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MILITARY CONFLICTS BETWEEN COMMUNIST STATES: GEOPOLITICAL REALITIES AND THE REALIZATION OF A COMMUNIST PEACE

Abstract

Despite historical perceptions of systemic communist-capitalist bipolarity in the Cold War world order, the international communist system was nevertheless affected by the same geopolitical realities that influenced the international system as a whole. By examining the seven cases of military conflicts between communist states from 1945 to 1991 – the Soviet invasion of Hungary (1956), the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), the Sino-Soviet border conflict (1969), the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (1978-1989), the Chinese invasion of Vietnam (1979), the Somali invasion of Ethiopia (1977-1978), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) – this article challenges both the notions of Cold War bipolarity between communist and capitalist systems as well as the Marxist theory of peaceful coexistence between communist states.

Key words: international relations, geopolitics, military conflicts, communist peace theory

Słowa kluczowe: stosunki międzynarodowe, geopolityka, konflikty zbrojne, komunistyczna teoria pokoju

Introduction

When considering the conflicts of the Cold War from a Western perspective, there is a common tendency to begin by visualizing a map of a recently decolonized world on which an immense swath of red engulfs the surface of Asia and extends into Eastern Europe. To the south, red dots mark points on the Arabian Peninsula, in the Horn of Africa,

as well as throughout the remaining Sub-Saharan regions of the African continent. Across the Atlantic, more red dots can be detected in the Caribbean. This imaginary map is a visual representation of what has variously been referred to as the communist bloc or the international communist system, a geopolitical entity constructed to accompany the Cold War narrative of a bipolar international system. At its peak, this bloc supposedly subjected a third of the world population. It controlled nearly half of the world's energy resources, boasted a third of the world's industrial capacity, and commanded the world's two largest standing armies.¹ Tempting as it may be to look back at the communist bloc as an ideologically, economically, and militarily solidary system of states, this narrative does not take into consideration the seven cases of military conflict that took place between communist countries during the Cold War period.

A considerable amount of data about conflicts between communist states has entered the historical record since the end of the Cold War. For this reason, the aim of this article is not to determine whether conflicts between communist states had indeed taken place or to what extent they had done so—as there already exists an abundant literature to address these questions—but rather to ask what led to the outbreak of military conflicts in the first place. While many of these conflicts have frequently been attributed to bilateral diplomatic breakdowns or anomalous territorial disputes between individual states, this article proposes that they were in fact rooted in much deeper geopolitical realities. In several cases, the struggle for hegemony within the international communist movement led to both bilateral and multilateral confrontations between communist states that were effectively proxy wars for regional spheres of influence between two rival powers: China the Soviet Union. Should these conflicts come to be viewed as such, the resulting paradigm shift could challenge the narrative that the communist bloc represented a united and solidary front against the capitalist system in a bipolar world order during the Cold War period. Furthermore, the identification of geopolitical realities as the root causes of military conflicts between communist states could prompt a reanalysis of the Marxist theory of a communist peace.

This article begins by examining the place of international relations in Marxist theory, particularly insofar as Marxian views of state behavior and interstate conflict are concerned and how they differ from those held by realist approaches to international relations theory. Here, it is also worthwhile to examine how these theories have been interpreted and applied in practice to the foreign policy doctrines of ruling Marxist-Leninist parties in communist states, taking as an example the Soviet Union, which served as the driving force of international communist expansion since its conception. Next, the article proceeds to outline a framework for conceptualizing key terms and defining the criteria for case selection before presenting the comparative historical analysis on

¹ A. Bebler, Conflicts between socialist states. *Journal of Peace Research* 1987, 24 (1), pp. 31-46.

which this study is based. Finally, a discussion of the results is provided followed by concluding remarks in which the limitations of this study and areas for further research are addressed.

International Relations in Marxist Theory and Communist Foreign Policy Doctrines

The primary reason why the issue of international relations remains so extensively disputed among Marxist theorists is that Karl Marx himself addressed the issue relatively little in his works. For Marx, the basic unit of analysis was the class, which he saw as the primary actor on both the state level and in the international system. In Buecker's view, this means that when "a large majority of the world's societies participate in global solidarity and joint action, a world socialist society can come into being."² Quoting Friedrich Engels, Buecker explains that "in such a communist society [...] 'it will not occur to anyone to disturb internal peace,' nor would a communist society fight an aggressive war, as they know 'that in war it will only lose men and capital,' thereby exceeding the gains of possible territorial occupations."³ Marxism also reduces the issue of nationalism to economic terms, as the Marxist perception of the nation-state frames it as a bourgeois tool for the exploitation of labor. Drawing on the Bolshevik theorist Nikolai Bukharin, Linklater writes that "instead of 'clinging to the narrowness of the national state' and succumbing to the patriotic ideal of 'defending or extending the boundaries of the bourgeois state' the proletariat would return to the main project of 'abolishing state boundaries and merging all the people into one Socialist family.'"⁴ Similarly, Burin believes that both Marx and Engels considered war to be a natural phenomenon of capitalist societies, while "the classless society of the future would do away with war together with all other forms of human conflict."⁵ Such theories, intended to be applied on a global scale, formed the basis of the notion of a communist peace, or a mutualistic coexistence between communist states in the international system before a classless, stateless world society could ultimately be created. Should such a peace have been achieved, the only threat of aggression to a communist state—insofar as separate communist states continued to exist independently—would have come from outside the communist bloc, with the states least affected by foreign aggression being those entrenched deep within it.

