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Possible Soviet Initiatives Along The Chinese Border

Summary

Gorbachev's comments in Vladivostok last month indicate that his regime is indeed making a more determined effort to improve the USSR's position in Asia, as several Soviet officials have predicted within the past year. His remarks also suggest that the Soviets, after years of "hanging tough," are now willing to address at least some of China's main security concerns-- especially on its northern border--in order to achieve that goal.

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The Soviets could follow-up on Gorbachev's speech in various ways:

- Adopt a more conciliatory position on China's territorial claims against the USSR.
- Announce a token force reduction in the Soviet Far East.
- Withdraw some of their forces from Mongolia.

Judging from the evidence at hand, the Mongolian option may be exercised first, perhaps even before the next round of Sino-Soviet political consultations is held in Beijing this October. The Soviets could, however, hold off until after the October round ends, if only to get a better reading of Chinese intentions before making any concessions.

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] Office of Soviet Analysis. Information available as of 7 August 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division [Redacted]

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Gorbachev has not made any promises on the China border question akin to his announcement that the Soviets will withdraw six regiments from Afghanistan by the end of this year. But he has shown more flexibility than any of his predecessors on three issues--the Sino-Soviet border dispute, troop deployments on both sides of that boundary line, and the Soviet military presence in Mongolia. These issues together are one part of the "three obstacles" cited by China as impediments to improved relations between Beijing and Moscow; the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and Soviet support for Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia are the other two. [redacted]

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In his Vladivostok speech, Gorbachev spoke about turning the frontier between the USSR and China into a "zone of peace and friendship" and noted that the two sides had already taken a few steps in that direction, especially along the Amur River in the Far East. He added that the official border there "could pass along the main navigation channel"--raising the possibility of a deal regarding Chimnaya Island (Heixiazhi), opposite Khabarovsk--long a major sticking point in the Sino-Soviet border negotiations. [redacted]

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Gorbachev also called for major force reductions in Asia and proposed starting in the Far East, adding that Moscow was ready to discuss with Beijing "specific steps aimed at a balanced reduction in the level of land forces." His statement on that point was the first time any top Soviet leader has publicly endorsed reductions of that sort since the Soviet military buildup opposite China began in the mid-1960s. [redacted]

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Gorbachev also announced that the Soviet and Mongolian leaders are examining the question of the withdrawal of a "considerable number" of what we believe to be 60,000 Soviet troops now stationed in Mongolia. He said nothing about any preconditions for such a withdrawal. No Soviet leader has ever publicly stated that the USSR was considering reducing its forces in Mongolia--some units have been there "temporarily" since 1966. Moreover, both Moscow and Ulaanbaatar have insisted for nearly a decade that China must sign a nonaggression pact with Mongolia or find another way to alleviate Mongolian security concerns before any Soviet troops can be withdrawn from Mongolia. [redacted]

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Concrete progress on any of these matters will, of course, require a good deal of give on both sides. Beijing has

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stonewalled repeated Soviet requests for a resumption of their border talks, and Moscow has insisted repeatedly that it will not improve relations with China at the expense of its friends or allies like Mongolia. But Gorbachev and his colleagues reportedly are convinced that Moscow has made some mistakes with China over the past few years, as Gorbachev himself reportedly stated in a wide-ranging critique of Soviet foreign policy at the Soviet Foreign Ministry in late May.<sup>1</sup> They may believe that an effort to accommodate Beijing on some of its main security concerns is worth certain risks, given the strategic importance of China in their overall scheme of things.

- Sino-Soviet relations still lag behind China's ties with the West, and Moscow could lose more political ground by standing still if Washington and Beijing move closer.
- An improvement in Sino-Soviet ties would weaken the US position in the Sino-Soviet-US triangle. Moscow also may again hope for an opportunity to influence Chinese domestic politics. [redacted]

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The following is a speculative look at various steps that the Soviets might take--based on what we know about their territorial dispute with China, the military balance along China's northern perimeter, and the situation in Mongolia--to follow up on Gorbachev's speech in Vladivostok. We would emphasize at the outset, however, that the Kremlin has yet to admit that there are any "disputed areas" along the border with China, or that its military forces in that area pose any "threat" to the Chinese. [redacted]

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#### Possible Soviet Moves on the Border Dispute

