The Impact of the Bombardment of Jinmen in 1958 upon Sino-Soviet Relations

by Dai Chaowu

The bombardment of Jinmen in 1958 put the Soviet Union in a very difficult situation to make decisions. The crisis in Sino-Soviet relations not only affected the two countries' alliance, but deepened the two sides' differences and conflicts on the issue of Taiwan and the offshore islands. At the same time, the crisis resulted in the Soviet Union’s decision to stop providing nuclear technical support to China. Therefore the crisis was a very important event in the Sino-Soviet split and had a profound influence.

The Significant Change in Chinese Diplomatic Ideas, the Strategic Differences between China and Soviet Union and the Decision to Bombard Jinmen

Mao Zedong once said that over twenty years of turning over international issues in his mind he had gradually formed some opinions and achieved a certain clarity. These important views included the theory of intermediate zones, the issue of war and peace, the argument that "The East wind prevails over the West wind," a dialectical understanding of tense international situations and so on. The can be no doubt that in bombarding Jinmen he was putting his views into concrete practice.

The issue of intermediate zones was an important one to which Mao gave considerable thought in the late 1950s and on which his views changed fundamentally. This issue became the basic starting point for Mao’s observation of international problems in that period and his decisions on China's foreign policy. First of all, Mao thought that the U.S. tried to control the intermediate zones not only to oppose communism but also to weaken the intermediate countries. Secondly, he made new judgments and analysis on the nature of nation-states and thus changed his previous opinions. Mao Zedong regarded those states’ neutral policy in the Cold War as an “independent and autonomous stand” that China welcomed. Furthermore, Mao Zedong pointed out that the main areas imperialist countries tried to control were in Asia and Africa. He said: “Among communism, nationalism and imperialism, communism and nationalism are closer.”1 At the same time Mao Zedong clearly pointed out that the intermediate zones were strategic areas that could affect and wipe out imperialist strength. He stressed mutual support among nationalist and socialist countries. He also pointed out that it was very important to make relative
strengths more favorable to the socialist camp to win over the countries in intermediate zones.\textsuperscript{2} To achieve that goal, Mao Zedong emphasized that “we must support” the popular struggles against imperialism in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other countries. He also stressed that the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America constituted “the major support” to socialist countries.\textsuperscript{3}

In addition to international factors, China’s diplomatic strategy underwent fundamental changes due to some important domestic factors, namely, the “Great Leap Forward” in national economic construction. The theoretical base of the Great Leap Forward was consistent with the guidelines of China’s “revolutionary diplomacy” in late 1950s and each complemented the other. The fever of the Great Leap Forward had profoundly influenced China’s diplomacy and Mao Zedong asked diplomatic workers to conquer conservative ideas and break down blind faith in the West. In June 1958, the foreign ministry convened a conference to discuss the international situation. The conference affirmed foreign policy since 1949, but also pointed out that in the treatment of some specific problems there existed the tendency of rightist conservatism. In relations with other socialist countries, these included neglecting necessary criticism in relations and failing to refute revisionist opinions; in relations with nationalist countries, overlooking necessary struggles and thus obscuring the boundaries between socialist and nationalist countries; in relations with imperialist countries, unrealistic expectations. Mao Zedong especially stressed that his instructions to contact the U.S. at the Geneva Conference in 1954 were inconsistent with his thought, and that it was better to go on fighting against the U.S. and not to develop relations with it. It was concluded at the meeting that Chinese foreign policy was to “denounce Yugoslavia, consolidate socialism; strike the U.S., rout imperialism; isolate Japan, and win over nationalism.” In light of this, in the future foreign affairs, “struggle would be absolute; the Cold War could not be avoided; and compromise would be relative and temporary.”\textsuperscript{4}

That the intermediate zone theory was re-proposed and given new meanings pointed to the new characteristics of “revolutionary diplomacy” in China’s foreign affairs guidelines in the late 1950s. It required that China should support world revolution and oppose imperialism, especially the U.S. But it was basically different from the Soviet Union’s socialist foreign policy, especially that latter’s policy of “peaceful co-existence, peaceful competition and peaceful transition” and its intended detente with the U.S. In the middle and late 1950s, Sino-Soviet relations began to undergo an obvious change. In the realm of ideology China opposed the Soviet Union’s blanket negation of Stalin. Besides, the two countries basically had divided opinions on some important strategic problems.