² R. Buecker, Karl Marx's conception of international relations. *Glendon Journal of International Studies* 2003, 3, p. 53.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 53-54.

⁴ A. Linklater, Marxism. In: *Theories of International Relations*. 3rd edition. New York 2005: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 121.

⁵ F.S. Burin, The communist doctrine of the inevitability of war. *The American Political Science Review* 1963, 57 (2), p. 335.

In contrast to the Marxist focus on class relations and interclass struggles, realist and neorealist approaches to international relations treat the state as the basic unit of analysis. Therefore, while communist states may do away with market economies, Waltz argues that the international system nevertheless continues to function like a market that “conditions [states’] calculations, their behaviours, and their interactions.”⁶ In this view, states may choose to cooperate when cooperation is expedient—and the cooperation between two communist states against a capitalist rival may very well prove to be mutually expedient—but the fundamental need to ensure self-preservation and sovereignty requires even communist states to be wary of one another when territory, resources, and spheres of influence are concerned. As Davenport notes, “it is from [a] circumstance of fragmentation, of multiple particularist political communities, with borders [...] creating divisions of inside and outside, always interacting but always potentially hostile, that Realism deduces the inevitable periodic recurrence of war and derives the invariant abstraction of geopolitics.”⁷ Thus, while the theory of communist peace may form the dogma of communist foreign policy doctrines, geopolitical realities nevertheless create a situation in which hegemonic struggle is unavoidable, in turn affecting the praxis of relations between communist states.

Given the existing dichotomy between a Marxist theory of international communist peace and realist views of inevitable rivalry and hostility in the international system, the Bolsheviks under Vladimir Lenin were faced with the historically unprecedented task of crafting a communist foreign policy in the aftermath of their victory in the October Revolution of 1917. Linklater notes that:

Without a vision of how socialist foreign policy could distinguish itself from its predecessors, Soviet Marxism quickly succumbed to the classical methods of power politics, postponing if not altogether abandoning its ideal of a world community in which nationalism and sovereignty would be superseded, and generating in its own bloc the very forms of nationalism and defence of state sovereignty which it intended to abolish.⁸

This pragmatic Marxist-Leninist approach to foreign policy first manifested itself in 1919 with the Red Army’s failed attempt to expand Soviet Russia’s western frontier in the Polish-Soviet War. Other efforts at Russian territorial expansion, however, were more successful. In 1921, the independent Georgian Soviet Republic was absorbed into the Transcaucasian Federation before the creation of the Soviet Union the following year. After 1922, there were only two states with at least nominal independence from the Soviet

⁶ K. Waltz, *Theory of international politics*. New York 1979: McGraw-Hill, p. 39.

⁷ A. Davenport, Marxism in IR: Condemned to a realist fate? *European Journal of International Relations* 2011, 19 (1), p. 31.

⁸ A. Linklater, Realism, Marxism and critical international theory. *Review of International Studies* 1986, 12 (4), p. 304.

Union: the Mongolian and Tannu Tuva People's Republics, the latter of which had existed as a protectorate of the Russian Empire before the October Revolution. In 1924, authorities in Moscow sent a cavalry regiment to Tannu Tuva, secured a change of leadership in the local communist party, and incorporated its territory into the Soviet Union. This was the first case of military conflict between two formally independent communist states.⁹

A Conceptualization of Military Conflicts Between Communist States

Any attempt to qualify a communist state is bound to be met with disagreement on both theoretical and ideological lines. For the practical purposes of this study, communist states are understood as sovereign countries that existed as single-party states under the rule of self-proclaimed Marxist-Leninist parties for a period of at least one year. The period of one year has been chosen in order to distinguish established states in which the ruling communist party was able to consolidate power and exercise foreign policy from those short-lived polities in which a communist movement was merely able to claim control over a certain geographical area for a period too brief to independently engage in foreign relations. As the *de jure* concept of state sovereignty may be disputed due to controversies of international recognition, just as the legality of party rule may also be disputed over questions of legitimacy, the definitions of both are applied on a *de facto* basis. Therefore, the Socialist Republic of Romania, which existed from 1947 to 1989, qualifies as a communist state within this conceptual framework, while the Lithuanian-Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, which existed briefly between February and July 1919, would not.¹⁰ Moreover, the People's Republic of Angola would also qualify as a communist state from its independence in 1975 to 1991, when the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA)—which remained in power despite constantly being contested by rival parties in a prolonged civil war—formally renounced its Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, Nicaragua, which was ruled by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) from 1979 to 1990 would not, as the FSLN did not establish a single-party state despite its far-left leanings.¹¹ According to this definition and for the purposes of this study, 25 communist states are recognized to have existed between 1945 and 1991: Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Benin, Bulgaria, Cambodia, China, Congo (People's Republic), Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Ethiopia, East Germany, Grenada, Hungary, Laos, Mongolia, Mozambique, North Korea, Poland, Romania, Somalia, South Yemen, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia.