The Soviets have asked the Chinese on a number of occasions over the past five years to agree to a resumption of their border negotiations, which have been suspended since June 1978. To encourage the Chinese, Moscow could take a more conciliatory position than previously on some or all of Beijing's main demands--that Moscow admit that certain parcels of land are in dispute, withdraw its military forces from those areas (all of

<sup>1</sup> According to a Soviet diplomat in Beijing, Gorbachev called for a more flexible and pragmatic approach, better relations with all countries, and an improved style of work in Soviet embassies. The diplomat added that Gorbachev had specifically stressed the need for better relations with the Chinese and had warned his audience against unrealistic expectations that the relationship could return to the golden days of the 1950s.

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them are in Soviet hands at present), and agree in advance to return all territory that is subsequently determined to be rightfully China's. A few Chinese leaders have, in recent years, hinted at some flexibility on those points in their own public statements, and while the Soviets almost certainly are not prepared at present to make wholesale concessions, they may be willing to make some conciliatory gestures:

- The Soviets might start the bargaining by proposing that both sides keep their regular army units and border guard detachments out of all disputed areas along their common border (see map 1). This gesture would cost Moscow very little in military terms, but probably would be seen as a significant move in Beijing. The Soviets currently have only small border guard units stationed within those disputed areas.
- They could recognize Beijing's claims to almost all of the 700 disputed islands in the Amur and Ussuri Rivers. Most of those islands have little importance in either economic or military terms. The Soviets could, at the same time, offer to purchase the strategically important Chimnaya Island [Heixiazi], opposite the city of Khabarovsk. We doubt that they would hand the island over to the Chinese, however, except as part of a final settlement on the border dispute.
- They might revive their suggestion about setting up a joint commission to restudy the old treaties and other relevant documents, and then conduct a new survey before installing additional border markers where needed. This approach would finesse for the moment the question of which documents, other than formal treaties signed by both sides, have a legitimate bearing on the subject.

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#### Potential Force Reductions in the Soviet Far East

The Soviets could make some token unilateral gestures involving their forces opposite China. Although our understanding of how the Soviets see their military requirements in that part of the world is imprecise, we can conceive of several "disengagement" packages that would probably not disturb the existing balance of forces. The USSR has such an overall advantage vis-a-vis China that even if the Soviet air and ground troops in the area were cut by as much as ten percent--that is, by about 60-70,000--they would still retain a decisive local advantage in ground forces. While Beijing has about 1.7 million troops opposite the USSR and Mongolia, its armed forces have much less firepower and mobility than Soviet or Mongolian units. China's main forces are, moreover, based 100-200 miles back from

the border, and thus hardly in a position to mount a sudden offensive into the USSR or Mongolia. This situation may change in the coming years because the Chinese have abandoned their old strategy of "luring the enemy in deep" for a more forward defense posture,<sup>2</sup> but the Soviets have a good opportunity at present to deal from strength. While they presumably remain unwilling to make moves which would significantly alter the military balance, they could:

- Withdraw or deactivate one or more of their ground force divisions stationed in the Soviet Far East near the Chinese border. Units guarding strategic targets, such as the Trans-Siberian Railroad or the Vladivostok naval base, probably would not be pulled out, but other units in that area could be moved and not have a major impact on Soviet capabilities.
- Withdraw some SS-20s from areas close to China. The Soviets would, however, have a hard time finding alternative sites that would not have adverse effects on European arms negotiations. [redacted]

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A leadership decision to remove significant numbers of Soviet troops from the Chinese border would test Gorbachev's grip on the Soviet Ministry of Defense. There are signs that he has been managing leadership relations with the military pretty well so far, and in the end would probably get his way on Chinese border cuts of the size contemplated in this analysis. [redacted]

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#### Reducing the Soviet Presence in Mongolia