The systematization of the intermediate zones theory and the imagined rapid increase in Chinese economic strength directly resulted in Mao Zedong’s famous statement that “the East wind prevails over the West wind.” In 1957, Mao pointed out at the conference of the Communist Party and the Workers Party at Moscow that “the Western countries have been surpassed and we have gained the advantage over
them".\(^5\) With that judgment, China and the Soviet Union became fundamentally divided in opinions upon the guiding principle in foreign policy of socialist countries. The disparities demonstrated themselves first in their different views on “peaceful co-existence” and “detente with U.S.” Peaceful co-existence was “the general guideline of socialist countries' foreign policies” put forward in the 20\(^{th}\) congress of Soviet Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party had also spoken highly of the principle of peaceful co-existence since 1954. Related to this was the question of whether to seek detente with the U.S. in the international situation of that time. On the basis of the general line on peaceful co-existence, Khrushchev made improving relations with the U.S a top priority of Soviet foreign policy. This was precisely what China opposed firmly. At the beginning of 1957 Mao Zedong clearly pointed out, “I think it is more advantageous to us to establish diplomatic relations with the U.S. a few years later;” and to do so could “isolate the U.S., deprive it completely of political resources and put it in an unjustifiable position. The longer this went on the more passive U.S. would become and the fewer its friends in China would be.”\(^6\) Therefore on relations with the U.S., China’s policy was to “isolate and strike the U.S. imperialists, eliminate fear of the US, give people more confidence and make them dare to fight firmly against the U.S. imperialists”\(^7\) Chinese leaders later even thought, “The fight between socialism and imperialism is a fight to the death. It’s very dangerous to neglect this fight and sing the praises of peaceful co-existence, and not speak of the confrontation between the two worlds.”\(^8\) So when Chinese leaders publicly stated that “only the Chinese government dares to confront the U.S.” the bombardment on Jinmen was the best answer to the Soviet Union’s policy of detente.

Another significant difference in the foreign policies of China and the Soviet Union was the issue of how to treat the national liberation movement. Along with the putting forward of the intermediate zone theory and new judgments on the international situation, Chinese leaders began to take the “mutual desire for peace of Asian and African countries and their struggles against colonialism and imperialism" as “a basis for socialist countries to establish a united front with them." In the view of the Chinese leaders, this united front was to fight imperialism and colonialism rather than to “peacefully co-exist” with them. However, in the view of the Soviet leaders, peaceful co-existence, cooperation among socialist countries and support to national liberation movement were three separate principles, and “it is for the cooperation, unity and mutual support of the socialist camp that the USSR regards peaceful co-existence as the general line of socialist countries’ foreign policies. It is not only a matter of supporting national liberation movements.”\(^9\) As Mao Zedong repeatedly explained, the objective of the bombardment was in the first place to support the Arab anti-imperialism struggle. Peng Dehuai also stressed that “the Chinese people must give their support through actual actions, of which one is the deployment of the air force in Fujian and another is the bombardment on Jinmen...It is also to tell people all over the world that if the U.S. imperialists want war Chinese people are not be afraid.” The bombardment showed the idea of supporting national liberation movement in
China’s “revolutionary diplomacy.”

Besides, the judgment that “the East wind prevails over the West wind” directly brought about another question, “Who is afraid of whom?” The question was in fact concerned with how to estimate the strength of the U.S. The Soviet leaders held that, when analyzing U.S. strength and economic potential, consideration should be given to the fact that the U.S. had already renewed its industrial facilities and had greater economic and military strength at the time; they also had a large army and many advanced weapons, and therefore couldn’t be simply regarded as “a paper tiger.”

