From Frontier Violence to Cold War Crisis: Zhenbao/Damansky in Chinese, Soviet, and American Perspective

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Introduction

"宁肯让装甲车从我身上压过去，也绝不让它践踏我国神圣领土"
"I would rather let the armored vehicle run over my body than allow it to trample upon our country's sacred territory."
周登国 (Zhou Denguo)[1]

Thick snow fell over the frozen Ussuri River, covering Zhenbao Island, known to the Soviet Union as Damansky Island, in near silence. It was a quiet evening. Two Soviet border guards watched through the poor visibility but saw nothing unusual. Unbeknownst to them, Chinese forces had already begun moving into position, hiding among the bare trees and shrubs of the island as they waited in secrecy. Around 10:40 a.m., the silence broke. Soviet guards noticed a small group of Chinese personnel advancing toward the island, waving Mao's Little Red Book before moving across the ice. To the chief of the Soviet outpost, Senior Lieutenant Ivan Strelnikov, this did not seem unusual. As he had many times before, he ordered his men to arms, drove toward the island, and prepared to demand that the Chinese withdraw. However, as Strelnikov approached the group, other Chinese troops remained hidden in ambush. Moments later, pistol shots rang out as the signal to begin. Gunfire erupted from concealed Chinese positions, shattering the frozen silence and transforming a routine border confrontation into a deadly ambush.[2]

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[1] "Ten Combat Heroes on Zhenbao Island," Liberation Army Daily, August 1970, reprinted by the Center of Chinese Research Materials, Association of Research Libraries.
[2] Dmitry S. Ryabushkin and Harold Orenstein, *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969, Volume 1: The Border Conflict That Almost Sparked a Nuclear War* (Warwick: Helion, 2021), 19–22; Soviet Government, "Diplomatic Note to the Government of the People's Republic of China," March 2, 1969, published in *Pravda*, March 4, 1969, reprinted in Vladimir Wozniuk, ed., *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy: Readings and Documents* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 183.

From 1960 to October 1964, more than 1,000 incidents occurred along the Sino-Soviet border. Between October 1964 and March 1969, that number rose by more than 150 percent, reaching 4,189 recorded confrontations.[3] Yet, the March 1969 clash at Zhenbao/Damansky, occupies a disproportionately large place in the history of the Sino-Soviet split. Zhenbao/Damansky was a small disputed island in the Ussuri River along the eastern Sino-Soviet border, situated between China's Heilongjiang province and the Soviet Far East. The island itself had little strategic value. For much of the year, it was frozen over, and its practical importance lay mainly in local uses such as fishing rather than military control.[4] As shown through the statistics, Violence on the Sino-Soviet frontier predated Zhenbao. Why has this particular clash escalated so far beyond earlier incidents and acquired a significance that many previous confrontations never did? Why did Zhenbao/Damansky become the border clash that historians return to, while so many earlier episodes remain in the background? What transformed a frontier conflict into an international political crisis?

To answer these questions, Zhenbao/Damansky has to be placed within both the longer history of the Sino-Russian frontier and the political crisis of the late 1960s. The border itself had been shaped by a series of treaties between the Russian Empire and the Qing dynasty, especially Nerchinsk in 1689, Aigun in 1858, and the Treaty of Peking in 1860. By the twentieth century, those agreements had become politically charged.[5] Lenin had sought to abolish the unequal treaties imposed under the tsarist regime. China had recognized this shift, in fact, Mao stated at the Seventh CPC Congress in

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[3] Kuisong Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao/Damansky Island to Sino-American Rapprochement," *Cold War History* 1 (2000): 21–52.
[4] Michael S. Gerson, *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict: Deterrence, Escalation, and the Threat of Nuclear War in 1969* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, 2010), 14
[5] Lorenz M. Lüthi, The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), Chapter 1.

1945, and repeated on December 16, 1949, that the Soviet Union was the first state to repudiate those unequal treaties and replace them with new, equitable agreements with China.[6] In fact, when the soviet union and China were still friendly, there was an ambiguous consciousness of national boundaries on those living along the border, people (especially the Chinese) would frequently cross the border simply just to " [pick] wild fruits, wild vegetables, [...] cutting firewood, hunting [...] and fishing."[7] In the eyes of the border residents, "'The USSR is our elder brother, and there is no problem in going there to have a little to eat or bringing a little back. China and the USSR are friends; Boundary trespass is of no consequence[...]'"[8]

Historically, few alliances are permanent, and the Sino-Soviet alliance was one that disintegrated with unfortunate speed. Its collapse was driven largely by ideological disagreements over the proper path of communism. After Stalin's death, Khrushchev's Secret Speech denouncing Stalin initiated the process of de-Stalinization and signaled a new Soviet direction. Khrushchev promoted peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world and emphasized consumer goods, scientific management, and economic competition with the West. As he later boasted, the Soviet Union would "bury" the West not through direct war, but through superior productivity.[9] In Mao's eyes, this moderation was counterrevolutionary. By the late 1950s, Mao could increasingly afford to downgrade relations with the Soviet Union because Soviet aid was no longer as politically acceptable or strategically indispensable as before. Staying close to Moscow would have required Mao to compromise ideologically and accept

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[6]ibid
[7] Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact The Cold War History of Sino-Soviet Relations June 2005 Comrades Plus Brothers: Sino-Soviet Border Relations in the 1950s by Li Danhui*
[8]Ibid
[9] Nikita S. Khrushchev, "Control Figures for the Economic Development of the U.S.S.R. for 1959–1965," report delivered to the Twenty-First Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, January 27, 1959, 16, 52

Soviet leadership over the socialist world.[10] Mao instead decided that ideological independence was worth more than preserving the alliance. The benefits of remaining close to Moscow were also becoming smaller, as shown by the Soviet refusal to provide China with a model atomic bomb in 1959.[11] Rather than formally "leaving" the socialist camp, Mao publicly challenged Soviet leadership within it. China pursued its own revolutionary model through the Great Leap Forward, which envisioned a self-reliant path to socialism that mobilized the masses over bureaucratic expertise. Backyard furnaces, people's communes, and the breakdown of traditional work hierarchies became hallmarks of a Chinese model that rejected the Soviet emphasis on heavy industry, hierarchical technocracy, and centralized state planning.[12]

Additionally, these ideological disagreements became increasingly public through a series of polemical exchanges in the early 1960s, including Beijing's "Long Live Leninism!" articles and the later exchange of open letters between the Chinese and Soviet parties.[13] In these writings, China condemned the Soviet Union as "revisionist," accusing Moscow of betraying revolutionary communism through its support for peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world. By the late 1960s, this criticism hardened further as Chinese leaders increasingly portrayed the Soviet Union as "social-imperialist," socialist in name, but imperialist in practice. Moscow, in turn, grew alarmed by Beijing's ideological radicalism

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[10] Lorenz M. Lüthi, "Sino-Soviet Relations during the Mao Years, 1949–1969," in *China Learned from the Soviet Union, 1949–Present*, ed. Thomas P. Bernstein and Hua-Yu Li (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 27.
[11] Ibid
[12] For more specifics, see Editorial Department of *Hongqi*, "Long Live Leninism! In Commemoration of the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Birth of Lenin," *Peking Review* 3, no. 17 (April 26, 1960); Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, "A Proposal Concerning the General Line of the International Communist Movement," June 14, 1963, in reply to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's letter of March 30, 1963; Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, "Open Letter of the Central Committee of the CPSU to All Party Organizations, to All Communists of the Soviet Union," July 14, 1963, originally published in *Pravda*, July 14, 1963.
[13] Ibid

and its divisive influence within the socialist bloc. As Lorenz Lüthi argues, Mao "stoked territorial disputes" as a way to pressure the Soviet Union over these ideological conflicts.[14] Chinese leaders therefore framed the border question not simply as a territorial disagreement, but as proof of Soviet betrayal. By emphasizing that Moscow still occupied land taken from China through unequal treaties, Beijing turned the frontier itself into evidence of Soviet imperialism.

The rise of Sino-Soviet territorial conflict therefore closely followed the development of ideological conflict, as the border became a means for Mao to challenge Soviet authority within the socialist world. By 1964, even as China and the Soviet Union negotiated the eastern sector of the border and reached tentative understandings over several disputed islands, Mao revived broader historical claims involving Outer Mongolia, Eastern Siberia, and the Soviet maritime provinces.[15] The failure of the 1964 secret border negotiations further intensified the dispute. During these talks, both sides considered redrawing parts of the river boundary along the main channel, in keeping with international practice, and Khrushchev later claimed that the Soviet Union was willing to make limited concessions, including the transfer of certain islands.[16] Yet Beijing sought more than technical adjustments. It pressed Moscow to acknowledge that the existing frontier had been created through unequal tsarist treaties imposed on a weak China..[17] Khrushchev regarded this demand as unacceptable because it would have undermined the legal basis of Soviet territorial claims. As a result, the negotiations broke down, leaving the border not merely unresolved, but increasingly politicized as a

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[14] Lüthi, "Sino-Soviet Relations during the Mao Years," 27.

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[16] Sergey Radchenko, *Two Suns in the Heavens: The Sino-Soviet Struggle for Supremacy, 1962-1967* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 20

[17] Yang, "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969,"

site of historical grievance and ideological rivalry.

Soviet military preparations along the Chinese frontier gave Beijing another reason for alarm. Under the 1960 "Regulations on the Protection of the State Border," Soviet border troops already protected the USSR's land, sea, river, and lake frontiers, but later CPSU and government decisions expanded that mission into the armed defense of the Sino-Soviet frontier, including the "decisive suppression" of Chinese "military-political provocations."[18] The April 30, 1965 Council of Ministers resolution widened the border strip to 1,000 meters and increased troops, weapons, vehicles, and armored boats, while the February 4, 1967 CPSU Central Committee and Council of Ministers resolution added new detachments, patrol-boat divisions, outposts, maneuver groups, roads, and electrical alarm barriers.[19] By 1969, Soviet border density had risen from 0.8 to 4 personnel per kilometer.[20] Combined with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, this buildup made Beijing fear that Moscow might use force against China as well. By late 1968, the Sino-Soviet border had become more than a disputed frontier: because China used the unequal-treaty issue to accuse Moscow of imperialism, and because Soviet actions made Beijing fear intervention, even local patrol clashes came to represent the larger ideological and strategic rivalry between the two communist powers.

Within this context, Sino-Soviet border clashes acquired their historical significance. Zhenbao/Damansky was only one episode in a broader border crisis, and the island itself was small, remote, and of limited military value. Later in the chapters, I will show that the confrontation that

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[18] Collective Authors, Russian Border Troops in Wars and Armed Conflicts of the Twentieth Century, chap. 8 (Moscow: Granitsa Publishing House, 2000), 80–95, https://royallib.com/book/kollektiv_avtorov/pogranichnie_voyska_rossii_v_voynah_i_voorugennih_konfliktah_xx_v.html

[19] ibid

[20] ibid

unfolded there carried meanings far beyond the frozen Ussuri River. By 1969, a local clash on the frontier could no longer remain local. It was immediately interpreted through the ideological rupture between Beijing and Moscow, the militarization of the border, and the strategic calculations of the wider Cold War. This thesis argues that Zhenbao/Damansky became historically significant because it transformed recurring frontier tension into an openly armed, highly public, and politically consequential international crisis. Its importance lay in the meanings attached to it by China, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

Chapter One establishes the significance of Zhenbao/Damansky by comparing it to earlier Sino-Soviet border incidents. Rather than treating pre-1969 clashes as mere background, this chapter argues that they are essential for understanding why Zhenbao/Damansky mattered. Earlier incidents created a pattern of normalized confrontation along the frontier, but they usually remained limited in scale and political visibility. Zhenbao/Damansky broke from that pattern. The March 2 clash was not simply another case of border harassment; it involved a prepared ambush, immediate casualties, and a rapid shift from local confrontation to international crisis. The chapter also emphasizes publicity as a key difference. Once both Beijing and Moscow turned the clash into a public event, Zhenbao/Damansky became a test of sovereignty, ideological legitimacy, and military resolve. In this sense, Chapter One explains why Zhenbao/Damansky became the starting point of the 1969 border crisis in historical memory; it shattered the assumption that frontier clashes could remain contained.