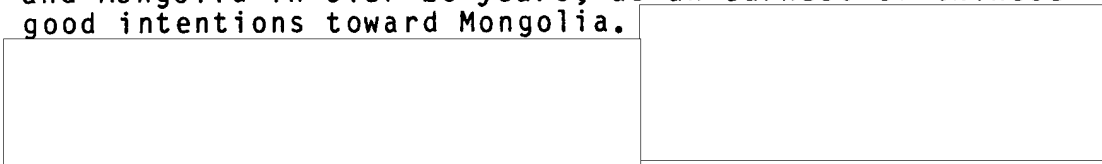
While determined to keep Mongolia in the Soviet camp, the Kremlin could undertake any one of several moves to alleviate Beijing's concern over the extent to which Mongolia has been transformed into a staging area for an offensive Soviet drive into China. The five Soviet divisions stationed in Mongolia are the most combat-ready Soviet ground forces facing China. These divisions, plus the three divisions that the Mongolians now have, have acquired added importance in recent years as a counterweight to the Chinese buildup on the Vietnamese border. The Soviets could withdraw one or more divisions at this time, however, without seriously eroding their overall security situation. Indeed, they would only be trimming their military presence in Mongolia back to its level during the 1970s. A move of this sort would not necessarily call into question Moscow's support for

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Ulaanbaatar, and it could easily be reversed by reintroducing the withdrawn units if Sino-Soviet relations worsened.

- Moscow also could make a greater effort to promote a Sino-Mongolian political dialogue, especially if the Chinese gave any sign of a willingness to negotiate a nonaggression pact or an agreement on nonuse of force with the Mongolians.
- The Soviets may regard the consular pact signed during the recent visit to Mongolia by a Chinese vice foreign minister, the first agreement of its kind between China and Mongolia in over 20 years, as an earnest of Chinese good intentions toward Mongolia.



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#### The Problem with Demilitarized Zones

We have examined the possibility that Moscow might, as a more significant gesture, offer to keep all regular ground force units, as distinguished from KGB border guards, some distance-- say, 30 kilometers--from the Chinese border. Such an offer could even be part of a package of confidence-building measures (CBMs) that also provided for advance notice of any military exercises or major troop movements within, say, 200 kilometers of the border, better cross-border communications, and the like.

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Our analysis of the Soviet force posture along the border indicates, however, that creation of such a narrow "demilitarized zone" would require the USSR to relocate some seven divisions and dismantle an extensive system of fortified zones along the border (see map 2). A move of this magnitude would, in our view, be well beyond the kinds of gestures examined so far and have significant strategic implications. It would, for example, require the Soviets to leave long segments of the Trans-Siberian Railroad unprotected, and probably would have large cost implications. Accordingly, we believe that such a demilitarized zone, while probably impressive to the Chinese, would be such an important military concession by the Soviets that it would be seriously considered only as part of a major political agreement.

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#### Implications

Although all of these possible gestures would fall well short of Beijing's stated demands regarding the "threat from the North," they would point to a Soviet willingness to discuss



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Chinese concerns in that area seriously. In time, moreover, they might lead to further progress on the Sino-Soviet border dispute, significant force reductions on both sides of that line, or some sort of an understanding on Mongolia. [redacted]

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If the two sides were to make progress on any of these issues, it would be the most significant development in their relationship since the low point in 1969, following the sharp clashes along their border. Moscow and Beijing would, of course, still have major differences--especially over Afghanistan and the Vietnam/Cambodia question. But even a hint that the Soviets and Chinese were making progress toward what Gorbachev termed "the creation of an atmosphere of good-neighborliness" along China's northern perimeter would have an impact in the West, complicating US and allied dealings with both the USSR and China. [redacted]

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There could, at the same time, be certain negative consequences for the Soviets. In particular, the Japanese would almost certainly regard any Soviet concessions to the Chinese on their border dispute as a precedent for their own territorial claims against the USSR. The Japanese might well fail to recognize the differences between the two cases, and decide to press their claims to the Northern Territories with more vigor in the future, believing that this approach would eventually force the Soviets to return at least some of the islands to Japan. By the same token, Hanoi and Kabul could well become a good deal more worried about the possibility that Moscow might sacrifice their interests to its own, and thus seek even more in the way of Soviet reassurances. [redacted]