⁹ A. Bebler, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ S. Suziedelis, *Historical dictionary of Lithuania*. 2nd edition. Plymouth 2011: Scarecrow Press.

¹¹ D.F. Busky, *Communism in history and theory: Asia, Africa, and the Americas*. Santa Barbara 2002: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Following this conceptualization of communist states, it is also necessary to make clear what is meant by military conflicts between them. Excluded from this definition are cases of domestic conflicts between rival factions within communist states (i.e. the Angolan Civil War), covert operations (i.e. KGB actions to support or hinder foreign communist movements), as well as military interventions on behalf of other communist states to maintain domestic stability (i.e. the Soviet intervention in East Germany during the uprising of 1953). Therefore, military conflicts between communist states include only those cases in which regular military units of one communist state took overt action against the government of another communist state. As mentioned earlier, the first historical example of such a conflict was the Soviet invasion of Tannu Tuva in 1924, insofar as the latter could be considered a *de facto* communist state. This definition would therefore apply to both relatively large-scale military conflicts (i.e. the Soviet invasion of Hungary) as well as low-intensity operations aimed at regime change by military means (i.e. the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia).

Finally, as the scope of this work focuses on the Cold War period, when communism had proliferated to become a global phenomenon and Marxist-Leninist parties began coming to power beyond the Soviet Union's direct geographical sphere of influence, this study examines only those military conflicts that took place between communist states from the year 1945 to 1991. Applying these criteria for case selection, this study examines the following seven cases of military conflict: the Soviet invasion of Hungary (1956), the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia (1968), the Sino-Soviet border conflict (1969), the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia (1978-1989), the Chinese invasion of Vietnam (1979), the Somali invasion of Ethiopia (1977-1978), and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989).¹² What follows is a qualitative analysis of the aforementioned cases. Each case study is broadly divided into three parts: an overview of the historical and geopolitical context of the conflict, a narrative of the conflict itself, and an examination of the geopolitical consequences in the aftermath of the conflict. For the purposes of this study, most attention is placed on the analysis of the geopolitical situation before and after each conflict, while the actual military operations are addressed more superficially with the limited goal of outlining the sequence and scale of events.

Conflict Analysis

1) Soviet Invasion of Hungary

The expansion of Soviet influence into Europe following the Yalta Conference of February 1945 in the final days of the Second World War gave rise to what would become known as the Eastern bloc. Despite the region's seemingly homogenous composition of communist

¹² For a visual timeline of the cases organized in chronological order by date of commencement, see Annex.

governments, however, it was not long before geopolitical differences began to develop in the region. Although Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin, had secretly endorsed his Yugoslav counterpart Josip Tito's ambitions of annexing Albania, the proposal of also absorbing Bulgaria proved to be a step too far.¹³ With his irredentist goals of creating a Greater Yugoslavia undermined by Moscow, Tito formally severed diplomatic relations with both the Soviet Union and Albania in 1948.¹⁴ The death of Stalin in March 1953 set off a wave of further instability in the region, the first sign of which was the East German uprising that broke out on 16 June of that year. Order was quickly restored the next day, however, after Soviet Marshal Andrei Grechko "ordered one of his armies [...] with three fully manned divisions and 600 tanks, to enter Berlin and crushed the uprising."¹⁵ The need for unilateral Soviet intervention during the uprising had significant influence on the creation of the Warsaw Treaty Organization in 1955. The Warsaw Pact, as it was commonly known, symbolized a commitment to mutual defense and security by all of the Eastern bloc countries—Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and the Soviet Union—with the exception of Yugoslavia.

In July 1953, just one month after the East German uprising, Imre Nagy replaced Matyas Rakosi as Prime Minister of Hungary and began to liberalize many of his predecessor's hardline Stalinist policies. Without the support of Moscow, however, he was expelled from the Hungarian Working People's Party in April 1955, allowing Rakosi to return to power. Then in July 1956, Rakosi himself was dismissed by Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, for apparently insulting Tito while Khrushchev was negotiating to improve diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia.¹⁶ The vacancy was filled by Erno Gero, who had Moscow's favor but lacked popular support in Hungary. On 23 October, students and workers began demonstrating in Budapest, seeking "the reappointment of Nagy as Prime Minister, an end to Soviet domination and the removal of Soviet troops from Hungarian territory."¹⁷ The next day, Nagy was reinstated, but fighting continued between those loyal to him and his opponents, most significantly represented by the State Protection Agency (AVH), the country's secret police force. By 30 October, the fighting that had already claimed about 10,000 lives was beginning to calm down.¹⁸ Surprisingly, not only had Soviet troops stationed in Hungary rejected Gero's request for aid, but they actually began to pull out of Hungary altogether. With this development, Nagy decided the time had come to take the

¹³ A. Barnett, Inter-communist conflicts and Vietnam. *Critical Asian Studies* 1979, 11 (4).