About this, Mao Zedong questioned Soviet foreign minister Andrei A. Gromyko: “Is U.S. really so economically powerful that it is hard for us to take it on?” Mao’s answer to this was “it is imperialism that is more afraid of us.” So the objective of Chinese foreign policy was to “explain clearly and bring into play” Mao’s idea that “it is imperialism that is more afraid of us,” without having to “consider Soviet views.” In addition, it was to “publicly announce standpoint in our international relations and our foreign policy.”

The Soviet Union believed that opposing peaceful co-existence and insisting on the anti-imperialist struggle would certainly make the international situations tense and would fundamentally harm the common interests of socialist camp. But China’s view was just the opposite. Mao Zedong believed that tension “could arouse the masses, backward strata and people in the middle to struggle,” and at the same time “a tense situation could make people all over the world stop and think, and could mobilize people all over the world, workers, and other laboring masses to make more a few more communists.”

Mao Zedong also believed that struggle against the U.S. could eliminate people’s superstitious fear of the U.S. In the view of the Chinese leaders, bombard Jinmen and creating a tense situation was also a means to achieve this goal.

The Soviet Response to the Bombardment on Jinmen and Its Policy Choice

Soviet leaders were not surprised at the bombardment on August 23, 1958. Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs that Chinese leaders had said they had prepared to take New military operation against Chiang Kai-shek. They asked for air cover, long-range and seashore artillery. However the outbreak of the second Taiwan Straits crisis still outran Khrushchev’s expectations. First, that was because China did not inform the USSR of the time and plan of the bombardment according to regular practice. Secondly, Khrushchev himself did not expect so strong a response from the U.S.. So the crisis put the USSR into a difficult dilemma. Soviet policy choices at the time were based on their understanding and knowledge of China’s policy decisions and their judgments about the US response to the crisis. Their policy choices can be roughly divided into two phases. Throughout the course of the crisis the Soviet response and policy decisions were passive and cautious.

In the first phase of the crisis (from the beginning of the bombardment to the end
of September 1958), because the USSR did not know what China’s strategic objectives were, it announced its support for China’s actions and tried to take some concrete steps on the one hand, while on the other hand it sought through a variety of channel to ascertain China’s intentions so as to influence and restrict China’s actions. Realizing that war might break out in the Taiwan Straits area, the Soviet military showed great caution and restraint at this stage. Although the USSR might have known in advance what action China would take, the Soviet leaders were nonetheless astonished that China had absolutely not informed them of the time, objective and plan of the bombardment. Hence the knowledge of China’s intentions became the essential prerequisite for the USSR’s policy decisions and the Soviet embassy in China became the important source of relevant information. After the bombardment the Soviet embassy immediately telegraphed the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party to say that China had sent a message only after the bombardment on August 23 and had not in any way given advance notice of its intentions in this important military and political action. From the beginning of the crisis till the end of 1958, Soviet embassy sent in all 52 reports on the matter. According to these reports, the Russians believed that “It would not be entirely correct to regard the solution of the Taiwan issue …as purely a domestic affair of China. In the first stage of the development of the Taiwan conflict our Chinese friends have demonstrated a rather simplistic approach to evaluating the degree of urgency of the Taiwan problem and have let the possibility of aggravating the international situation emerge to keep the United States ‘on the verge of war’ from their side too.” The reports also pointed out that “Our Chinese friends started to show excessive sensitivity toward the problems of sovereignty and independence of their country, reservations about the measures that used to be taken by both countries jointly.” The Soviets obviously believed that the Chinese showed a tendency towards solving Asian problems themselves. They did not think it necessary to consult the USSR about their planned actions, though they would expect its support when the situation got out of control.