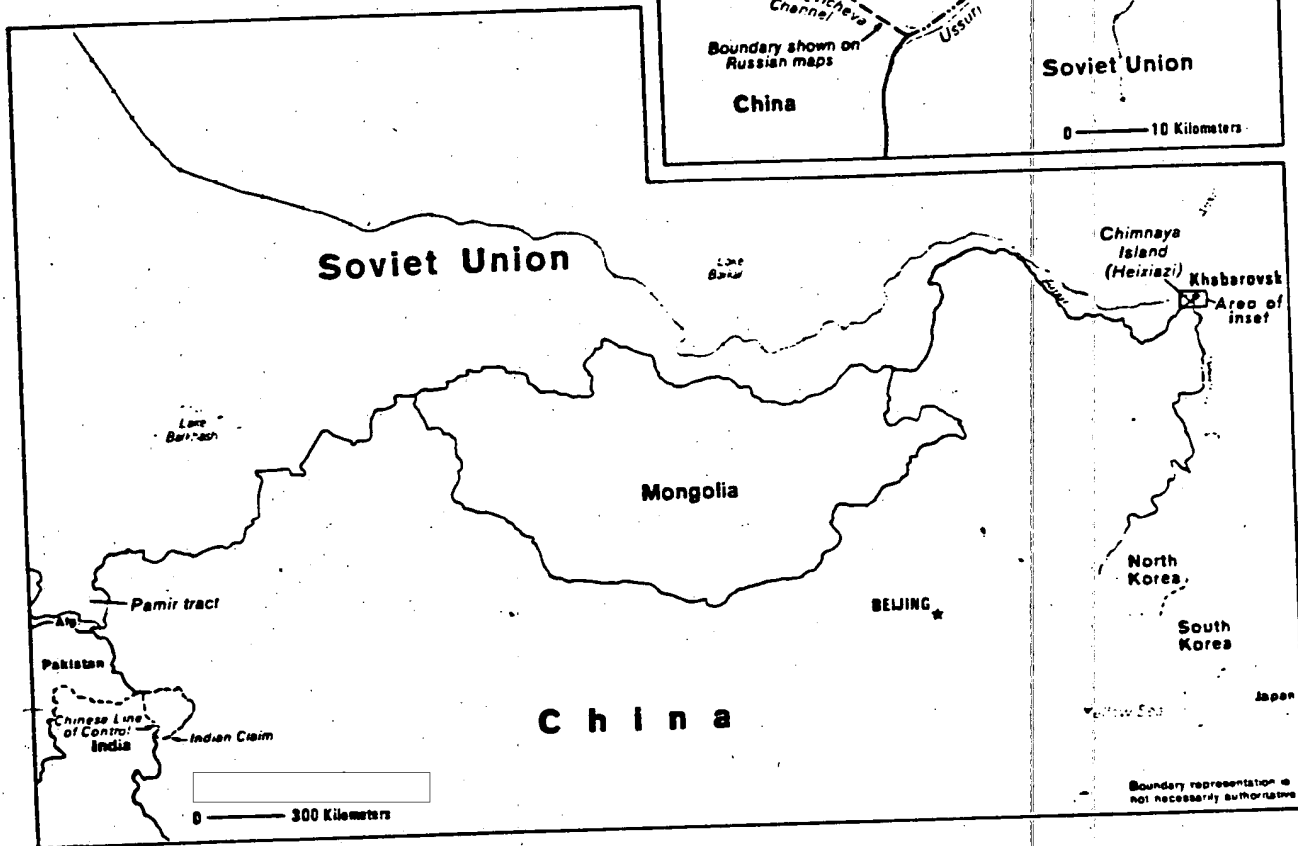
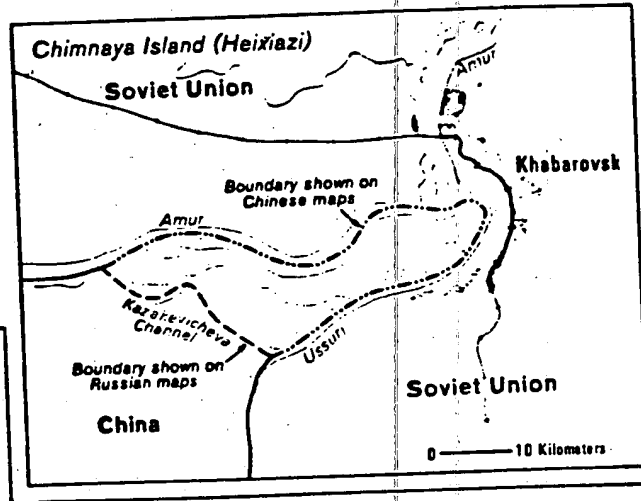
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Map 1

### Disputed Areas on the Sino-Soviet Border

□ Principal areas in dispute between China and the Soviet Union. Chinese claim the Soviets hold islands in the Amur and Ussuri and areas in the Pamirs which were not given to Tsarist Russia even by the "unequal treaties" of the 19th century.