Chapter Two examines the Chinese dimension of the Zhenbao/Damansky crisis and argues that the clash exposed the fractured nature of political authority inside Beijing. Although the official Chinese narrative cast the Soviet Union as the aggressor and China as a restrained victim acting in

self-defense, Mao, Zhou Enlai, and Lin Biao drew different lessons from the crisis. Mao saw it as an opportunity to restore discipline and redirect the Cultural Revolution. Zhou translated the threat into the language of planning, production, and state coordination. Lin Biao, however, drew the most militant conclusion. For Lin and the military figures around him, Zhenbao confirmed that China's survival required self-reliance, a politicized People's Liberation Army (PLA), and a revolutionary order organized around armed struggle rather than diplomatic compromise. Under Lin's interpretation, the Soviet threat reinforced ideological hardness, militarized politics, and independence from both superpowers. The clash therefore matters because it shows that China's path toward rapprochement with the United States was not inevitable; it also helps explain why the border conflict became more violent, organized, and premeditated. Ultimately , Zhenbao first intensified internal debates over the future of the Cultural Revolution and strengthened the political case for PLA authority.

The third chapter explores the Soviet response following a different logic. Moscow approached Damansky with an already established understanding of Chinese behavior. Before the March fighting, Soviet officials had concluded that Beijing was manufacturing tensions, politicizing border issues, and cultivating anti-Soviet hostility for ideological purposes. Once the clash occurred, Soviet leaders treated it as confirmation of an established Chinese pattern rather than as an isolated misunderstanding. That interpretation mattered especially in the aftermath of the Prague Spring and under the shadow of the Brezhnev Doctrine, when Soviet authority within the socialist bloc was already under strain. Publicizing the clash allowed Moscow to reverse the political optics of 1968 and present itself as a disciplined victim defending socialist order against Chinese recklessness. In Soviet hands, Zhenbao became an argument about power, bloc leadership, and the political meaning of socialism itself.

Lastly, the fourth chapter explores the American dimension of the Zhenbao/Damansky crisis, showing how a confrontation on a remote stretch of the Ussuri River became part of global Cold War strategy. For Washington, the clash mattered because it transformed the Sino-Soviet split from a background feature of the Cold War into an immediate strategic problem. Earlier tensions had already weakened the image of a unified communist bloc, but they had not yet created an obvious opening for American diplomacy. The March 1969 clash changed this. It turned ideological hostility into armed confrontation, raised the possibility of a wider Sino-Soviet war, and made both Beijing and Moscow more attentive to how Washington would interpret their actions. For Nixon and Kissinger, the crisis created both danger and opportunity: danger because Soviet pressure on China, especially the possibility of strikes against Chinese nuclear facilities, could destabilize Asia and complicate the Vietnam War; opportunity because Chinese vulnerability and Soviet anxiety gave the United States new leverage. Washington's goal was therefore not to choose China or the Soviet Union, but to preserve flexibility, avoid being trapped in Moscow's anti-China strategy, and use the split to strengthen its position in Vietnam, arms control, and détente. By refusing to align fully with either communist power, Nixon and Kissinger made American neutrality itself meaningful, turning the Sino-Soviet conflict into a foundation for triangular diplomacy.

Chapter 1: The Significance of the Clash

Scholarship on the Zhenbao/Damansky Island clash has often explained the crisis through two related questions: who initiated the fighting and how the conflict contributed to Sino-American rapprochement. Two scholars dominate this discussion: Lyle Goldstein and Yang Kuisong. Both reject the older view that Zhenbao/Damansky was simply an accidental border clash or a Soviet-initiated attack. Goldstein argues that although the clash was staged by Beijing, it was not originally intended to produce rapprochement with Washington. Instead, the American opening emerged as an unexpected result of the crisis. Yang places particular emphasis on Mao's willingness to use limited violence for domestic and strategic purposes. This paper builds on their arguments but shifts the emphasis in three ways. First, it argues that earlier border incidents were not merely background to March 1969. These pre-Zhenbao clashes created a repertoire of normalized confrontation that shaped how both China and the Soviet Union interpreted the violence on the island. Second, it places greater emphasis on Lin Biao and the PLA, rather than Mao alone, in turning limited violence into a strategic tool. The planning of the clash reveals the growing political importance of the military during the Cultural Revolution. Third, this paper gives more attention to the Soviet perspective. For Moscow, Zhenbao/Damansky was not only a border crisis with China; it was also a political crisis of legitimacy. Soviet leaders needed to present the USSR as the victim of Chinese aggression and as the responsible defender of socialist order. This helps explain why the Soviet Union moved quickly to frame the incident publicly and diplomatically.

Understanding of Zhenbao/Damansky through the backdrop of the previous border helps

shed light to what made it more significant.. Earlier incidents are often treated merely as background to March 1969, but they are crucial because they reveal both continuity and rupture.

Zhenbao/Damansky did not emerge out of nowhere, but neither was it simply another episode in an existing pattern. Before March 1969, violence along the border often took the form of coercion rather than sustained armed combat: beatings, ramming, forced expulsions, crowd pressure, symbolic occupation, and intimidation. Fatalities were rare, and when they occurred, they generally did not result from shooting.[21] Chinese local records describe serious confrontations near the Ussuri, including the December 1967 Kachali Island incident and the March 1968 Liuzixu Island incident, where Soviet personnel allegedly beat Chinese civilians and fishermen.[22] These accounts must be read critically, since Soviet and Chinese sources often provide conflicting numbers and narratives. Still, they point to an important distinction: serious bodily violence existed before 1969, but it did not produce the same political or military consequences as Zhenbao/Damansky.

What made March 1969 decisive was not simply that violence occurred, but that it crossed into organized armed confrontation. Earlier border incidents had involved intimidation, physical clashes, and localized coercion, but Zhenbao/Damansky introduced a more lethal and deliberate form of conflict. Yang Kuisong argues that the March 2 clash was not spontaneous: the PLA had planned a "defensive counterattack," the Central Military Commission had approved preparations before the fighting, and selected PLA units had been trained and secretly deployed in advance. Beijing's goal, in

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[21] Goldstein, Lyle., "Return to Zhenbao/Damansky Island: Who Started Shooting and Why It Matters," *The China Quarterly* 168 (2001): 985–997.

[22]Chinese Communist Party Heilongjiang Provincial Committee Party History and Local Gazetteer Research Office. "Section Two: Border Disputes." *Heilongjiang Local Gazetteer Website*. https://www.hljszw.org.cn/home/book/info/get_id/274677.htm

Yang's interpretation, was to "teach the Soviets a bitter lesson."That preparation shaped the way the battle unfolded. Soviet border guards did not detect anything unusual during the night, partly because visibility was poor and the Chinese force remained concealed.[23] By the morning of March 2, the situation still appeared familiar: a visible group of Chinese personnel moved toward Damansky, prompting Soviet border guards to respond as they normally would to a routine border violation.[24] This familiarity made the attack effective. While one Chinese group remained visible, another stayed hidden, creating the impression of a manageable confrontation while drawing the Soviet patrol into a trap.[25] When the Soviet guards approached, the encounter seemed to follow the usual pattern of warning and withdrawal. Instead, concealed Chinese forces opened fire, supported by positions on the Chinese bank. Soviet accounts emphasized the suddenness of the attack: some guards were still in standard formation and had not even loaded their weapons when the shooting began.[26]

The March 2 clash also changed the conditions under which later fighting took place. Once the first encounter had exposed the border as a space of organized armed conflict rather than routine patrol confrontation, both sides prepared for another round of violence. This became clear on March 15, when the fighting expanded beyond the sudden ambush of March 2 into a larger and more conventional military engagement. Soviet forces returned with heavier equipment and greater firepower, while Chinese forces were also more prepared for sustained combat around the island. After

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[23] D. S. Ryabushkin and Harold Orenstein, *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969*, vol. 1, *The Border Conflict That Almost Sparked a Nuclear War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2011)

[24] Ibid

[25] Collective Authors, Russian Border Troops in Wars and Armed Conflicts of the Twentieth Century, chap. 8 (Moscow: Granitsa Publishing House, 2000), 80–95, https://royallib.com/book/kollektiv_avtorov/pogranichnie_voyska_rossii_v_voynah_i_vooruzhennih_konfliktah_xx_v.html

[26] "20th March, 1969 No. 262, Major Major Current Events as Revealed in the Press and Radio of the Soviet Government," Frederick Nossal Papers, Box 26, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

March 2, the conflict could no longer be treated as another routine border incident. Both sides had reason to prepare for retaliation, reinforcement, and a larger confrontation.

Publicity was another crucial difference between Zhenbao/Damansky and earlier border incidents. Earlier clashes often remained local, unpublicized, or preserved only in scattered records, which helped keep them politically contained. March 1969 was different. Because the fighting produced immediate deaths and injuries, both governments quickly issued formal protests, and the Soviet Union moved through TASS to frame the clash as a premeditated Chinese ambush.[27] Moscow's publicity served several purposes at once. It explained Soviet losses, established a diplomatic record of Chinese aggression, and cast the USSR as the victim of an attack on its own territory. Beijing then transformed the clash into a national and international propaganda event through its March 4 *People's Daily* and *Liberation Army Daily* editorial "Down with the New Tsars!," later photographs, radio broadcasts, films, and musical treatments of Soviet atrocities.[28] Once the fighting became public, it could no longer remain a localized frontier disturbance. It became an event through which both states had to defend territory, legitimacy, and ideological authority.[29] In this sense, Zhenbao/Damansky transformed the meaning of the entire border conflict. Earlier incidents had created a repertoire of normalized confrontation and encouraged both sides to believe that future clashes could be managed and contained. March 1969 shattered that illusion. Once armed violence on the island became globally

[27]I looked through many major newspapers and did not find discussion of specific border clashes. Instead, there were only general references to the Soviet Union encroaching on Chinese territory or threatening the border on the Chinese side. There was also almost no mention of these incidents in the Soviet press until March 1969.Robinson confirms that the TASS was in fact the first announcement of the conflict; Robinson, The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute, Frederick Nossal Papers, box 26.

[28] Chinese film, Zhenbao Island will not be encroached upon (珍宝岛不容侵犯) produced by 中国电影发行放映公司 and a musical (*Down with the New Tsar!)* produced by 朝陽出版社

[29] Soviet Union created radio shows talking about the history of their kindness to China; "Glorious CHapter of Sino-Soviet Relations, The Consistent Policy of Friendship with China," transcript of Radio Moscow in Chinese, Sino-Soviet folder, box 46, Stanley Karnow Papers, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.

visible, international observers no longer saw only a remote frontier dispute. Chinese political and military institutions framed the fighting as a defense of sovereignty and a demonstration of revolutionary legitimacy against Soviet "revisionism." Soviet officials treated it as evidence of Chinese strategic intent and as a warning of wider war. American intelligence and foreign policy officials, in turn, read the clash as further proof of a deepening fracture within the socialist bloc.