On receiving the reports from the Soviet Embassy, Khrushchev immediately demanded that the embassy inform Beijing that considering that China had just begun socialist construction and was quite backward both economically and militarily, she did not at present have the capacity to launch a modern war and carry out a landing operation on Taiwan. There was no need for the whole socialist camp including the USSR to get involved in this war. To this, Mao Zedong replied, via Foreign Ministry, that these islands were Chinese territory and their liberation was China’s internal affair. Because the USSR could not exactly learn what China had in mind, it decided to send Gromyko to China. Before this, the Soviet Embassy Counsellor, Sudarikov, called on Zhou Enlai on September 5 under Khrushchev’s instructions. Zhou Enlai used the meeting to discuss China’s analysis of the situations in Taiwan Straits from both the domestic and international perspectives, the problems between Taiwan and the U.S., and China’s stand, tactics and the actions China had taken. Zhou Enlai especially stressed that the bombardment of the islands of Jinmen and Mazu did not
mean that China would attempt to liberate Taiwan by force. It was just to punish Kuomintang troops and prevent the U.S. from supporting “Two Chinas.” China would bear the consequences and would not drag the USSR in if trouble broke out.  

On September 6th, Zhou Enlai met with Gromyko and explained to him the Chinese government’s stand on the Taiwan Straits. Gromyko indicated that the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party fully endorsed China’s stand and measures. Zhou stated that with the strike on the offshore islands China had considered the possibility of the outbreak of a local war between the U.S. and China in the area, and was prepared to bear come under heavy attack including atomic bombs and the destructions of cities. Zhou Enlai pointed out that the USSR would not need to take part in this stage even if the U.S. used tactical nuclear weapons. Only when the U.S. used more powerful nuclear weapons and risked expanding the war should Russian nuclear retaliation take place. According to Gromyko’s memoirs, Mao Zedong expressed the same idea in talking to him. Mao told Gromyko that China was not afraid of the nuclear threat. If the U.S. used nuclear weapons, the Chinese government would move to Yanan and go on fighting.

After exchanging views with China, Khrushchev published an open letter to Eisenhower on September 7 in response to J.F.Dulles’s nuclear threat and the Newport Declaration, appealing to U.S. government to exercise caution in their actions in Taiwan and the Taiwan Straits area and not to lightly adopt measures could result in irretrievable consequences. In the letter he especially stressed that any attack on the Soviet Union’s great friend, ally and neighbor, the People’s Republic of China, would be seen as an attack on Soviet Union. In Gromyko’s speech at the UN assembly on September 18 and Khrushchev’s second open letter to Eisenhower on September 19th, the same stand was again expressed.

At the peak of the crisis after mid-September, Zhou Enlai continuously met with the Charge d’Affaires of the Soviet Embassy in Beijing, S.F.Antonov, and informed him of the CCCPC’s policy assumptions. At the meeting on September 18th Zhou Enlai said that China would still focus on punitive attacks on Chiang’s troops on Jinmen and Mazu islands. The U.S. did not want to get involved nor did China want to fight the U.S. But China was not afraid of the expansion of the military actions on Jinmen and other islands. At their talk on September 28 Zhou Enlai further pointed out, "Our strikes may be heavy, moderate, or light. But we do not want to beat them to death in one go. Our intention is to make things difficult for them but not to make them desperate. The longer it takes, the greater the difficulties for the U.S." Zhou also informed him of CCCPC’s three estimates on the developing situation in the Taiwan Straits: the U.S. might make concessions and reach a compromise with China, although conditions for this were not mature; or the status quo might be maintained, which was highly probable; or the U.S. might stick its head into the noose, though this possibility was unlikely.

At the same time, Khrushchev had especially called in Chinese Ambassador to the USSR Liu Xiao and had “an important talk.” Khrushchev said that after discussion
the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Soviet Union thought that the airforce in the area should be strengthened and made strong enough to threaten the naval forces of the U.S. and Chiang Kai-shek. On receiving Liu Xiao’s telegram, Zhou Enlai met with Peng Zhen, Peng Dehuai, Chen Yi, Huang Kecheng, Zhang Wentian and airforce officer Wang Binzhang and carefully discussed the Soviet proposal. They reported the result of the discussion to Mao Zedong in a letter dated September 23rd, stating that “We should welcome Soviet support and the Soviet and Chinese air forces should undertake technical preparations. The question of when the time is ripe for the T-16 fighters to enter China and come under Chinese command should be separately decided through joint consultations.” Mao approved their proposal in his telegraphed reply the next day, but at the same time stressed that great caution should be taken in deciding the way in which Sino-Soviet cooperation was to be realized: would it be a volunteer army, a mercenary army or a Soviet regular army? After the discussion, the CCCPC refused the Soviet proposal.