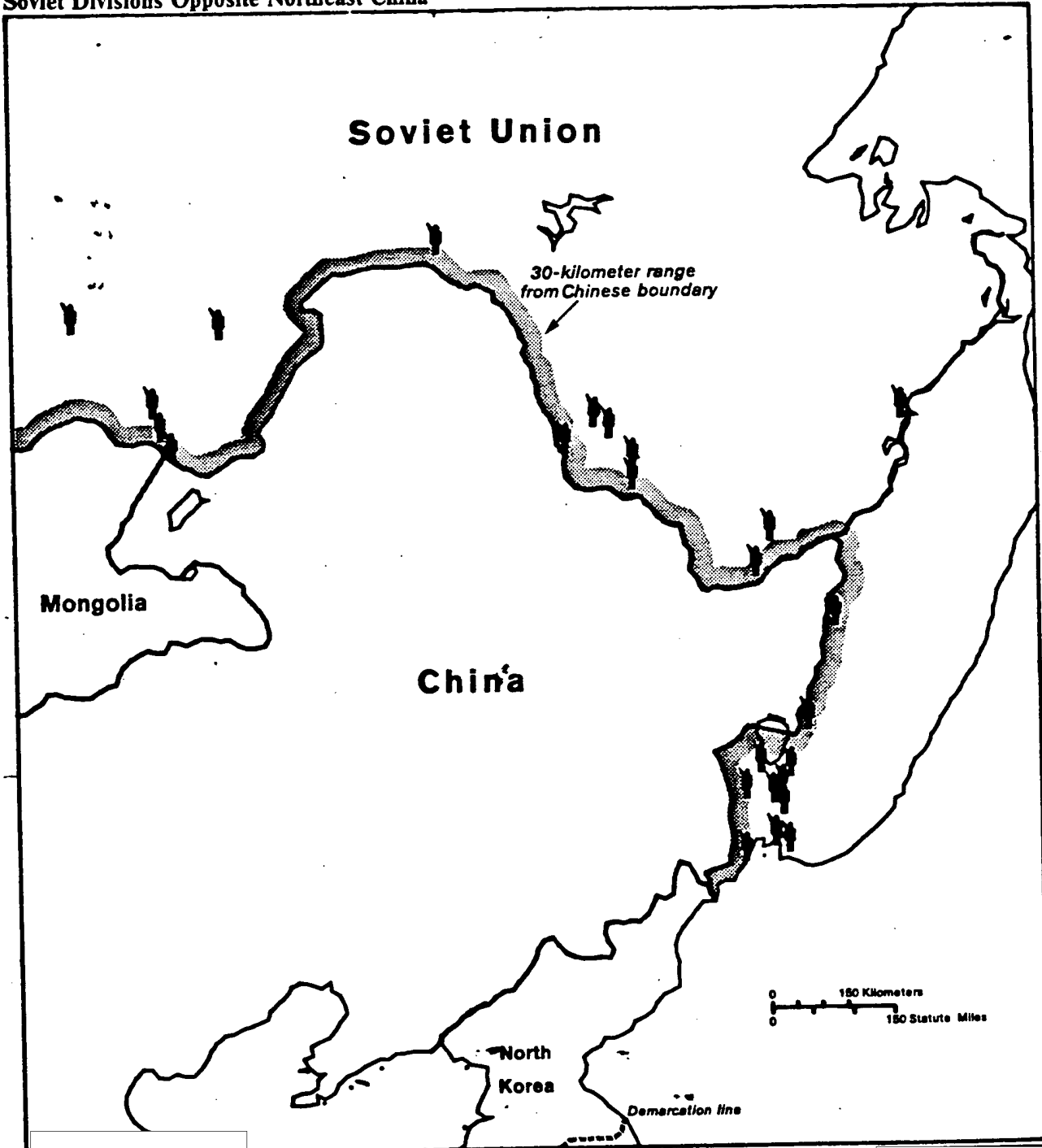
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**Soviet Divisions Opposite Northeast China**



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Note: This map shows only those divisions deployed in the Soviet Far East near the Chinese border.

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- 1 - SOVA/TWA/A/Topping



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