

U.S. Fears Chance of Sino-Soviet War Is Rising

Russia Reported Eying Strikes at China

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Reports reaching Washington relating to a possible Soviet strike at the Chinese nuclear complex have increased Nixon administration alarm about the chances of a war between the two Communist giants.

According to these reports, at least two in number, the Russians have been making discreet inquiries of some fellow Communist leaders, both those in power in Eastern Europe and some out of power in Western Europe, on what would be the reaction to such a Soviet strike. There are no reports on the responses.

It appears that the inquiries were first made at the world Communist gathering in Moscow last June and later repeated at another place. That could not be ascertained yesterday.

The reports are considered authentic but it is conceded that they might somehow have been surfaced as part of the Kremlin's psychological warfare against the Peking regime of Mao Tse-tung.

The rising tension between China and the Soviet Union, most marked since the clashes on the Siberian border in March, has led American officials to draw up scenarios of what Moscow and Peking might do and what the United States reaction could be. It is understood there has been a National Security Council study.

The sense of alarm over a possible war has been steadily rising in Washington for months. The border clash in Central Asia last month considerably accentuated the alarm.

One key official who only a month earlier had rated the chances of a major Chinese-Soviet fight at about 10 per cent recently said that the chances now are only slightly less than 50-50. This sort of talk is now also widely heard among those who follow Soviet and Chinese affairs.

As viewed here there are at least three major possible Soviet tactics:

1. A punitive action such as an extensive border clash, initiated by Moscow as it is believed was the case last month in Central Asia, in which a large Chinese force would be destroyed by superior Soviet power.

2. Attempts to subvert the racial minority groups in Sinkiang on the Chinese side in Central Asia where anti-Peking feeling is thought to run high.

3. A preventive strike, by air or on the ground.

This latter, by far the most serious and thought likely to lead to major conflict if not all-out war, includes the strike at the Chinese nuclear complex about which the new reports are concerned. It is believed that such an attack would be with conventional bombs.

Perhaps the single most critical target in such a case would be the gaseous diffusion plant at Lanchow which makes the fissionable material for Chinese nuclear weapons.

However, the advantages that the Soviets enjoy in terms of logistics in Central Asia are thought to be missing in Siberia. There, in the Soviet Far East, the Soviets are dependent on the single double-track Trans-Siberian railway which runs close to the Chinese border in many places and which could be cut by raiding parties. This would be especially true in the long winter months when the Amur and Ussuri river borders are frozen.

It is the virtually unanimous view of those here who follow China that the Peking government would retaliate if there were a Soviet strike of any importance. But there is a division of opinion as to whether Peking would use its nuclear weapons.

The Chinese lack a missile capability but do have a few Soviet-made bombers and many Soviet fighters that could be modified to carry bombs. The Soviets have mounted a massive defense in Siberia but there can be no guarantee that a plane or two would not get through. Such important Siberian cities as Blagoveshchensk, Khabarovsk and Vladivostok are barely on the Soviet side of the long bor-

The Nixon administration had proclaimed a public policy of not taking sides in the Chinese-Soviet dispute but rather of trying to improve relations with both countries. Moscow and Peking, however, appear to remain suspicious that the United States will join the other against it.

There has been minimal official public comment here on the possibility of a Chinese-Soviet war. On Aug. 20, however, Secretary of State William P. Rogers told a group of college students that "our best judgment is that border clashes and incidents will continue" since "we are convinced that the hostility between them is deep." He expressed hope such clashes would not turn into a war.

Rogers went on to say that China watchers in Hongkong had told him the Soviets had the capability to "take over a good section of the country near Peking and probably Peking itself." However, it is widely felt here that the Soviets would shrink from such a major attack lest they become bogged down in a major land war in China much as were the Japanese in the pre World War II period.

Recent polemics from Moscow and Peking show the intensity of feeling. Soviet Communist Party chief Brezhnev in June charged that China was preparing to wage "both an ordinary and a great nuclear war" and declared that the Soviet people "are not intimidated by shouting." Other Russians have rattled their own nuclear weapons.

