generation” but had made the necessary compromises to reach agreement in this one.

²⁸ This laborious, vexed procedure is described, in much vivid detail, in IWASHITA Akihiro’s account of *A 4,000 Kilometer Journey Along the Sino-Russian Border*; *Slavic Eurasian Studies* 3, (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2004).

²⁹ The eastern sector plus a fifty-mile remainder sector in the west. The negotiations between Beijing and the three new Central Asian states were protracted and vexed, several times being on the point of breakdown. The cases of Kyrgyz-China and Tajikistan-China were especially difficult, with intense engagement of political parties challenging provisional agreements reached without their agreement.

The compromises made by the two sides to reach the deal formalized in a supplementary agreement on the eastern section of the Sino-Russian boundary line in Beijing in 2004 can be inferred (their details have not been made public). On June 2, 2005, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov signed the certificate for the exchange of the instruments of ratification for the supplementary agreement on behalf of their respective governments in Vladivostok and exchanged the instruments of ratification and the certificate. The “main contradiction” for each side was different, and they were separable. For Moscow, retention of the portion of Bear Island offshore of Khabarovsk, long regarded by the inhabitants as part of the city, continued to be nonnegotiable. Unwilling as Russia has historically been to cede territory, to relinquish the upstream end of Bear Island was small change for a final settlement. For Beijing, what mattered most was to acquire the upstream portion of Bear Island, thus restoring the Fuyuan Channel (forgetting Kazakevich) to its treaty-defined status as an inland waterway of China, both its banks Chinese sovereign territory. As long as China’s right of navigation through the confluence was guaranteed, there was no need for Beijing to insist on repossession of the end of the island that abutted Khabarovsk; it could be ceded to Russia. By this stage, the two teams of boundary negotiators could work together with a common purpose: to fine-tune a boundary so as to balance the interests of their principals and of local populations and regional authorities so that the proposed alignment would be broadly welcomed and Moscow and Beijing could jointly proclaim achievement of a “win-win” solution, as they duly did.

So the needs and demands of both parties, which had long appeared to be irresolvably contradictory, could now be met by the straightforward process of partition. Thus, short, indeed tiny, new stretches of Sino-Russian land boundaries were created on Bear Island and the other put-aside problem island in the Argun River. And with their demarcation, the entire length of the Sino-Russian boundary thus became agreed, defined, and legitimated, marking the opening of a period of unprecedented Sino-Russian amity.