¹⁴ A. Bebler, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ V. Gobarev, Soviet military planning and activities during the East German uprising of June 1953. *International Journal of Phytoremediation* 1997, 10 (4), p. 27.

¹⁶ T. Hartman, *A world atlas of military conflicts, 1945-1984*. Boston 1985: Da Capo Press.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

final step to ending Soviet domination in Hungary. On 1 November, he announced the country's withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and requested that the United Nations recognize Hungary as a neutral state.

Nagy's decision proved to be a fatal miscalculation of Soviet patience. In the evening of 2 November, Soviet forces unilaterally invaded Hungary. According to the UN General Assembly Special Committee on the Problem of Hungary, initial "estimates of Soviet forces in Hungary vary from 1,600 to 4,000 tanks and from 75,000 men to 200,000 [although] the Committee [had] been informed that a more probable figure is 2,500 tanks and armoured cars with 1,000 supporting vehicles."¹⁹ By 4 November Hungary was under complete military control. The Special Committee estimates that between 2,500 and 3,000 Hungarians died in the fighting and some 13,000 were wounded. The exact number of Soviet losses remains unknown, but the Special Committee judges that original estimates of 7,000 casualties were most likely too high. In the aftermath of the invasion, a new government was organized under Janos Kadar, the Hungarian Working People's Party was rebranded the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party and purged of any anti-Soviet elements, Nagy was executed for his mutiny, and Hungary was reincorporated into the Warsaw Pact.²⁰

2) Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia

The invasion of Hungary largely overshadowed the tensions that were simultaneously developing between the Soviet Union and Poland. As in Hungary, the death of Stalin produced the opportunity for Polish communists to liberalize the country's political system and gain greater autonomy from Moscow. Widespread protests as well as the transition in Polish United Workers' Party leadership from the hardline Boleslaw Bierut to his reformist successor, Wladyslaw Gomulka, in October 1956 were alarming signs for Moscow. Although the Soviet Union also threatened Poland with military intervention, Gomulka managed to avoid Nagy's fate by reassuring Khrushchev that any policy reforms would be strictly domestic in nature and would not affect Poland's relationship with either the Soviet Union or other Warsaw Pact allies.²¹ Khrushchev's own liberalization of the Soviet political system and denouncement of certain Stalinist policies—along with ongoing efforts to improve tensions with Yugoslavia—resulted in the break of diplomatic relations between Albania under the orthodox leadership of Enver Hoxha and the Soviet Union in 1961.²²

¹⁹ United Nations General Assembly, Report of the Special Committee on the problem of Hungary. *Official Records: Eleventh session Supplement No. 18 (A/3592)*. United Nations 1957, p. 56.

²⁰ Z. Gitelman, The politics of socialist restoration in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. *Comparative Politics* 1981, 13 (2), pp. 187-210.

²¹ L.W. Gluchowski, Poland, 1956: Khrushchev, Gomulka, and the 'Polish October'. *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 1995, 5, pp. 53-55.

²² A. Bebler, *op. cit.*

Despite the Soviet Union's relative de-Stalinization under Khrushchev, the invasion of Hungary showed that geopolitical realities in the Eastern bloc remained very much unchanged. Coinciding with the death of Stalin, the head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, died in March 1953. He was succeeded by Antonin Novotny, who "was unable to mollify the demands for reform within Czechoslovakia, and on January 5, 1968 Alexander Dubcek replaced him as First Secretary of the Communist Party."²³ The ensuing period known as the Prague Spring was a period of radical reforms to the existing political system. Dubcek's government encouraged greater political independence for Slovaks, an end to the party's monopolistic control over civil society organizations, more autonomy for economic enterprises, and loosening censorship restrictions on the press.²⁴ According to Paul, the primary aspects of Dubcek's reforms that caused greatest concern for the Soviet Union with respect to regional stability in the Eastern bloc were the "ambiguous ideology" and "domestic demands" that Czechoslovakia was promoting to other communist countries.²⁵ He explains that "the former has to do with the doctrinally indeterminate and controversial nature of socialist international relations, [while] the latter with the pressure of certain 'home-front' interest groups for concentration of attention (and finances) on domestic (in preference to international) priorities."²⁶