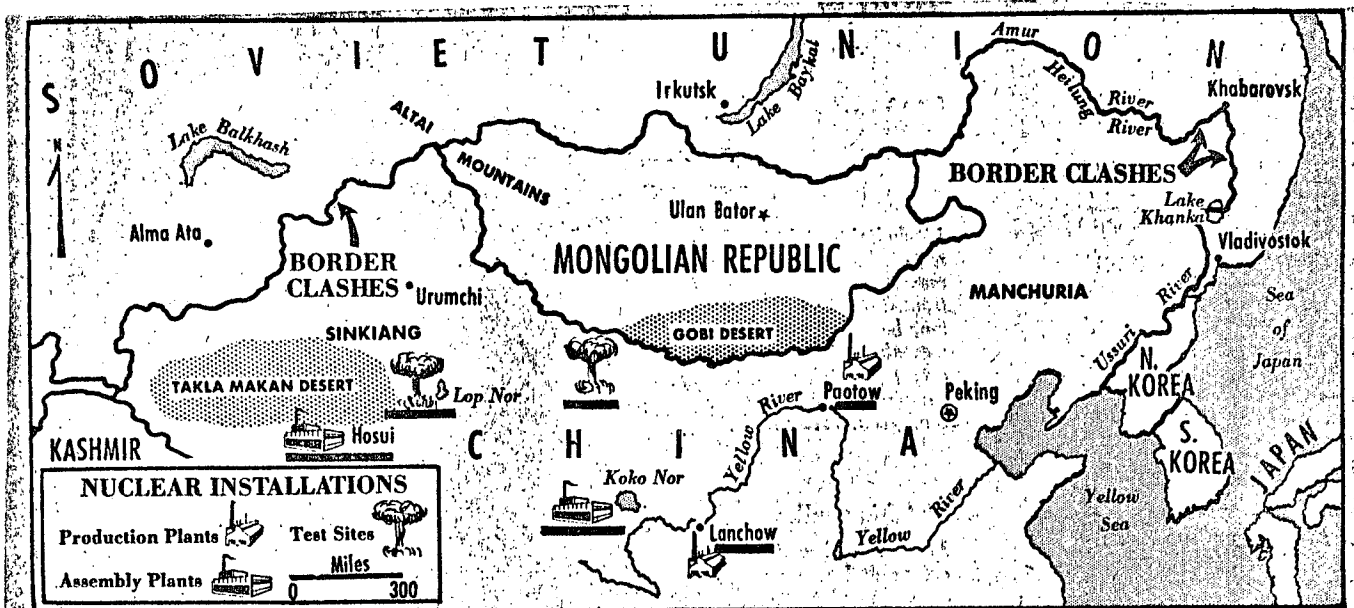
Anatoly V. Kuznetsov, the prominent Soviet writer who recently defected in Britain, told the New York Times in London that the great fear of the ordinary Soviet citizen today is China. He said Russians fear a Chinese attack and believe war cannot be avoided. Even though Kuznetsov broke with his own government he put all the blame on the Chinese.

A Peking broadcast on Aug. 14 charged that the Soviets have "built a series of airbases and guided missile bases along the Sino-Soviet and Sino-Mongolian borders" and have "plotted to gather some of the satellite troops of the Warsaw Pact and organize them into units to oppose China."

The current issue of Peking Review contains a scathing denunciation of "the new Czars" in Moscow. It especially attacked Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's recent friendly words about President Nixon's call for an "era of negotiation" to replace confrontation. Gromyko was charged with revering the Nixon formula and with having "prostrated himself before it."

Some Soviet watchers have concluded that the Kremlin leaders have decided there is no merit in waiting for Mao's death in hopes he would be followed by leaders who would repair the breach with Moscow.

It also is theorized here that Soviet military leaders have been making the case that the Chinese before long will have an invulnerable nuclear capability and thus the time to strike is now. But earlier American estimates of Chinese nuclear development have proved to be overoptimistic, judging by known tests.



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By Joseph P. Mastrangelo—The Washington Post

Map of Soviet-Chinese border area shows locations of known Chinese nuclear plants and test sites. Other such major border clashes this year as well as some of the sites known to U.S. authorities have not been disclosed.