For these reasons, Zhenbao/Damansky remains worth studying not only as a step toward Sino-American rapprochement, but also because of the different meanings it created for China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. The clash mattered because each country interpreted it through its own political anxieties: China through the instability of the Cultural Revolution and the rise of the PLA, the Soviet Union through the threat to its authority within the socialist bloc, and the United States through the strategic possibilities created by the Sino-Soviet split. Zhenbao/Damansky was therefore not simply a small island battle. It was the moment when repeated frontier friction became an openly armed, highly public, and politically consequential international crisis.

Chapter 2: Zhenbao and the Militiarization of Chinese Politics

"最重要的还是那么一条，就是动员人民，依靠人民，实行全民皆兵，进行人民战争。"
"The most important one is still mobilization of the people, reliance on the people, making every one a soldier and waging a people's war."
(Lin Biao)[30]

This chapter argues that Zhenbao became politically significant inside China because Chinese leaders invested the clash with broader political meaning beyond the island's limited military value. The different ways the Chinese leaders interpreted the event demonstrated a degree of the factionalism that arose during the Cultural Revolution. Understanding how some prominent leaders reacted helps us better understand some of the different visions for the future of the cultural revolution. First, Mao Zedong, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and the dominant figure in Chinese politics, treated the crisis as grounds for restoring discipline, redirecting the Cultural Revolution, and preparing the country for the possibility of wider confrontation. Whereas Zhou Enlai, Premier of the People's Republic of China, was much more tamer, translated the same threat into the language of planning, production, and long-term state coordination.Lin Biao, however, drew the sharpest conclusion. As Minister of National Defense and Mao's designated successor, he pushed the crisis toward a more explicitly militarized reading of Maoism, emphasizing self-reliance, people's war, revolutionary vigilance, and the PLA's role as the guardian of the revolution. Lin treated Zhenbao as confirmation that China's survival depended upon a more deeply politicized PLA, a more militant Party, and a revolutionary order grounded in self-reliance and armed struggle. In this sense, the clash mattered

[30] Lin Biao, *Long Live the Victory of the People's War! Carry Out the Strategy and Tactics of People's War* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 29, box 28, Frederick Nossal Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

because it could be mobilized to justify a particular vision of political authority at home. This chapter places particular emphasis on Lin's response because his interpretation reveals most clearly how external crisis and internal power became intertwined in 1969. A close reading of Chinese leaders' responses suggests that the clash acquired significance through the political utility it held within an already divided leadership. For Lin and the military figures around him, Zhenbao was evidence of Soviet "social-imperialist" hostility that created an opportunity to reinforce the political centrality of the PLA, legitimize the further expansion of militarized governance, and strengthen the broader military network that rose alongside Lin at the Ninth Party Congress. Zhenbao therefore illuminates more than Chinese threat perception alone. It shows how a border conflict could be absorbed into a larger struggle over revolutionary order, Party authority, and the political direction of late Cultural Revolution China.

Initial Response

The first political meaning of Zhenbao Island Clash was created almost immediately through a rapid official narrative that fixed responsibility on the soviet, asserted chinese sovereignty and Chinese's right to protect themselves. Right after the soviet had published its telegram in the TASS radio, Beijing responded by asserting the fact that the Soviet border forces had "brazenly" intruded into "unquestionably Chinese territory," opened fire first, and compelled Chinese border troops to carry out a "counterattack in self-defense.[31] In the Chinese account, the Soviet Union was cast as the sole aggressor, while China appeared as the restrained victim of yet another armed violation of its territory.

[31] *People's Daily. "Soviet Border Troops Invade China's Zhenbao Island Area in Heilongjiang Province and Create an Extremely Serious Bloody Incident; The Chinese Government Lodges the Strongest Protest with the Soviet Government." March 2, 1969. Sino-Soviet Stories folder, Frederick Nossal Papers. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.*

This framing established the central formula of the Chinese response, where self-defense justified retaliation while still leaving room for further escalation. The protest note that the CCP sent to the soviet union, insisted that chinese troops acted only after repeated warning had failed and only because they had been "left with no other choice."[32] At the same time, the note ended with a warning that any further Soviet provocations would bring a "resolute counterattack of the Chinese people," a formulation that blamed the Soviet Union, legitimized armed response, and left open the possibility of further escalation under the banner of self-defense.

The March 4 editorial published in People's Daily and Liberation Army Daily, "Defeat the New Tsars!," widened this framing dramatically. What had been presented in the protest note as a border incident was now elevated into proof of the "wolf-like nature" of Soviet "social-imperialism."[33] The editorial repeated the key claims of the note but it moved beyond diplomatic accusation into ideological war language. Through this attack, the Soviet Union was a new form of tsarist expansionism masquerading under socialist language. In this rhetoric move, the clash became evidence that the USSR had inherited the aggressive legacy of the Russian Empire itself. The editorial painted this event in the larger story of previous clashes, and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, the betrayal of revolutionary movements abroad, collusion with U.S. imperialism, and a growing anti-China encirclement. The enemy at Zhenbao was no longer just a frontier force, but "social-imperialism" as a whole.[34] Politically, this linked the clash to the already entrenched anti-revisionist discourse of the Cultural Revolution, made the Soviet threat appear ideological as well

[32]Ibid
[33]People's Daily and Liberation Army Daily. "Defeat the New Tsars!" March 4, 1969. Sino-Soviet Stories folder, Frederick Nossal Papers. Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.
[34]ibid

as territorial and allowed Chinese leaders to present the confrontation on the Ussuri River as one front in a much broader struggle between revolution and betrayal. The editorial's emotional rhetoric also intensified the clash's mobilizational function. Its militant tone was captured in the phrase, "If others do not attack us, we will not attack them; if others attack us, we will certainly attack them," a formula that helped mobilize the Chinese public's understanding of Zhenbao and echoed Mao's earlier language of communist self-defense against Kuomintang attacks.[35] The immediate official framing fixed the public meaning of Zhenbao as an act of Soviet aggression met by Chinese self-defense and resilience but Mao, Lin Biao, and Zhou Enlai did not merely repeat the same narrative, they utilized it to advance different political and strategic priorities and visions.

Mao and Zhou's Perspectives on the clash

The different ways Chinese leaders interpreted the event reflected the factionalism that had already taken shape within the central leadership during the Cultural Revolution. By the late 1960s, Beijing was not operating as a politically unified center. Mao often governed by encouraging struggle among senior figures, while Zhou Enlai generally emphasized order and administrative stability, Lin Biao elevated the political and military role of the PLA, and Jiang Qing and other radicals pushed a more militant revolutionary line.leadership's differing responses to Zhenbao revealed a central government already fractured by competing priorities, rival political networks, and conflicting visions of how the Cultural Revolution should proceed.

Mao treated the clash as a politically productive crisis that could deepen mobilization and discipline. In Mao's speech, presented at a Central Cultural Revolution Group Meeting in March 1969, just 13

[35] Ibid

days after the first attack at Zhenbao and 2 days before the second attack at Zhenbao island. Mao practically voiced approval for the soviets to come in, "we should give them a little face and let them come in," as "once they come in, so much the better; then we have a reason– a sufficient reason. [...] to rouse us into mobilization."[36] This is one of the clearest signs that Mao did not view the border crisis only as an external danger to be minimized, he also saw it as politically useful to stir society and strengthen revolutionary discipline. Mao's reaction drew heavily on the logic of the People's War.[37] He called for each county to establish local military forces, reinforcing the idea of the People's war, " One county, one regiment—then in wartime it would be like cutting chives."[38] Local forces should remain in place during peacetime but be ready to reinforce the field army in wartime, then it will just be like cutting chives, which grows very easily and the local forces can replenish very quickly, and the attacking army would be easily cut down.the enemy might have greater firepower but China possessed manpower. This also appears at the Ninth Party Congress, When he praised the courage of Chinese infantry at Zhenbao and argued that victory depended above all on the action of the people, The core of warfare remained human courage, guerilla warfare and political spirit, not on "turtle shells," aircraft or technical mights alone. [39]

To Mao, the clash was valuable precisely because it could reorganize the country. Mao points to how this has already unified the red guards, as this border conflict has helped eliminate factional

[36]Mao Zedong, "在中央文革碰头会上的讲话" [Speech at a Meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group], March 15, 1969, in *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*, ed. Song Yongyi et al.
[37]People's warfare is a Maoist strategy that relies on popular support, guerrilla warfare, and drawing the enemy into the countryside until revolutionary forces can weaken and eventually defeat them.
[38] Ibid
[39]Mao Zedong, "在中共九大期间的讲话(三)" [Speech During the Ninth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, no. 3], April 13, 1969, in *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*,

fighting where "previously been especially intense."[40] How some that were unwilling to carry their packs on marches, are "now not only [...] willing [...]even refusing to ride in a vehicle" instead choosing to march.[41] This is because being mobilized against a foreign caused the red guard to ignore factional issues and support something bigger than themselves. This points to one of Mao's central concerns in early 1969 and at the 9th central communist party congress, which is how to implement Cultural revolution policy in a more disciplined and selective way, so that only a small minority would be treated as true enemies. The implication is that external danger requires greater discipline and selectivity. If China was entering a period of possible confrontation with the Soviet Union, then the state could no longer afford indiscriminate factionalism at home. This suggests that by 1968 Mao was already considering how to redirect, if not begin winding down, the Cultural Revolution. In that context, the Zhenbao clash mattered because it gave him an external crisis through which he could justify shifting the movement away from factional chaos and toward discipline, resisting revisionism, and remaking society along more consciously revolutionary lines.

Zhou Enlai was considered the more mild one compared to Mao and Mao's gang of four. Whereas Mao's response was very ideological, Zhou translated the same danger into a more practical language of planning and production. Zhou's speech at the national planning work conference made this especially clear, Zhou saw that China's entire economic and administrative apparatus had to be reorganized under conditions of the line struggle and China must be ready for a long-term preparation due to the external threat. Planning, in Zhou's hands, became inseparable from politics and war

[40]Mao Zedong, "Speech at a Meeting of the Central Cultural Revolution Group," April 1969, in *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*.
[41] Ibid

readiness. In making the production plans, one must begin with line struggle and he grounded planning in Mao's border formula of "grasp revolution, promote production, promote work and promote strategic preparedness."[42] In other words, the economic sphere had to be subordinated to proletarian politics and directed by revolutionary lines. The sino-soviet confrontation became a rationale for comprehensive national preparation for a need for economic, military industrial, raw production, and agricultural reorganization. Zhou also criticized "maoist formalism" and the waste it creates, such as oversized Mao badges. Compared to Mao, Zhou's public comments criticized louder displays of revolutionary commitment but advocated for a more rational allocation of effort and resources if we were to go to war.

Preparation, Ambush, and the Question of Military Initiative

Before turning to Lin Biao and the PLA, it is necessary to establish what occurred during the clash itself. Whether the fighting was reactive or the result of a premeditated attack is especially important. The available evidence points strongly to China as the initiator of the conflict, though the question of who precisely planned and carried out the attack remains unresolved. Although no direct evidence survives that lays out the detailed operational planning behind the clash, most scholars, Chinese, American, and Soviet alike, agree that the Chinese "were better prepared for the battle."[43] Scholars continue to debate the degree of that preparation, but there appears to be a broad consensus that

[42] Zhou Enlai, "周恩来在全国计划工作会议上的讲话" [Speech at the National Planning Work Conference], March 25, 1969, in *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*
[43] D. S. Ryabushkin and Harold Orenstein, *The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969, vol. 1, The Border Conflict That Almost Sparked a Nuclear War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2011) p 49.

Chinese forces carried out some level of "[planning] and [executing] an ambush" and that they were the side that "started the shooting," while Soviet troops were caught unprepared.[44] This point matters because it suggests that particular actors, especially military leaders, may have had a strong stake in the event and in the political advantages that could follow from it, especially with the Ninth National Congress set to convene in April, only weeks after the March clashes.