Believing that such radical reforms within the Warsaw Pact posed an internal threat to the organization itself, Leonid Brezhnev—who had succeeded Khrushchev in 1964—responded with a multilateral invasion of Czechoslovakia. On 20 August 1968, an estimated 250,000 troops from Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, and the Soviet Union entered the country, eventually reaching between 500,000 and 650,000 after subsequent reinforcements had arrived.²⁷ Despite the fact that the Czechoslovak Army numbered approximately 200,000 troops at the time of the invasion, there was almost no resistance to the invading forces. As a result, only some 70 people were killed in the invasion, and by the next day Warsaw Pact troops were in full control of the country and its media outlets.²⁸ Like in the case of Hungary, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was purged of elements hostile to the Soviet Union and Dubcek was removed from power. He was replaced by Gustav Husak, who reversed many of his predecessor's reforms in an effort to return Czechoslovakia to the political status quo that existed prior to the Prague Spring. The decision to intervene in Czechoslovakia was met with considerable diplomatic backlash from the international

²³ R.M. Goodman, The invasion of Czechoslovakia: 1968. *The International Lawyer* 1969, 4 (1), p. 46.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ D.W. Paul, Soviet foreign policy and the invasion of Czechoslovakia: A theory and a case study. *International Studies Quarterly* 1971, 15 (2), p. 173.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ T. Hartman, *op. cit.*; R.M. Goodman, *op. cit.*

²⁸ R.M. Goodman, *op. cit.*

community, including other communist states. Both Romania and Albania had refused to take part in the invasion, and although Czechoslovakia and Romania would remain in the Warsaw Pact, Albania protested with a formal defection. This time however, the Soviet Union made no attempts at intervention. Besides the international denouncement of Soviet aggression, another factor that was in Albania's favor was its advantageous geographic location between non-aligned Yugoslavia and NATO-allied Greece. This physical isolation from the Eastern bloc would have made a Warsaw Pact military operation strategically risky, at best.

3) Sino-Soviet Border Conflict

In the early years of the Second World War, Spykman predicted that “a modern, vitalized, and militarized China of 400 million people [...] will be a continental power of huge dimensions” and whose “economic penetration in [Asia] will undoubtedly take on political overtones.”²⁹ At that time, Mongolia was still the only communist country in the region officially independent of the Soviet Union, but the status quo changed dramatically with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Once in power, Chairman Mao Zedong wasted no time in taking advantage of the inertia that the Chinese Revolution had created in the region. With his Soviet allies, he readily aided the North Korean communists in their own revolution, leading to the creation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1953. However, the death of Stalin that same year would mark the beginning of the end of the Sino-Soviet alliance, as ideological divisions between Mao's orthodox approach to Marxism-Leninism and Khrushchev's apparent revisionism of many of his predecessor's policies provided the theoretical grounds for the Sino-Soviet split. While ideological differences may have contributed to a strain in relations between the two countries, the breakdown of the alliance was ultimately a matter of geopolitics. As Radchenko notes, “so inexplicable did the split appear from a Marxist perspective that both Chinese and Soviet historians in retrospect would blame the debacle on the other side's betrayal of Marxism. But from a realist perspective, Marxism had nothing to do with the rift: the Soviet Union and China were great powers with divergent national interests.”³⁰ Mao knew that China was too big and too powerful to be treated like another Soviet satellite state. Thus, when Khrushchev gave tacit support to India in its 1959 border war with China and pulled out of a deal to provide China with a prototype atomic bomb the next year, Mao felt that China's national interests were being undermined in its relationship with the Soviet Union.³¹

²⁹ N.J. Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*. New York 1942: Harcourt, Brace and Company, p. 469.

³⁰ S. Radchenko, The Sino-Soviet split. In: M.P. Leffler & O. Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge history of the Cold War*. Cambridge 2010: Cambridge University Press, p. 349.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

The 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), held in October 1961, would be the last one attended by a Chinese delegation. At the event, the Chinese made a new ally after giving Albania their support in its dispute with the Soviet Union. Equally notable was a major foreign policy shift on the part of the Soviets, in which the CPSU formally abandoned the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of the inevitability of war—the “precept that wars are inevitable as long as imperialism exists”—and avoidability of war instead “became the doctrinal complement to the global strategy and propaganda line of peaceful coexistence.”³² The official statement read as follows:

It is possible to avert a world war by the combined efforts of the mighty socialist camp, the peace-loving non-socialist countries, the international working class, and all the forces championing peace. The growing superiority of the socialist forces over the forces of imperialism, of the forces of peace over those of war, will make it actually possible to banish world war from the life of society even before the complete victory of socialism on earth [...].³³

For the Chinese communists, this ideological shift indicated not only a betrayal of Marxism-Leninism but a blatantly hypocritical denial of the Soviet Union’s own imperialist tendencies. Before the October Revolution, the Russian Empire had annexed about 700,000 square miles of Chinese territory, producing a 4,000 mile border that stretched from Manchuria to Central Asia.³⁴ Even after their own turn to communism, the Chinese still considered the Soviets’ unwillingness to renegotiate imperial-era claims over these territories a highly controversial issue.