The decision left the Soviet leadership extremely dissatisfied. On September 27 the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union wrote to the CCCPC and again emphasized the position of the Soviet government on the crisis, clearly indicating the Soviet leadership’s unhappiness with the Chinese decision. The wording of the letter even sounds even rather agitated in some places: “Thank you for your nobility, that you are ready to absorb a srike, not involving the Soviet Union.” But, “It would be a great calamity for the entire Socialist camp, for the Communist working class movement, if, when atomic bombs have begun to fall on the Chinese People’s Republic and China has begun to pay with the life of its sons and daughters, the Soviet Union, possessing terrible weapons which could not only stop but also devastate our common enemy, would allow itself not to come to your assistance. This would be a crime before the working class, it would be a retreat from the holy of holies of the Communists—from the teaching of Marxism-Leninism.” Besides, Khrushchev himself wrote to Mao Zedong twice on September 27 and October 4, saying that the USSR could send the C-75 bombers carrying ground-to-air missiles to Fujian to increase the strength of the Chinese air defense and change the relative strategic strength across the Straits so as to avoid war. To this Mao Zedong instructed, “No rushed reply until further discussions are held.” Mao did not reply until October 14, when he wrote to Khrushchev: We were deeply moved by your unselfish contribution to Marxist-Leninist principles and internationalism. On behalf of the CCCPC, I gave you our sincere thanks. But Mao Zedong stressed that, “For the ultimate victory, we are willing to bear the first strike and to destroy imperialism, even at the expense of many lives.” At the same time Mao suggested that it was best for Soviet government to supply China with some field-to-air and shore-to-ship missiles. He also asked Soviet government to send technical staff to help China train the troops equipped with these weapons.

At the later stage of the crisis, CCCPC changed its policy on the offshore islands. On the basis of his analysis of the Warsaw talks and his judgments on U.S policies,
Mao Zedong came to the conclusion at the end of September that “unfortunately it is not appropriate to adopt” the proposal to occupy Jinmen. After careful discussion CCCPC resolved to leave Jinmen and Mazu in the hands of the Nationalist Party and solve the Taiwan problem altogether in the future. Zhou Enlai informed the Soviet charge d’affaires Antonov of the readjustment of and change in China’s policies on October 5 and 14. As the CCCPC understood it, Khrushchev agreed with the CPC’s policies at that time. Although to date there are no Soviet documents which disclose the details of Soviet decision making in the later stages of the crisis, two points are clear: first, Khrushchev continued on several occasions to express his support for China’s actions; second, Khrushchev was very dissatisfied with the CCCPC’s new policies in this period, a fact that was clearly revealed at the Sino-Soviet meeting in October 1959 when he criticized CCCPC’s handling of the offshore islands as “Trotskyite” at the talks.

The Impact upon Sino-Soviet Relations of the Bombardment of Jinmen in 1958

Although we still need more documentation to make clear the development of Sino-Soviet relations in the crisis, there is no doubt that the crisis seriously affected the Sino-Soviet alliance. First the crisis produced unprecedented difficulties in the development of the two countries’ relations. The USSR proposed a series of criticisms of the bombardment of Jinmen, blaming the CPC for “having misjudged the international situation,” and believing that the bombardment was “beneficial only for the enemy” and dragged the USSR into a serious risk of war. More importantly, the bombardment was “in fact in accord with the U.S. war party’s intention to disrupt the Soviet policy of relaxing international tensions. Beijing planned to use this kind of actions to harm USSR-U.S. relations and made use of the Sino-Soviet treaty to expand the conflict to a military confrontation in the Far East.” That is why Khrushchev always felt dissatisfied with China’s not informing him in advance of so important an action. To China, the bombardment of Jinmen was decided against the political background of “opposing Khrushchev group’s ambition to control China” and “against the Soviet policy of indulging the West after Khrushchev took office.” To Mao, Khrushchev had sought detente with the U.S. and given up the fight against imperialism, especially the U.S., and hence could no longer be regarded as a communist and Marxist. The great differences between China and the USSR in ideology, disclosed through the bombardment on Jinmen, implied that it was only a question of time before the two countries split. At the end of 1959, Chinese leaders began to stress: “To criticize revisionism is our main and most important task at present.”