Lin Biao, the PLA, and the Militarization of Zhenbao

The People's Liberation Army occupied a special place in the political life of the People's Republic of China. It was never simply a military institution standing apart from the Party. It was the armed force through which the Chinese Communist Party had risen to power, defended its rule, and extended its authority into society. During the 1960s, that role deepened as the Cultural Revolution, the Sino-Soviet split, and the growing possibility of Soviet attack pushed Chinese leaders to think about defense in far more political terms. In that setting, the army became inseparable from questions of ideology, discipline, and revolutionary survival. Lin Biao stood at the center of this transformation. After becoming minister of national defense in 1959, he recast the PLA around political loyalty, diminished the prestige of military professionalism for its own sake, and placed Mao Zedong Thought at the core of army life. By the time of the Zhenbao clash, he was ready to interpret a border crisis as confirmation of a much larger political lesson. To Lin, the fighting on the Ussuri was evidence that China needed an army more deeply embedded in the revolutionary order and more capable of defending that order through political will as well as force.

[44] Lyle J. Goldstein, "Return to Zhenbao Island: Who Started Shooting and Why It Matters," *The China Quarterly*, no. 168 (December 2001): 985–997, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443901000572.

This reading did not arise spontaneously in March 1969. It followed ideas Lin had articulated years earlier in Long Live the Victory of People's War!. In that essay, he argued that revolutionary success did not rest on superior technology, foreign guarantees, or faith in peaceful accommodation. He wrote instead that China had to "rely mainly on her own strength," draw upon "the creative power of the whole army and the entire people," and preserve the Party's "independence and initiative."[45] He rejected the view that military strength could be reduced to weapons alone and ridiculed the belief that political struggle must give way before material superiority. In his language, yielding to stronger powers was a form of capitulation. "If unity is sought through struggle, it will live; if unity is sought through yielding, it will perish."[46] The conclusion followed naturally. A revolutionary state that wished to survive could not hope to escape confrontation through moderation or dependence. It had to prepare itself to fight on its own terms, and it had to make the army the instrument through which that preparation became real.[47] Zhenbao fit that framework with remarkable ease. For Lin, the clash showed that China's security could not rest on diplomacy, foreign sympathy, or technological imitation of the Soviet Union. It had to rest on self-reliant armed struggle. He had already argued that the enemy's material advantages did not determine the outcome of conflict and that a politically mobilized people could overcome a stronger opponent. Zhenbao seemed to provide an immediate example. The Soviet Union could be described as mechanized, powerful, and threatening, yet still vulnerable before a state willing to organize itself for struggle and draw strength from political discipline.[48] Read in that way, the

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[45] Lin Biao, *Long Live the Victory of the People's War! Carry Out the Strategy and Tactics of People's War* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 29, box 28, Frederick Nossal Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.
[46] Ibid, 16.
[47] Ibid, 19-21
[48] Ibid 48-49

clash vindicated rather than altered Lin's worldview. It confirmed his belief that a stronger PLA was necessary because China's answer to Soviet pressure could only come through its own revolutionary resources. This was why he could treat Zhenbao less as a warning against confrontation than as proof that China had to deepen its commitment to people's war and to the military institutions that made such a strategy possible.

The importance of that interpretation becomes even clearer in Lin's report to the Ninth Party Congress. There he defined the Chinese Communist Party as a "vigorous vanguard organization" and reminded his audience that the Party had been forged through "armed struggle."[49] Those phrases did more than celebrate revolutionary history. In the atmosphere of 1969, they gave present meaning to the Soviet threat. The USSR appeared in Lin's language as "social-imperialist," a power whose external aggression expressed the same revisionist danger that Maoist politics claimed to be fighting within China.[50] Once the Soviet Union was understood in those terms, military danger and ideological danger no longer sat in separate categories. Revisionism could cross the frontier in armed form. Border defense therefore became part of the same struggle as Party purification. That is why Lin's language fused the crisis so tightly to questions of internal discipline. A Party capable of facing the Soviet Union had to remain militant, preserve its "independence and initiative," and continue "relying on our own efforts." Zhenbao strengthened his argument that the Party had to be remade into a harder revolutionary instrument, one that could meet pressure from abroad without loosening its hold at home.[51]

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[49] Lin Biao, *Long Live the Victory of the People's War! Carry Out the Strategy and Tactics of People's War* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), 29, box 28, Frederick Nossal Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.
[50] Ninth Party Congress Agenda, Lin Biao's Speech," box 26, Frederick Nossal Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University
[51] ibid

Seen from this lens, Lin's emphasis on strengthening the PLA was never a narrowly military program. The army represented the political form through which self-reliance could be enforced. It held together defense, ideology, and authority. Mao used Zhenbao to underline preparedness and to support a broader movement toward consolidation after the most chaotic years of the Cultural Revolution. Lin drew a sharper lesson. He understood the clash as proof that revolutionary order still depended on a politicized army and on a Party willing to think in terms of struggle rather than retreat. At the moment when Mao was moving toward greater discipline and institutional stabilization, Lin could read the Soviet threat as a reason to preserve the centrality of militarized politics. In his hands, Zhenbao became evidence that China's safety rested on revolutionary resolve and on the institutions capable of sustaining it. That reading gave the PLA a renewed political importance. It was the body through which the revolution could defend itself and the institution through which the state could remain self-sufficient under pressure.

Beyond ideology and the perception of northern border tensions as a genuine danger, Zhenbao also created a political opportunity for Lin Biao and the military figures around him. By 1967, Mao had already decided that the Cultural Revolution should begin moving toward conclusion and that the Ninth Party Congress would mark that transition in early 1969. That trajectory did not necessarily serve the interests of those whose power had grown under conditions of prolonged upheaval. Lin and those around him understood continuing tension as politically useful. The crisis on the northern border could help preserve a climate in which power was still being redistributed and in which the PLA's political importance continued to grow. The conversation at Lin's Dwelling, Maojiawan (毛家

湾) from late 1968 is especially revealing in this respect.[52] In a conversation with Huang Yongsheng, Wu Faxian, Li Zuopeng, and Qiu Huizuo, the group reportedly concluded that "a big war is unlikely, but a small war is unavoidable," to which Lin responded that a small war "may not necessarily be a bad thing."[53] This does not prove that Lin engineered the crisis, but it does suggest that he viewed limited conflict as potentially advantageous. A controlled confrontation with the Soviet Union could sustain the atmosphere of mobilization, delay the final winding down of Cultural Revolution politics, and strengthen the influence of those already dominant within the military sphere. In that sense, the border crisis became entangled with the internal power struggles surrounding the Ninth Party Congress.

That connection becomes clearer when placed alongside the succession issue. Lin's associates reportedly described the Congress as a "redistribution of power" and insisted that the question of his succession be written into the Party Constitution. Ye Qun argued that "only when the title is proper can one speak and act with legitimacy," while others stressed that "the point that the leader is the successor must be written in."[54] Lin himself reportedly brought the discussion to its center by declaring, "Among the myriad affairs under heaven, this alone is the greatest."[55] These remarks suggest that, within Lin's political world, the growing crisis on the northern border could not be separated from the question of succession. The prestige of the PLA rose in proportion to the seriousness of the Soviet threat, and those closest to Lin stood to benefit from a political order in which the army appeared indispensable to national survival.

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[52] Chen Zhibin and Sun Xiao, 冰点下的对峙: *1962–1969*中苏边界之战实录 [Confrontation below freezing point: A documentary record of the Sino-Soviet border war, 1962–1969] (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chuban gongsi, 1992), Chapter 6, War clouds gathered over the Sino-Soviet border.
[53] Ibid
[54] Ibid
[55] ibid

The Ninth Party Congress institutionalized this shift by bringing more PLA figures into the Party's leadership structure. The expanded military presence at the Congress, much of it tied to Lin Biao's network, showed that the PLA's wartime importance had translated into political authority.[56] Lin's elevation as Mao's successor was the clearest symbol of this change, but it also reflected a broader militarization of Party power. Zhenbao helped legitimize that development by making the PLA appear indispensable to China's survival, discipline, and revolutionary future.

The Zhenbao crisis also gave new legitimacy to the military's growing role in domestic governance. During the Cultural Revolution, the PLA had already entered civilian life through the "three supports" and the "two militaries."[57] The border clash gave fresh justification to that expansion.[58] Huang Yongsheng's description of the PLA as a "pillar of support," hardened through the Cultural Revolution and essential to completing the stage of "struggle, criticism, and transformation," captured the political meaning of the moment.[59] The army could now be presented as the force most capable of holding the revolutionary state together under conditions of external danger and internal uncertainty. In this setting, preparedness meant more than military vigilance. It elevated the political authority of the PLA itself. The symbolic elevation of Sun Yuguo at the Ninth Party Congress shows how that political line was dramatized. Sun, the frontier officer associated with Zhenbao, described the

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[56] MacFarquhar, Roderick; Schoenhals, Michael (2006). Mao's Last Revolution. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

[57] Three supports and two militaries" 三支两军 referred to the PLA's Cultural Revolution tasks of supporting the Left 支左, supporting industry 支工, supporting agriculture 支农, military control 军管, and political-military training 军训. See Chang Yuan-ho and Sun Hsiao-chen, "Three Supports and Two Militaries Make for the Best Army Building," Peking Review, no. 3, January 16, 1970, 14; "三支两军"和稳定局势的初步措施, 中共中央党史研究室, December 25, 2012.

[58] Li Shude, "内蒙古自治区革命委员会常委李树德同志在华建革委会第二届学代会开幕式上的讲话" [Speech by Comrade Li Shude, Standing Committee Member of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Revolutionary Committee, at the Opening Ceremony of the Second Student Congress of the Huajian Revolutionary Committee], March 18, 1969, in *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*

[59] Huang Yongsheng, "黄永胜在'九大'全体会议上的发言" [Huang Yongsheng's Speech at a Plenary Session of the Ninth Party Congress], April 14, 1969, in *Chinese Cultural Revolution Database*

March 2 and March 15 clashes as moments when the Soviet "traitor clique" violated Chinese territory and China therefore launched a victorious "counterattack in self-defense."[60] He immediately linked that success to ideological and political loyalty, stressing that the PLA had been created by Mao and was directly commanded by Vice Chairman Lin.[61] This was more than battlefield testimony turned into political theater. The voice of the frontline soldier was used to demonstrate that military success flowed from Mao Zedong Thought and from fidelity to the command structure represented by Lin Biao. Zhenbao thus became a narrative that affirmed the legitimacy of the militarized political order Lin sought to defend.

Seen in this light, Lin's response to Zhenbao followed a logic distinct from, though not wholly separate from, Mao's. Mao treated the crisis as grounds for preparedness, discipline, and political correction. Lin treated it as confirmation that China needed a more deeply militarized revolutionary order. In his view, the Soviet Union represented a "social-imperialist" threat that was strategic and ideological at once. People's war remained the answer to a technologically stronger enemy, and the PLA stood at the center of that answer as the institution best equipped to defend both the nation and the revolution. The evidence does not show that Lin deliberately sought the clash. It does show, however, that he and the military figures around him were able to use Zhenbao politically. The crisis strengthened the authority of the PLA, reinforced the claim that the Party had to remain militant, and helped elevate the broader military network that rose with Lin at the Ninth Party Congress. Ultimately, Zhenbao politically helped pave the path of the future direction of the Cultural Revolution. Mao used the crisis to support a turn toward discipline, consolidation, and greater control

[60] Ibid
[61] Ibid

after years of factional violence. Zhou Enlai translated the same confrontation into a case for orderly planning, production, and national preparation. Lin Biao, however, saw in Zhenbao proof that China's survival depended upon a more militant political order and an even greater centrality for the PLA. These differing interpretations show that the clash did not possess a single fixed meaning within the Chinese leadership. Its significance was produced through political struggle at the center of the regime. Zhenbao became a vehicle through which Lin Biao advanced competing answers to the same fundamental question: how should China respond to external danger, and what kind of revolutionary order should emerge from the wreckage of late Cultural Revolution factionalism? Read in this way, the border clash illuminates the intersection of foreign crisis and domestic power, revealing how an event on the frontier became part of a broader contest over authority, militarization, and the political future of the Chinese state.