When Mao launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he wasted no opportunity to solidify his position against the Soviet Union. Between 1964 and 1969, the Chinese charged the Soviets with 4,189 border violations and organized both civilian and military demonstrations around the border areas in response.³⁵ On the night of 1 March 1969, about 300 Chinese troops crossed the frozen Ussuri River to attack the Soviet-controlled Damansky Island the next morning. The hit-and-run strike lasted only two hours with minor casualties suffered on both sides. After the incident, both armies retreated from the island but nevertheless claimed victory in the battle.³⁶ Over the next two weeks, the Soviets and Chinese began to accumulate troops and equipment on their respective banks of the river. On 15 March, fighting broke out again on the island, this time with mortar

³² F.S. Burin, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

³³ J.F. Triska (ed.), *Soviet communism: Programs and rules*. San Francisco 1962: Chandler Publishing Co., p. 64-65.

³⁴ T. Hartman, *op. cit.*

³⁵ T.W. Robinson, The Sino-Soviet border dispute: Background, development, and the March 1969 clashes. *The American Political Science Review* 1972, 66 (4).

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

and artillery fire, resulting in an estimated 60 Soviet and 800 Chinese casualties.³⁷ Though the fighting ceased to escalate thereafter, the territorial dispute remained unresolved and tensions between the two countries continued. Along with the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia that had occurred just one year earlier, the Sino-Soviet border conflict was regularly exploited by Chinese propaganda until Mao's death and the subsequent end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. If Khrushchev's apparent revisionism had instigated the Sino-Soviet dispute, then the Brezhnev Doctrine—which held that it was both the right and responsibility of the Soviet Union to preserve the communist bloc by intervening in other communist countries if the system was threatened from within—firmly cemented the split and set off a rivalry for international influence as communism began to expand into the newly decolonized regions of the world.

4) Vietnamese Invasion of Cambodia

Following North Korea's turn to communism in 1953, the Soviet Union and China quickly turned their attention to Southeast Asia, where the outbreak of the Second Indochina War just two years later provided a new front for communist expansion. By 1975, the Viet Cong had successfully taken control of Vietnam, the Pathet Lao had taken control of Laos, and the Khmer Rouge had taken control of Cambodia. Though all three movements had received support from China and the Soviet Union, hopes of creating a united bloc in the region quickly faded. As the local communist parties had framed the conflicts as wars of national liberation, first against French colonialists and later against American imperialists, their legitimacy was deeply rooted in promises of national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

While Laos remained a virtual satellite of Vietnam after gaining its independence—signing a 25-year treaty of cooperation and agreeing to harbor some 60,000 Vietnamese troops on its soil—the case of Cambodia was much different.³⁸ By the end of the conflict in 1975, “more than a million people of Cambodian origin [lived] in the Mekong Delta, and more than 500,000 ethnic Vietnamese [were] resident in Cambodia.”³⁹ Border incidents began almost immediately after liberation, when Cambodia—now formally called Democratic Kampuchea—seized Vietnam's Tho Chu Island and Vietnam responded by seizing Cambodian-controlled Wei Island. After two years of ongoing tensions and disputes, the Khmer Rouge launched a large-scale attack on the Vietnamese province of Tay Ninh in April 1977. In September of the same year, coinciding with the announcement of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot's upcoming trip to China, the Cambodians attacked again on a new

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ M. Kirsch Leighton, Perspectives on the Vietnam-Cambodia border conflict. *Asian Survey* 1978, 18 (5).

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 448.

front. At this time, there were some 10,000 Chinese military advisors present in Cambodia aiding the closely allied Khmer Rouge regime.⁴⁰ Relatively low-intensity border incidents continued until 25 December 1978, when the Vietnamese responded with a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. By 7 January, Phnom Penh had fallen, and 200,000 Vietnamese troops were deployed to occupy the country.⁴¹ The Khmer Rouge were exiled and assumed a guerilla struggle once again, launching sporadic attacks against the new pro-Vietnamese regime in Cambodia, which was renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea in 1979. The Vietnamese invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia resulted in serious geopolitical ramifications for the region. China's support for the Khmer Rouge, the initial aggressors in the conflict, pushed Vietnam and, by extension, closely allied and heavily dependent Laos into the Soviet orbit. Kirsch Leighton notes that after "the intensification of the Vietnam-Cambodia border war, Soviet and Chinese media [took] the sides of their respective allies, but without the stridency that [had] marked the propaganda output of the local contestants."⁴²

5) Sino-Vietnamese War

By the time of its invasion of Cambodia in December 1978, Vietnam had already joined the Soviet-aligned Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, effectively guaranteeing both countries mutual support in times of crisis. In response, China cut off all foreign aid to Vietnam in the summer of 1978.⁴³ Moreover, Vietnam became a regular target of Chinese propaganda, and Chinese media increasingly began to accuse Vietnam of provocations against its military personnel and civilians in the border areas. For example, the *People's Daily* cited 439 instances of Vietnamese provocation in 1975, 986 instances in 1976, 752 instances in 1977, and a record 1,108 instances in 1978. When Vietnam finally did invade Cambodia, China provided aid to the Khmer Rouge resistance, as it originally "believed that the Cambodian conflict was the main drain on Vietnam's resources, [and] it made sense for it to prolong the conflict and increase Moscow's burden."⁴⁴ However, Vietnam's swift victory forced China to reassess its approach.