Secondly, the crisis deepened the differences and conflicts of the two countries with regard to the problems of Taiwan and the offshore islands. Although the USSR supported China in the crisis, it actually opposed China’s stand on Taiwan and the
offshore islands. This attitude was fully evident in Khrushchev’s talks with Chinese leaders during his visit to Beijing in October 1959. He complained that the bombardment in 1958 “created difficulties for the USSR,” and expressed dissatisfaction with China’s policy on the Taiwan problem. He told Chinese leaders clearly that once the war broke out over the Taiwan Straits the USSR would not get involved. He also suggested that in future China and the USSR exchange views on the Taiwan problem through particular channels so that each was aware of the other’s stands, principles and policies. His proposals and views were rejected and rebutted in severe terms by the Chinese leadership. Mao told him directly: How to liberate Taiwan can only be decided by ourselves...You can’t do anything so shouldn't comment.28 Because of this, the Chinese leadership thought that the Soviet leadership’s response to China’s action on Jinmen was an obvious sign that the USSR would not hesitate to sacrifice China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity for its own diplomatic interests.

Thirdly, another important result produced by the bombardment of Jinmen was the Soviet leadership’s decision to stop nuclear technical support to China. In the crisis Khrushchev decided that the USSR would not supply China with a sample atomic bomb and would reconsider its relations with China. Determined to seek détente with the U.S., Khrushchev regarded it as very dangerous to provide China with the atomic bomb. On June 20th 1959, the USSR officially informed China that it would stop providing China with a sample atomic bomb and technical documents on the production of atomic bomb. The CCCPC thought this was a significant event in Sino-Soviet relations that showed Khrushchev might adopt new policies on Sino-Soviet relations involving opposing China together with the West, especially the U.S. The Soviet action later was assailed as “opposing China together with the U.S.” Therefore Khrushchev’s decision to halt nuclear technical support to China in the second Taiwan Straits crisis was actually an important event in the Sino-Soviet split. The issue of control and opposition to control in nuclear policies had profound influences and results.

The bombardment of Jinmen was an important event in the lead-up to the Sino-Soviet split. Harmonious and cooperative on the surface, the two countries’ significant differences in ideology and national interests were deeply buried. The crisis further deepened the two sides’ differences in ideology. At the same time, and even more importantly, the second Taiwan Straits crisis showed clearly that the contradictions and differences had begun to develop from ideology to national interests. It is one of the important markers of the emergence into the public arena of Sino-Soviet contradictions and of the rapid deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations.
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Notes

2 Minutes of talks between Mao Zedong and Yudin, Russian documents collected and numbered by Shen Zhihua (henceforth referred to as Russian documents), SD08102.
13 According to recently declassified Chinese documents, the CCCPC did not inform Russia before the bombardment. Cf. A Biography of Mao Zedong, vol., pp. 855-856; for the latest research on this question please see Shen Zhihua, “Did China Inform the USSR before the Bombardment on Jinmen in 1958?,” CCP History Research, 2004, no. 4.
14 TsKhSD (Storage Center for Contemporary Documents of Russia), f.5, op.49.d.134, Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War, p.223.
15 TsKhSD, f.5, op.49.d.239, f.5, op.49, d.131, f.5, op.49, d.134, Vladislav Zubok and Constantine
Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, pp.221-224.
17 TsKhSD, f.5, op.49, d.133, Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War*, p.225