Chapter 3: Moscow's Narrative of Damansky

«Ослабление любого звена мировой системы социализма прямым образом отражается на всех социалистических странах, которые не могут быть равнодушны к этому»
"The weakening of any link in the world socialist system has a direct effect on all the socialist countries."
Леонид Брежнев (Leonid Brezhnev)[62]

Chapter 2 reconstructs how China framed the Damansky clash through the political language of the Cultural Revolution, but the Soviet side must be approached differently. For China, the Damansky clash was significant because it exposed internal factional tensions and reflected the broader shift toward the militarized political order. What transformed the clash into an international crisis, however, was the way Soviet leaders interpreted Chinese intentions and converted that interpretation into an official narrative. The significance of the March 1969 clash lies precisely in this shift. A violent border encounter became politically consequential because Moscow did not treat it as an isolated frontier dispute. Instead, the Soviet Union seized upon the incident and recast it as an international political event, presenting itself as both the victim of Chinese aggression and the true defender of socialism. By portraying China as reckless and destabilizing, Soviet leaders sought to generate sympathy for their position, strengthen their standing within the Eastern European bloc, and demonstrate that the Soviet Union remained both restrained and powerful, willing to use force when necessary in defense of socialist order.

[62]"Sovereignty and the International Duties of Socialist Countries" by S. Kovalev, published in Pravda on September 26, 1968.

Soviet Assumptions and the Interpretation of Chinese Intentions

Soviet domestic politics did not experience the kind of instability or sudden shift that can clearly explain the March 2 Damansky clash. Unlike China, which was engulfed in the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet Union in late 1968 and early 1969 remained comparatively stable, with policy disagreements taking place within an established political framework rather than through open factional struggle.[63] A survey of Soviet newspapers, journals, and radio broadcasts from October 1968 through February 1969 shows little evidence of a dramatic change in propaganda or leadership composition that would suggest a new anti-Chinese line emerged immediately before the clash. At the same time, Soviet military thinking was becoming noticeably harsher toward China in the months before March 1969. While there is no firm evidence that the army acted independently of the Party, articles in the military journal Communist of the Armed Forces journal reveal a more militant ideological framing of Maoist China. Military writers increasingly presented China as an internal threat to socialism in the form of a dangerous "leftist" deviation, while simultaneously placing it within the broader landscape of imperialist danger.[64] Seen in this light, they began to extend the logic of the Brezhnev Doctrine beyond Czechoslovakia and toward China, thereby creating a theoretical basis for stronger Soviet action. Although this stronger Soviet action did not directly cause the March 2 incident, it helped lay the ideological groundwork for the tougher Soviet response that followed, especially by the March 15 attack and June 10th attack on the Western border.

Moscow did not come to Damansky with a neutral understanding of Chinese behavior.

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[63] Robinson, Thomas W. "The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute: Background, Development, and the March 1969 Clashes." American Political Science Review 66, no. 4 (1972): 1175–1202. https://doi.org/10.2307/1957173.

[64] Ibid

Months before the clash, Soviet officials had already concluded that Beijing was deliberately manufacturing a Soviet threat for political purposes. In the Soviet foreign ministry note of October 1968, issued in response to Chinese accusations of repeated Soviet airspace violations, Moscow flatly rejected the charges as "fabrications from beginning to end" and insisted that not one of the alleged 119 cases could be substantiated.[65] More importantly, the Soviet note claimed that Chinese authorities were deliberately distorting facts and using such accusations to inflame hostility.[66] In Soviet eyes, this was evidence that Beijing was cultivating anti-Soviet hysteria inside China and turning border questions into instruments of ideological struggle. Other Soviet statements made the same move more aggressively. A Soviet report delivered to East German leaders stated this especially clearly, arguing that the "Mao Zedong group" had been preparing armed provocations on the Soviet-Chinese border "for a long time" and that the events at Damansky should be seen within that larger pattern. [67] The report connected the March 1969 clash to years of "artificial tensions," thousands of earlier border violations, and a series of major provocations in late 1967, 1968, and early 1969.[68] In this framing, Damansky was not the beginning of a new conflict so much as the latest and most dangerous expression of an already escalating Chinese line. This interpretation helps explain the speed and certainty of the Soviet response. Rather than treating the March clash as a confused frontier incident, Soviet leaders understood it as confirmation of an established Chinese strategy. In their view, the violence on the frontier formed part of a wider political and ideological offensive against the USSR.

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[65]Soviet Foreign Ministry Note of October 1968 ," in *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy: Readings and Documents*, ed. Vladimir Wozniuk (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), pg, 178
[66] Ibid
[67] "East German Documents on the Border Conflict, 1969," doc. 1, "Soviet Report to GDR Leadership on 2 March 1969 Sino-Soviet Border Clashes," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, nos. 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996): 188-89.
[68] Ibid

Further, Veterans' recollections describing earlier confrontations did not remember them as ordinary border scuffles. Instead, they recalled scenes that seemed staged for display. Skladanyuk, a soldier at the clash, remembered that the Chinese had prepared a provocation in advance because "dozens of correspondents, including foreign ones," appeared almost immediately on the Chinese side and began recording events as they unfolded.[69] At the same time, loudspeakers broadcast insults and threats in Russian across the riverbank.[70] To Soviet observers, this suggested a confrontation planned for tactical effect but for publicity. It looked like a political performance prepared for both domestic and foreign audiences. Another recollection from earlier altercations in February 1968 points in the same direction. V.D. Bubenin, another veteran, described a Chinese crowd that had been working into a frenzy, then suddenly surged forward while "as many as ten movie cameras" filmed from the opposite bank and officials in paramilitary and military uniform stood by.[71] What struck Soviet participants in such memories was the hostility of the crowd and the visible infrastructure surrounding it. These were the kinds of details that made Soviet veterans think the Chinese side was preparing spectacles as much as border incidents. The confrontations appeared choreographed, designed to create usable propaganda as well as direct pressure on Soviet personnel. Soviet observers later interpreted the March 2 clash through this same framework. Because earlier incidents had been remembered as staged and politically managed, Damansky appeared to confirm a familiar pattern, now on a far more dangerous scale.

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[69] Yu.M. Galenovich, Галенович Юрий - Россия и Китай в XX веке - Граница Russia and China in the 20th Century: The Border (Moscow: Isograph, 2001), p, 22-23 https://royallib.com/read/galenovich_yuriy/rossiya_i_kitay_v_XX_veke___granitsa.html#430080

[70] Ibid

[71] V. D. Bubenin, "Bloody Snow of Damansky" (Moscow; Zhukovsky; Granitsa; Kuchkovo Pole, 2004), 153, quoted in Dmitry Ryabushkin and Harold Orenstein, The Sino-Soviet Border War of 1969 (1): The Border Conflict That Almost Sparked a Nuclear War,

The Chinese Nuclear Threat and Soviet Strategic Anxiety

When Soviet leaders saw a pattern of China pushing the boundary further, the next direction of the danger was not just limited to the local guerilla clashes on the ground as the soviet were also thinking of the border incidents unfolding against the backdrop of a "rapidly advancing" Chinese nuclear program.[72] By 1968, China had already conducted its eighth nuclear test, which is an extremely remarkable rapid advancement since their first nuclear test in 1964.[73] Although the Soviet and US continued to describe that the Chinese's arsenal was still small and there remains a massive disparity between Chinese and Soviet capabilities, the speed China was developing its nuclear weapons was a point of concern. Beijing, for its part, insisted that the development of nuclear weapons was "entirely for the purpose of defence" and reaffirmed that "at no time and in no circumstances" would China be the first to use nuclear weapons.[74] Yet that language of defense was exactly how China framed the border clashes themselves. From the Soviet perspective, Chinese assurances of defensive intent offered little comfort, because Beijing used similar language of self-defense to justify repeated tests of Soviet resolve along the border.

Initially, Soviet leaders were not primarily worried that China had already achieved nuclear parity with the USSR. However, as fighting spread along the western frontier, their concern intensified. These clashes sparked a renewed wave of surveillance satellite launches. The frequency increased after the June 10 fighting in Xinjiang, and in the three weeks following the August 13

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[72] Clippings from London, June 15, Reuters, reporting that China would shortly test a 6,000-mile nuclear missile, citing the *Sunday Times*," box 39, Stanley Karnow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University

[73] Good News: China Successfully Conducts New Hydrogen Bomb," Peking Review, Extra, box 39, Stanley Karnow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

[74] ibid

Tielieketi/Zhalanashkol battle, four additional satellites were launched.[75] By late summer and fall 1969, this anxiety had moved beyond private alarm into strategic calculation. An August 12 U.S. intelligence estimate after the conversation with Davydov concluded that, for the first time, a major Sino-Soviet war in the near future was a reasonable possibility and observed that the Soviets had reasons, "chiefly the emerging Chinese nuclear threat," to believe that the most advantageous time for an attack might be "soon, rather than several years hence."[76] The same estimate judged that Moscow might see a strike on China's nuclear and missile facilities as a way to reduce the danger without becoming trapped in a prolonged war. Secretary of State William Rogers then reported in September that Soviet representatives had been "soliciting the reaction" of Americans and others to the possibility of striking Chinese nuclear facilities, while Washington noted an "obvious sense of Soviet concern" and strong Soviet interest in how other states viewed Sino-Soviet tensions. Later U.S. policy review extended this logic even further, warning that rising Soviet concern over China's growing nuclear and military capabilities may have been encouraging a more aggressive Soviet posture, including the possibility that Moscow could use border tensions as a pretext for broader action. [77] In this context, the Stearman-Davydov conversation proved especially significant because it introduced the language of nuclear conflict and drew the United States into what had previously appeared to be a localized border dispute. Seen in this broader light, the episode reveals the larger Soviet effort to seize control of the narrative and present itself as the responsible leader of the socialist bloc. This was closely aligned with

[75] Philip J. Klass, "USSR Accelerates Recon Satellite Pace," *Aviation Week*, April 6, 1970, 72–78.
[76] National Intelligence Estimate, "The USSR and China," August 12, 1969, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, vol. 34, National Security Policy, 1969–1972, doc. 61, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State.
[77]Minutes of Review Group Meeting, September 25, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 34, *National Security Policy, 1969–1972*, doc. 68, note 4, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State.

the logic of the Brezhnev Doctrine, under which the Soviet Union claimed not only the right but the duty to correct states that appeared to deviate from the proper socialist line. Later on August 18th, Soviet diplomat Boris Davydov told William Stearman that Chinese nuclear capability could become "a serious threat to the Soviet Union" in the "not too distant future." [78] In the same conversation, he linked that danger directly to the pattern of Chinese border behavior, he described Chinese provocations as ongoing since 1963, called the Damansky Island clash "the last straw," and suggested that the Soviets almost preferred overt Chinese provocations because he feared the day Beijing might adopt a "reasonable, peaceful front" behind which it could quietly continue expanding its nuclear strength.[79] It suggests that, from the Soviet point of view, Chinese aggressiveness was alarming not only in itself but because it signaled what kind of state was acquiring nuclear weapons. The Cultural Revolution heightened that fear. Davydov explicitly argued that internal dissent and upheaval in China made the regime vulnerable but he also treated that same internal disorder as part of a larger pattern of dangerous unpredictability.