On 17 February 1979, just over a month after Vietnam's capture of Phnom Penh, Chinese forces crossed the border into Vietnam. The initial invasion force of about 80,000 Chinese troops was met by 50,000 regular Vietnamese soldiers and the same number of

⁴⁰ A. Barnett, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ T. Hartman, *op. cit.*

⁴² M. Kirsch Leighton, *op. cit.*, p. 453.

⁴³ D. Tretiak, China's Vietnam War and its consequences. *The China Quarterly* 1979, 80.

⁴⁴ C. McGregor, China, Vietnam, and the Cambodian conflict. *Asian Survey* 1990, 30 (3), p. 268.

local militia.⁴⁵ Though the Chinese managed to take control of the border areas, Vietnamese forces were able to stop the southward Chinese advancement. By 18 February, however, the Chinese had received reinforcements and the invasion force grew to 200,000, allowing them to continue pushing further south. Despite the progress, Chinese losses were heavy and on 5 March the invading troops began to withdraw. On 19 March Vietnam declared victory over the invaders, claiming that 62,500 Chinese had been killed or wounded and 280 tanks destroyed. China, however, estimated the losses to have been 20,000 Chinese and 50,000 Vietnamese killed or wounded.⁴⁶

Though the Soviet Union did not intervene in the conflict militarily, it did criticize Chinese aggression against Vietnam. This position further deepened the division between the Soviet Union and China, and as a result the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance—signed in 1950 and set to expire in 1979—was not renewed as a manifestation of China's grievances against Moscow.⁴⁷ In the end, the Chinese invasion of Vietnam neither weakened Vietnam's hold over Laos or Cambodia, which it continued to occupy, nor resulted in significant territorial gains for China. By the end of the conflict, every other communist country in Asia had aligned itself with the Soviet Union. The only exception was North Korea, which in 1981 renewed the Sino-North Korean Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty but otherwise remained mostly non-aligned when it came to Sino-Soviet controversies.

6) Somali Invasion of Ethiopia

Beyond Southeast Asia, rapid decolonization had provided a number of communist movements with the opportunity to establish themselves throughout the third world. By the end of the 1970s, communism had reached its greatest geographical expansion. In the Caribbean, the Cuban Revolution was completed in 1959 and the New Jewel Movement seized Grenada in 1979. Having completed its revolution before the Sino-Soviet split, Cuba had no dilemma in establishing close ties with Moscow from the outset, which provided the country with considerable economic and military aid. Cuba, in turn, supported the New Jewel Movement when it took power in Grenada. In Africa, the Somali Democratic Republic was declared in 1969, the People's Republic of the Congo was declared in 1970, and Ethiopia subsequently turned to communism in 1974. Angola, Benin, and Mozambique all followed suit in 1975.⁴⁸ In contrast to the situation across the Atlantic, many of these countries became battlegrounds for Soviet and Chinese influence. In the Angolan Civil

⁴⁵ T. Hartman, *op. cit.*

⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁷ D. Tretiak, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ D.F. Busky, *op. cit.*

War, for example, the ruling MPLA government received aid from the Soviet Union as well as direct military support from Cuba, while the opposing National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) was backed by China.⁴⁹

Of all the communist countries in Africa and the Americas, the only ones to share a border were Ethiopia and Somalia. The formation of an independent Somalia following the decolonization and subsequent unification of British Somaliland and Italian Somalia in 1960 resulted in a surge of national sentiment among the Somali population. After its independence, the country pursued an irredentist agenda of creating a Greater Somalia of all the Somali-speaking regions in the Horn of Africa. Such a project would have effectively involved the absorption of Djibouti to the north as well as the annexation of land from Kenya to the south and Ethiopia to the west.⁵⁰ Following the 1969 coup that brought Siad Barre to power, his Supreme Revolutionary Council began pursuing this expansionist agenda more aggressively, financing both secessionist movements in Ethiopia's northern region of Eritrea as well as supporting pro-Somali guerrillas in the border region of the Ogaden, an area mainly inhabited by ethnic Somalis.