Seizing the Narrative after Czechoslovakia

Although the March 2 clash appears to have been more deliberately prepared than earlier border incidents, Damansky became more than a localized frontier conflict largely because the Soviet Union moved quickly to control the narrative. The first public announcement of the March 1969 border

[78] Memorandum of Conversation," Washington, August 18, 1969, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, vol. 34, National Security Policy, 1969–1972, doc. 63, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v34/d63
[79] Ibid https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v34/d68

clash was significant because it brought the confrontation onto the international stage while giving the Soviet Union an early opportunity to shape how it would be understood. By publicizing the incident immediately, Moscow could frame the conflict as an unprovoked Chinese assault and cast itself as the victim of border aggression. This was especially significant in the wake of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the articulation of the Brezhnev Doctrine, both of which had damaged the Soviet Union's international reputation and deepened fears about Soviet interventionism within the socialist world, Causing the soviet to be seen as "embark[ing] on the beaten track of imperialism."[80] The Chinese have considerably highlighted the fact that the soviet union has kept many communist countries "under strict control and stationed massive numbers of troops" and Czechoslovakia is just one country that was "trampled" hinting that any countries under soviet rule will be next if they fall out of line. Even the "aid" the [soviet] is providing is simply just to bring "these countries into its sphere of influence in contending with US imperialism for the intermediate zone."[81] Reports such as this one were disseminated through various countries such as Prague, Belgium and more, which proves that the Chinese are trying to persuade other countries into fearing the Soviets.[82] Under these circumstances, the border crisis gave Moscow an opportunity to reverse the political optics. Rather than appearing as the power that violated another state's sovereignty, the Soviet Union could now present itself as a state defending its territorial integrity against Chinese hostility. In this understanding,

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[80] "Leninism or Social-Imperialism?," joint article by the editorial departments of Jenmin Jih Pao, Hung Chi, and Chiehfang Chun Pao, New China News Agency, English service, April 21, 1970, 12:05 GMT, in "China: Sino-Soviet: Political tensions," Stanley Karnow Papers, 2017C33, box 46, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.
[81] Ibid
[82] Central Intelligence Agency, *Foreign Operations of Chinese Communist News Agency*, Special Report, February 7, 1964, CIA Reading Room, DOC_0000864571, accessed via CIA.gov. https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000864571.pdf

the international publicity surrounding the clash became a political tool that allowed the Soviet leadership to redirect diplomatic sympathy and partially rehabilitate its image after Czechoslovakia.

The erosion of Soviet control over the socialist bloc was a genuine and growing concern by the 1960s, and this helps explain why Moscow felt it had to take direct control over the narrative surrounding the Sino-Soviet border clash.[83] The deeper concern of the crisis lay in the political meaning that other socialist states might draw from the military event itself. If the Soviet Union appeared weak, divided, or unable to defend its position against China, that weakness could further undermine its authority across Eastern Europe. In this sense, the clash had to be narrated carefully and forcefully, because Soviet leaders were already confronting a broader crisis of bloc cohesion. One of the main causes of that weakening was the Sino-Soviet split itself. The rupture between Moscow and Beijing did not remain confined to bilateral relations. It spilled directly into Eastern Europe and threatened the Soviet Union's hold over its satellite states. Albania's alignment with China in the early 1960s was especially alarming in this regard.[84] Although Albania was not the most important state in the Warsaw Pact, its break from Moscow and subsequent departure from CMEA and the Pact represented a clear breach in the Soviet sphere of influence.[85] Even more troubling was the possibility that Albania might become a precedent. Soviet leaders discovered that China was not just merely celebrating Albania's defection, but was also trying to encourage other East European states to diverge

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[83]Leonid Brezhnev, "Speech by First Secretary of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev," November 13, 1968, in "Brezhnev Doctrine,"; "The Warsaw Letter," July 1968, in *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*,
[84] Mark Kramer, "The Changing Pattern of Soviet–East European Relations, 1953–1968," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. 2, *The Socialist Camp and World Power 1941–1960s*, ed. Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons, and Sophie Quinn-Judge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 139–69.
[85] Ylber Marku, "Communist Relations in Crisis: The End of Soviet-Albanian Relations, and the Sino-Soviet Split, 1960–1961," *The International History Review* (2019).

from Moscow's line. At a closed CPSU Central Committee plenum in December 1963, Soviet officials warned that the Chinese were pursuing "a policy of crude sabotage" in relation to Poland, Hungary, and East Germany.[86] Such evidence suggested that Beijing was actively attempting to foment discord within the Soviet bloc and weaken Soviet leadership from within.

Romania deepened those fears. In the mid-1960s, Bucharest increasingly embraced foreign and domestic policies that diverged sharply from Soviet preferences. It rejected Soviet economic integration plans, expanded trade with the West and the Third World, refused to take Moscow's side in the Sino-Soviet dispute, established diplomatic ties with West Germany, and maintained relations with Israel after other Warsaw Pact states had severed theirs.[87] Most importantly, Romania adopted an independent military doctrine and maintained a national command structure separate from the Warsaw Pact. Although Romania was not as strategically central as some other allies, its increasing autonomy demonstrated that Soviet leadership within the bloc could be challenged without immediate collapse. That lesson was dangerous in itself.

Against this background, the Prague Spring in 1968 appeared even more threatening. Czechoslovakia had long been viewed as one of the most orthodox and reliable members of the socialist camp, which made reform there especially unsettling. Soviet leaders came to interpret it as a multi-level threat: to Soviet influence inside Czechoslovakia, to the internal stability of neighboring socialist states such as Poland, to the unity of the Warsaw Pact, and ultimately to the strategic balance of the socialist

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[86] "Materialy k protokolu No. 6," quoted in Kramer, "Changing Pattern of Soviet-East European Relations," 146.

[87] Airgram From the Embassy in Romania to the Department of State, "Romanian Foreign Policy in 1968," January 19, 1968, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Volume 17, Eastern Europe*, doc. 158. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v17/d158

bloc as a whole. For Moscow, the danger in Prague lay in the possibility that Czechoslovakia might move toward neutrality, pursue a more independent path, and undermine Soviet authority over the socialist bloc. This fear is captured clearly in the ideological language of Brezhnev, "the weakening of any of the links in the world system of socialism directly affects all the socialist countries" and that "one or another socialist state... cannot be free from the common interests of that community."[88] In this formulation, no socialist state had the right to pursue a fully autonomous path, because each Communist Party was "responsible not only to its own people, but also to all the socialist countries, to the entire Communist movement."

Seen in this context, Soviet efforts to shape the narrative of the Sino-Soviet clash become much easier to understand. The conflict threatened to expose how fragile Soviet leadership had become at a moment when its authority was already under strain. Moscow needed to present itself as the stable, legitimate, and necessary center of the socialist world. If Czechoslovakia's withdrawal from the socialist community would be "detrimental to the other socialist states," and if "the community of European socialist countries would have been split," then the Soviet Union could frame decisive action, whether ideological, political, or military, as a defense of socialism itself.[89] This same logic helps explain the propaganda campaign that followed, including broadcasts such as those of Radio Peace and Progress. Soviet messaging was not simply aimed at condemning China; it was also designed to reassure common listeners across the socialist world, reassert Soviet legitimacy, retell the history of the soviet union's kindness not just as a country that attacks the soviet bloc but a country that ensure communist is on

[88] "The Brezhnev Doctrine, 1968," in King C. Chen, ed., *China and the Three Worlds: A Foreign Policy Reader* (White Plains, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1979)
[89] Ibid

the right path, by controlling the narrative immediately allowed it and prevent Beijing from turning dissatisfaction within Eastern Europe into a wider political realignment.

Communicating the narrative internationally

With the knowledge that China may be already trying to politicize these events, the priority was to make sure the most immediate Soviet response came through TASS, which played a central role in establishing the official line. Even though the initial dispatch was no longer than a few sentences, it already contained the essential structure of the Soviet interpretation. The report announced that on March 2nd, 1969 the Chinese authorities had "organised an armed provocation" in the region of the Nizhne-Mikhaylovka border post near Damansky Island, that a Chinese detachment crossed the Soviet state border, and that Chinese forces suddenly opened fire on Soviet border guards, leaving dead and wounded before being driven back by Soviet action. In this first public formulation, there was no ambiguity about blame, no suggestion of a local misunderstanding, and no space for competing interpretations.[90] The clash was presented from the outset as a calculated violation of Soviet territory conducted by Chinese authorities rather than by undisciplined local troops or chance patrol contact.

This language mattered as it established the Soviet state's interpretive framework before fuller facts had even entered public circulation. The key terms, "armed provocation," "crossed the Soviet state border," "suddenly opened fire," and "drove the border violators out" transformed the clash into a moral and political story as much as a military one.[91] Soviet border guards appeared as disciplined

[90]TASS, "Provocation of Chinese Authorities on the Soviet-Chinese Border," March 2, 1969, in "20th March, 1969 No. 262, *Major Current Events as Revealed in the Press and Radio of the Soviet Government*," Frederick Nossal Papers, box 26, Hoover Institution Library & Archives.
[91] Ibid

defenders of a violated frontier, while the Chinese side appeared as the conscious initiator of bloodshed. The same formulation appeared in the Soviet government protest note of March 3rd, which described the event as a "naked armed incursion into Soviet territory," a provocation "organised by Chinese authorities," and part of a policy aimed at "exacerbating the situation on the Sino-Soviet border."The note also warned that the Soviet government reserved the right to take "decisive measures" against future provocations.

The hardening of this interpretation became even clearer in the days immediately after the clash. Soviet public rhetoric quickly moved beyond the language of incident and protest toward the language of pattern and intention. Provocations and territorial claims had intensified as Chinese leaders pursued an "adventurist course" in their relations with the Soviet Union.[92] At the March 7 press conference held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the USSR, the first detailed Soviet account of the clash was brought to light, they accused Chinese forces of not only attacking Soviet troops but also brutalizing the wounded and mutilating some of the dead beyond recognition.[93] Beyond this unnecessary violence, The MFA argued that the Chinese had violated the border, through a staged ambush with troops, mortars, machine guns, and field telephone lines already in place, proof that the action had been "deliberately planned beforehand."[94] This was a major escalation in meaning. Soviet authorities thus linked the brutal violence at Damansky to a sustained political line emanating from Beijing.

The Soviet Union produced a number of radio series on Radio Moscow and Radio Peace and

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[92] Soviet Government, "Diplomatic Note to the Government of the People's Republic of China," March 2, 1969, in Wozniuk, *Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy*, 183.
[93]"March 7, 1969 Press Conference," in Wozniuk, Understanding Soviet Foreign Policy, 185.
[94] Ibid

Progress in multiple languages, broadcasting not only to audiences in the Eastern European bloc but also to listeners in China through Mandarin, Cantonese, and Shanghainese dialect programming. One such series, "The Consistent Policy of Friendship with China," was a multipart broadcast that guided listeners through the history of Sino-Soviet friendship step by step.[95] Throughout the series, Soviet commentators repeatedly emphasized that the Soviet Union had extended extraordinary support to China, presenting such assistance as a natural expression of socialist solidarity and the duty of communist states to help one another. The broadcasts focused heavily on the history of relations between the Soviet Union and China, stressing that Moscow had always acted as China's loyal friend and benefactor. They even claimed that Chinese leaders themselves had publicly acknowledged this support, declaring that the "large amount of Soviet assistance is unprecedented" and that "the Chinese people have always regarded Soviet assistance as one of the most important factors in [their] rapid progress."[96] Much like Soviet rhetoric surrounding Czechoslovakia, these radio programs consistently portrayed the Soviet Union as generous, patient, and devoted to socialist unity. By reminding listeners that the USSR had provided "thousands of experts" to accelerate the development of fellow communist countries, the broadcasts sought to reinforce the image of the Soviet Union as the rightful leader and defender of the socialist world.[97]

Ultimately, Damansky became historically significant on the Soviet side because it allowed Moscow to convert a frontier battle into a larger argument about power, legitimacy, and leadership in the socialist world. Soviet leaders did not interpret the clash as an isolated military episode. They read it

[95]"The Consistent Policy of Friendship with China," China: Sino-Soviet: Political Tensions, Stanley Karnow Papers, box 46, Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University.
[96]Ibid
[97]Ibid

through an existing conviction that Beijing had been deliberately escalating tensions, manufacturing provocations, and transforming the border into a stage for ideological struggle. Once the fighting broke out, that assumption enabled Moscow to present the clash as proof that China had become a reckless and destabilizing force whose behavior threatened the broader socialist camp. China's rapidly advancing nuclear program made this interpretation even more urgent, since it suggested that repeated border militancy was unfolding within a strategic context that could become far more dangerous in the near future. At the same time, the Soviet Union's authority within the bloc had already been strained by the Sino-Soviet split and the aftermath of Czechoslovakia, making it politically necessary for Moscow to seize control of the story before Beijing could do the same. Through diplomatic notes, TASS reports, press conferences, and multilingual radio broadcasts, the Soviet leadership recast Damansky as an international political event in which the USSR appeared as the disciplined victim of Chinese aggression and the responsible guardian of socialist order. In this sense, the Soviet response to Damansky reveals something larger than the clash itself: it shows how Moscow used border violence to reassert its ideological authority, defend the logic of Soviet leadership after Czechoslovakia, and claim that the true danger to socialism now came from a radical and increasingly unpredictable China.

In the next section, by viewing the clash through the US lens, Damansky can be understood in the way it forced the United States to reassess the strategic balance of the Cold War. What began as a Sino-Soviet frontier confrontation soon became, in Washington's eyes, a wider diplomatic problem tied to detente, the future of China policy, and the risk of great-power war. By tracing how American officials interpreted and responded to the crisis, this next chapter argues that Damansky became an

international crisis precisely because its consequences were no longer being measured only in Beijing and Moscow, but in Washington as well.

Chapter 4: America is Watching the Clash

The Zhenbao/Damansky clash became more than just a localized clash between China and the Soviet Union when it quickly drew in a third audience: the United States. Even before the Zhebao/Damansky clash, the United States was already aware that the Chinese were more anti-Soviet than anti-American. At this point the Nixon administration was already encouraging that it "'[explore] possibilities of rapprochement [sic] with the Chinese.' [...] Of course done privately and should under no circumstances get into the public prints from this direction."[98] For the US, the Zhenbao/Damansky clash couldn't have come at a better time. This clash only further pushed the Nixon administration to think about foreign relations in triangular terms, balancing the two global communist powers against each other, creating opportunities for a gradual opening to China but avoid being seen by either side as colluding with the other. The United States became invested in the conflict because the crisis touched

[98]Memorandum from President Nixon to his Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), February 1, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, doc. 3, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d3.

nearly every major question in Nixon's early foreign policy. For Nixon, this made the event politically useful, since it created room to maneuver in managing Cold War tensions.

Limited Clash, Expanding Implications

At first, Washington did not view the March 2 clash as the opening of a general war. An INR intelligence note written only two days after the incident concluded that the fighting on the Ussuri "appears to have been the result of persistent efforts by both sides to establish control" over the islands and was "not likely to lead to wider fighting in the near future," though it warned that similar incidents would likely recur.[99] This early judgment is important because it shows that the United States initially saw Zhenbao less as a decisive turning point than as the sharpest episode in an already existing pattern of frontier tension, whereas both the Soviet Union and Chinese had seen it otherwise. A March 6 Intelligence, concluded that "Mao will remain an insurmountable obstacle to any accommodation with the USSR," and it warned that China's developing nuclear capability shifts the balance of power in Asia and encourages Beijing to back revolutionary movements more confidently.[100] This was the first time America was recognizing that China was becoming more important, more dangerous, and harder to ignore. That is part of why the clash gradually became a triangular issue rather than a purely Sino-Soviet one. As the clash took on greater strategic significance. U.S. officials increasingly recognized that even limited American actions could shape how Beijing interpreted both the crisis and Washington's intentions. An internal memorandum on aerial reconnaissance over China cautioned

[99]U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River," *Intelligence Note* No. 139, March 4, 1969, reproduced in *The Sino-Soviet Border Conflict, 1969*, National Security Archive, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.1.pdf.

[100] Special National Intelligence Estimate 13-69, "Communist China and Asia," March 6, 1969, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, vol. 17, China, 1969–1972, doc. 9. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d9

that renewed U.S. overflights would be seen as a signal of "a shift in US policy" by the new administration, one that could "strengthen the hand of those advocating a hard line towards us" in Beijing.[101] This concern was heightened by signs that Moscow was already trying to draw Washington into the crisis. Later U.S. records further suggest that Soviet-linked representatives were hinting in March 1969 that "the situation might reach a point where a U.S.-Soviet 'understanding' of China would become necessary." [102] Telegram 1169 from Moscow, March 20, attached to the President's March 25 daily briefing Soviet officials reacted nervously to public American discussion of improved relations with Beijing, shortly after the clash in March.[103] Under these conditions, restraint served a strategic purpose, reducing the risk of escalation while helping the United States avoid appearing aligned with either side.

Deterrence, Miscalculation, and Diplomatic Opportunity

While Washington's initial response was defined by restraint, that caution soon developed into a more substantive interpretation of the crisis. By June, American officials increasingly understood Chinese behavior as deterrent signaling under conditions of insecurity. A June 3 INR note argued that China's propaganda campaign was driven by the desire to "coalesce internal unity" and "blacken the Soviets on

[101] "Memorandum to Members of the 303 Committee," Washington, March 14, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, doc. 10. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d10

[102] Ibid

[103] Henry Kissinger, memorandum to Richard Nixon, "The US Role in Soviet Maneuvering Against China," September 29, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, doc. 37, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State.https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d37

the eve of the international Communist conference," and also by "a genuine fear of attack."[104] Another INR paper made the point even more clearly. Although it judged that "the Chinese are the provocateurs," it argued that Beijing was "trying to deter an attack by publicizing the danger in advance" and by showing "that any attack will be forcefully resisted by a fearless adversary." [105] In this understanding , Chinese provocation was defensively aggressive, meant to communicate resolve and raise the political costs of Soviet action. That logic made the crisis more dangerous, since efforts to prevent war depended on confrontational signals that could easily produce miscalculation and trigger the wider conflict they were meant to avoid.

This growing concern appeared more clearly in the U.S.-Soviet conversations. In a June 13 discussion with Soviet diplomat Yuri Linkov, John Holdridge warned that continued border incidents could escape control if "some junior lieutenant" made the wrong decision, and that a full-scale war could "extend into other areas of the world." Washington was already trying to shape the diplomatic atmosphere around the crisis without formal involvement.[106] The same shift was evident at State Department meeting of June 21, there, American specialists agreed on a consensus that the border tension was serious and might intensify, that mutual suspicion of U.S. collusion heightened nervousness on both sides , and that Moscow might be seeking to improve relations with states on China's periphery and also with the United States. Most importantly, the meeting minutes stated

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[104] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Communist China: Peking Inflates Soviet War Threat," Intelligence Note no. 427, June 3, 1969. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.4.pdf

[105] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, "Peking's Tactics and Intentions Along the Sino-Soviet Border," Intelligence Note no. 459, June 13, 1969. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.6.pdf

[106] U.S. Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, "Comments of Soviet Embassy Officer on China and Vietnam," June 13, 1969 https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.5.pdf

outright that the situation opened possibilities for increased U.S.-Soviet cooperation in Asia and for American leverage to induce greater Soviet cooperation, especially in Vietnam and Laos.[107] Clearly, Washington was invested in the crisis because it feared escalation, and also the fact that the Sino-Soviet split might also yield diplomatic advantages. Yet at the same time, the meeting also recognized Chinese fears of the U.S.-Soviet collusion was sincere and that the risk of major hostilities was growing "rather from accident than from design."[108] Soviet power along the border was obvious, a strike on Chinese nuclear installations was conceivable and no real basis for settlement seemed to exist. American officials therefore saw a double danger. If Washington moved too close to Moscow, it could confirm Chinese fears and foreclose any future opening to Beijing. But if it ignored the Soviet side, it would lose leverage in its broader diplomacy. The United States was invested in the crisis precisely because it hoped to benefit from the Sino-Soviet split without becoming trapped inside it.

Triangular Management

This balancing became more apparent in Nixon's China Policy during the summer of 1969. On June 26 the White House approved a relaxation of certain economic controls against China on what the memorandum called "broad foreign policy grounds."[109] A few weeks later, Kissinger warned Nixon that delaying the announcement of those measures until after the president's Bucharest stop could make them appear overly anti-Soviet, especially if it seemed to be linked to Romania's independent line within the bloc and to the worsening border situation. That caution is revealing. The administration

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[107] Ibid
[108] Ibid
[109]"National Security Decision Memorandum 17: Relaxation of Economic Controls Against China," June 26, 1969, National Archives, Nixon Presidential Materials, NSC Files, NSC Institutional Files (H-Files), Box H-210, NSDM Files, NSDM 17. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d14

was not indifferent to the crisis. It was carefully trying to manage the meaning of its actions so that signals toward Beijing would not look like open alignment against Moscow, even as it explored a more flexible China policy.[110] In light of intensifying Sino-Soviet rivalry and Soviet efforts to isolate Communist China, Nixon ordered a formal study of "the policy choices confronting the United States."[111] The study was to examine alternative U.S. responses in the event of military clashes between the USSR and China and also the broader implications of the Sino-Soviet rivalry for the Sino-U.S.-Soviet triangle. By early July the White House had already institutionalized the crisis as a core strategic problem. Zhenbao and its aftermath had forced the administration to think t in terms of triangular diplomacy.

At the same time, American officials were also working to prevent other actors from worsening the situation. A July 4 telegram from Taipei shows the U.S. embassy reprimanding the Republic of China for a raid on mainland Chinese boats, stressing the undesirability of any hostile action that might heighten tension in the Taiwan Strait or elsewhere in East Asia and harm efforts to improve the prospects for peace.[112] This is a small but important piece of indication that American officials viewed the border conflict beyond just its contained nature, any new confrontation involving China would likely be interpreted through the wider border crisis.Nixon's own remarks to foreign leaders confirm that the administration's investment in the crisis was tied to a larger vision of détente and triangular balance. Nixon told de Gaulle in March that while some Americans favored a Soviet-U.S. détente

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[110]Ibid
[111]NSSM 63, "U.S. Policy on Current Sino-Soviet Differences."
[112] "Telegram From the Embassy in the Republic of China to the Department of State," July 4, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume 17, China, 1969–1972*, doc. 16, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d16

combined with a lineup against China, the longer-term American interest lay in recognizing both China and the Soviet Union as great powers and building "parallel relationships" with them.[113] Nixon similarly told Ceausescu that the United States did not intend to become involved in the Sino-Soviet conflict and would not "join in a bloc to fence off China."[114] Those remarks capture the core of the administration's position. Washington was interested in the crisis in hopes to use the split to create diplomatic flexibility on both sides of the communist world.

War Contingency

By August, however, American assessments had become significantly darker. For the first time it was reasonable to ask whether a major Sino-Soviet war could break out in the near future The estimate judged that the soviet had strong reasons, above all concern over China's emerging nuclear capability, to believe that the best moment for an attack might be soon and it explicitly raised the possibility of Soviet strikes against Chinese nuclear and missile facilities short of prolonged general war.[115] The estimate also concluded that the Soviets were trying to attract new allies or at least benevolent neutrals in order to contain China and that one element of this effort was a desire to improve the atmosphere of relations with the West.[116] This worsening concern helps explain why the White House simultaneously accelerated its covert China signaling. During Nixon's July-August trip, the administration used Pakistan and Romania as possible channels to Beijing, Nixon asked Yahya Khan to pass a friendly message to the Chinese leadership. Even if the administration still moved

[113] "Editorial Notes" *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, doc. 20, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d20
[114] Ibid
[115] National Intelligence Estimate 11/13-69, "The USSR and China," August 12, 1969, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, vol. 17 , China, 1969-1972 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 24. https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d24
[116] Ibid

cautiously and reassured Taipei that no basic change had yet occurred, a worsening Sino-Soviet conflict increased the value of keeping open a path to future communication with Beijing.[117] As the danger of Sino-Soviet war increased, so too did the value of preserving a future channel to China. Allen Whiting's August 16 report to Kissinger made the logic explicit, the United States should work to deter nuclear escalation and reassure Beijing that Washington was not colluding with Moscow.[118] After the August 13 clash at Tielieketi/Zhalanashkol, these concerns became even more urgent. American and NATO channels increasingly treated the conflict as a matter of alliance diplomacy and superpower strategy rather than a remote Asian border dispute. By late August, contingency thinking had become unavoidable. The crisis had moved from the frontier to the center of U.S. grand strategy.

United States as Necessary Audience

The Stearman-Davydov conversation was the culmination of this shift. When Soviet diplomat Boris Davydov raised with a U.S. official the possibility of a Soviet attack on Chinese nuclear facilities and asked what the American reaction might be. Secretary Rogers' memorandum to Nixon on September 10 emphasized that this was unusual because of the sustained justification Davydov offered, and it noted earlier Soviet feelers from Boston, Italy, Moscow, and elsewhere. Although Rogers remained skeptical that an attack was probable, the very existence of these probes showed that Moscow cared how Washington would interpret or respond to Soviet action against China.[119] The United States had

[117]"Memorandum of Conversation," August 28, 1969, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, vol. 17, China, 1969–1972 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2006), doc. 28.
[118] Memorandum of Conversation: China: US Reaction to Soviet Destruction of CPR Nuclear Capability; Significance of Latest Sino-Soviet Border Clash; Internal Opposition; Vietnam: US and Communist Intentions; Soviet Views; SALT: Reason for Soviet Delay; Laos: Soviet Role," Department of State, August 18, 1969, National Security Archive, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB49/sino.sov.10.pdf
[119]"Memorandum From Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon," September 10, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume 34, National Security Policy, 1969–1972*, doc. 66, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v34/d66

become a necessary audience for Soviet and Chinese strategy, the border crisis was shaped by how each side anticipated American reactions. Kissinger made this point directly when he warned Nixon that the Soviets had sounded out "numerous American contacts" and that U.S. responses "could figure in their calculations."[120] More troubling still, he suggested that Moscow may have been trying to foster the impression "that we are being consulted in secret and would look with equanimity on their military actions."[121] For Washington, the danger was obvious, if Beijing came to believe that the United States was quietly accommodating Soviet pressure, the possibility of a future opening to Beijing would be weakened. Kissinger thus urged a policy that would avoid "the appearance of siding with the Soviets" and instead publicly signal disapproval by "deploring reports of a Soviet plan to make a preemptive military strike against Communist China."[122]

William Hyland's August 28 memorandum shows just how deeply the crisis had penetrated U.S. grand strategy. Hyland argued that true impartiality in a major Sino-Soviet war was impossible because every ongoing arena of American diplomacy would be affected, four-power Middle East talks, SALT, seabed arms control, and even possible UN resolutions. If Washington continued business as usual with Moscow, much of the world would read that as support for the USSR. If it retaliated diplomatically, that would amount to support for China. Washington was invested because a Soviet-Chinese war would force decisions across the whole structure of the U.S.-Soviet relations.[123]

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[120] "Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon," September 29, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume 17, China, 1969–1972*, doc. 37, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d37

[121] Ibid

[122] Ibid

[123]Memorandum from William Hyland of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), August 28, 1969, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. 17, *China, 1969–1972*, doc. 27, Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State, https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v17/d2

What emerges from these documents is a picture of an administration that increasingly understood the 1969 border crisis as a problem of world order. In March, Washington still expected recurrent but limited violence. By June, it saw a serious confrontation prone to miscalculation and potentially useful for diplomatic leverage. By August, it was planning for the possibility of major hostilities, including a Soviet strike on Chinese nuclear facilities, by then the soviet and chinese had already dragged the US into the mess and the US could not just be a bystander. Throughout, American officials tried to balance three goals at once, preserving progress in Soviet-American diplomacy, avoiding the appearance of collusion with Moscow, and keeping open the possibility of a future relationship with Beijing. For that reason, foreign involvement was central to the meaning of Zhenbao. The clash mattered because it changed how a third great power understood the strategic landscape. Once the United States began to connect the crisis to detente, Vietnam, alliance management, arms control, and the future of China policy, the conflict could no longer remain a local border dispute. Zhenbao/Damansky became an international crisis precisely because its consequences were now being measured in Washington as well as in Beijing and Moscow. That transformation helps explain why this clash, rather than the many earlier frontier incidents, occupies such a central place in the history of the Sino-Soviet split.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Zhenbao/Damansky mattered because it revealed how quickly a localized border clash could become something much bigger. The island itself had limited military value, and violence along the Sino-Soviet frontier was not new by 1969. Earlier confrontations had already produced injuries, intimidation, and diplomatic tension. Yet those incidents usually remained contained, partly because they were treated as frontier problems rather than international political events. March 1969 broke that pattern. Once the clash became public, armed, and ideologically charged, it forced China, the Soviet Union, and the United States to read a local battle through their own fears, ambitions, and strategic priorities. Zhenbao became historically significant because each state turned the same event into evidence for a different political argument.

For China, the clash entered a domestic political world already shaped by the Cultural Revolution, factional struggle, and the question of how revolutionary order should be rebuilt after years of upheaval. The official Chinese narrative presented the fighting as a Soviet invasion met by righteous self-defense, but that public line did not produce one unified political lesson. Mao treated the crisis as a useful moment for mobilization and discipline. It gave him a way to redirect

revolutionary energy toward external danger and away from uncontrolled factional violence. Zhou Enlai understood the same threat through the practical language of planning, production, and long-term preparation. Lin Biao drew the most militarized conclusion. For Lin and those around him, Zhenbao confirmed that China's survival depended on self-reliance, political struggle, and the central role of the PLA. The clash therefore became part of a larger argument over what kind of state should emerge from the late Cultural Revolution.

For the Soviet Union, Damansky confirmed a suspicion that had already taken shape before March 1969. Soviet leaders did not approach the clash as a neutral or accidental frontier encounter. They had already come to believe that Beijing was manufacturing tension, using the border for propaganda, and attempting to weaken Soviet authority across the socialist world. That assumption shaped the speed and certainty of the Soviet response. Through TASS, diplomatic notes, press conferences, and radio broadcasts, Moscow framed the clash as a deliberate Chinese provocation and presented itself as the disciplined victim of Chinese aggression. This was especially important after Czechoslovakia, when Soviet claims to defend socialism had become deeply contested. Damansky gave Moscow an opportunity to recast itself as the responsible center of socialist order, while portraying China as reckless, violent, and dangerously revisionist in its own way.

For the United States, Zhenbao's significance developed more gradually. Washington did not initially treat the March 2 clash as the beginning of a general war. Early assessments saw it as the sharpest expression of an existing border dispute. Yet as the crisis deepened, American officials began to understand that the clash had opened a larger strategic field. The Nixon administration had to consider how the Sino-Soviet split affected détente, China policy, Taiwan, nuclear risk, and the global balance of

power. By the summer of 1969, the United States was no longer a distant observer. It had become an audience whose reaction mattered to both Beijing and Moscow. The possibility of a Soviet strike on Chinese nuclear facilities made the crisis even more dangerous. Zhenbao helped push American policymakers toward triangular thinking, where relations with one communist power could no longer be separated from relations with the other.

Taken together, these three perspectives show why Zhenbao/Damansky cannot be understood as a simple border clash. It became a major Cold War event because its meaning was produced across three political systems at once. In Beijing, it shaped arguments about revolution, discipline, and militarization. In Moscow, it became proof of Chinese hostility and a tool for reasserting Soviet leadership. In Washington, it helped make triangular diplomacy a practical necessity. The clash transformed accumulated frontier tension into a crisis whose consequences were measured far beyond the Ussuri River. Zhenbao became important because it turned recurring border friction into a public, armed, and internationally consequential crisis interpreted simultaneously in China, the Soviet Union, and the United States.

The present relationship among China, Russia, and the United States gives this history a continuing relevance, even though the triangle has changed dramatically since 1969. China and Russia are no longer ideological rivals competing for leadership of the communist world. Today, Beijing and Moscow publicly emphasize strategic coordination, shared opposition to the "Cold War mentality," and the principle that states should not seek security at the expense of others. Their 2025 joint statement on global strategic stability framed major-power relations, alliance expansion, nuclear risk,

and indivisible security as central questions in world politics.[124] Unlike the Sino-Soviet split, contemporary Sino-Russian tensions are not driven by rival claims to communist leadership. They are quieter and more pragmatic, rooted in the contradiction between public principles and state interests. Zhenbao/Damansky showed how an alliance built on socialist solidarity could collapse over sovereignty, hierarchy, and security. Today, China and Russia are not repeating that rupture, but Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows that those same issues—border sovereignty, great-power status, and the right of weaker states to security—remain unresolved beneath the surface of their partnership. At the same time, the United States now treats China as its central long-term strategic competitor, while also viewing China's and Russia's military-industrial growth as connected pressures on American power. A 2026 White House report describes China as the U.S. "pacing challenge" and links American defense-industrial weakness to China's and Russia's military buildup.[125] Strategic analysis likewise identifies the U.S.-China relationship as the defining axis of systemic rivalry, while stressing that the U.S., China, and Russia remain among the most important variables shaping the international order.[126]

The triangle has been rearranged. In 1969, the United States exploited the hostility between Beijing and Moscow. Today, Washington faces a closer yet distant China-Russia relationship, even as Beijing and Moscow still have their own interests, insecurities, and limits. The lesson of Zhenbao/Damansky is that great-power crises are shaped as much by interpretation as by military

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[124]People's Republic of China and Russian Federation, "Joint Statement by the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Global Strategic Stability," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, May 9, 2025, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zy/jj/xjpdelsjxgsfwcxjnslwgzzslqd/202505/t20250509_11617864.html.

[125]Council of Economic Advisers, "Strengthening the United States' Defense Industrial Base," chap. 8 in *Economic Report of the President: Together with the Annual Report of the Council of Economic Advisers* (Washington, DC: Executive Office of the President, April 2026), 171–87, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/ERP-2026-8.-Strengthening-the-United-States-Defense-Industrial-Base.pdf.

[126] ibid

events themselves. Local confrontations become dangerous when states read them through accumulated suspicion, domestic political need, ideological rivalry, and fears about future power. Zhenbao/Damansky shows how a small island could become a test of revolutionary authority, socialist legitimacy, and global strategy. For that reason, the clash remains important beyond 1969. It reminds us that in triangular politics, the meaning of a crisis is never controlled by one state alone. It is produced through the reactions, fears, and calculations of all three.

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