In July 1977, some 40,000 Somali troops crossed the border into the Ethiopian Ogaden. At that time, the Ethiopian army numbered about 100,000 regular soldiers, 30,000 of which were immediately deployed to the eastern front.⁵¹ As Somalia had signed an arms agreement with the Soviet Union, the Soviets tried to persuade Barre to withdraw from Ethiopia. Barre refused, and after Ethiopia's appeal for aid, Moscow made the decision to sign a 385 million dollar arms agreement with Ethiopia in September and requested Cuban military intervention on Ethiopia's behalf.⁵² In November, Siad Barre responded by abrogating "the 1974 Soviet-Somali Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, expelled Soviet advisers, revoked Soviet use of military facilities, reduced Soviet diplomatic representation in Mogadiscio, and severed relations with Cuba."⁵³ By February 1978 there were some 18,000 Cuban troops present in Ethiopia, and the last Somali troops were finally pushed back by March of that year. Both countries suffered estimated losses of between 6,000 and 6,500 while Cuban casualties numbered at about 400.⁵⁴ China was quick to seize upon the newly developed schism between Somalia and the Soviet Union, and both countries

⁴⁹ G. Meijer, From military peace to social justice? The Angolan peace process. *Accord: An International Review of Peace Initiatives* 2004, 15.

⁵⁰ B.B. Yihun, Ethiopian foreign policy and the Ogaden War: the shift from 'containment' to 'destabilization,' 1977-1991. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2014, 8 (4).

⁵¹ G. Tareke, The Ethiopia-Somalia War of 1977 revisited. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 2000, 33 (3).

⁵² K.G Weiss, *The Soviet involvement in the Ogaden War*. No. CNA-PP-269. Alexandria, Virginia 1980: Center for Naval Analyses, Institute of Naval Studies, p. 11.

⁵³ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁴ G. Tareke, *op. cit.*

developed close diplomatic relations in the aftermath of Somalia's defeat in the Ogaden. In 1981, delegates from both governments issued a statement claiming that "the strategic objective of the Soviet Union is global supremacy [and that] the turbulent situation all over the world and in the Horn of Africa is the result of Soviet aggression and intervention."⁵⁵

7) Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan

Communism had relatively little success gaining a solid foothold in the Middle East. In 1967, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen became the only Arab country under a Marxist-Leninist government. In the Ethiopian-Somali war of 1978, Yemen sided firmly with Ethiopia, Cuba, and the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ That same year, the Saur Revolution in Afghanistan brought the People's Democratic Party to power, which wasted no time in converting the country into a communist state. As Hartman notes, "the new government's efforts to stampede the country into the 20th century, involving, among other things, drastic land redistribution and unpopular female emancipation, angered the reactionary and fiercely Muslim peasantry and by April, 1979, most of the provinces were in revolt."⁵⁷

In light of the unrest, the Afghan government under Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin appealed to the Soviet Union for assistance. However, worried that the uprisings might spread to neighboring Soviet republics in Central Asia, which like Afghanistan all had Muslim-majority populations, Brezhnev was faced with a strategic dilemma: to support a friendly communist government on the Soviet Union's southern border or to suppress its radical and unpopular reforms. Although Brezhnev had invaded Czechoslovakia ten years earlier as a response to the country's radical step away from Marxism-Leninism, the current geopolitical situation was considerably different. Now, social and political stability within the Soviet Union itself was at risk.

On 25 December 1979, some 7,700 Soviet troops reached Afghanistan by air, with an additional 75,000 to 80,000 prepared for intervention. Two days later, they had taken control of Kabul, executed Amin, and replaced the existing government with a new Revolutionary Council under Babrak Karmal.⁵⁸ The Afghan Army, with about 80,000 troops, put up little resistance to the invasion. Half of them deserted shortly after the fall of Kabul, and some later took up arms against the Soviets by joining either the Islamist mujahideen

⁵⁵ H. Ododa, Somalia's domestic politics and foreign relations since the Ogaden War of 1977-78. *Middle Eastern Studies* 1985, 21 (3), p. 294.

⁵⁶ B.B. Yihun, *op. cit.*

⁵⁷ T. Hartman, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

⁵⁸ P. Dimitrakis, The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan: International reactions, military intelligence and British diplomacy. *Middle Eastern Studies* 2012, 48 (4).

or Maoist guerilla groups.⁵⁹ The invasion was highly controversial among the communist states, with only Cuba, Vietnam, and the Warsaw Pact countries—with the exception of Romania—manifesting support for the Soviet Union and declaring solidarity with the new Afghan regime.⁶⁰ China was the most outspoken critic of the invasion, and Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping even commented that it was “by no means an isolated case but a component of the global strategy of Soviet hegemonism.”⁶¹ Moreover, when the Soviet Union proposed to resume still unresolved border negotiations with China in September 1981, the Chinese responded with three demands: Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, and Soviet demilitarization of the border area⁶². Plans for further negotiations were canceled, and both Soviet and Vietnamese troops would continue their respective occupations until 1989.

8) Discussion

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 was a clear mark of its waning power as a regional hegemon. The *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) reforms introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, who assumed the seat of General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985, had both internal and international implications. Thus, when the revolutions of 1989 swept across the Eastern bloc—resulting in the destruction of the Berlin Wall as well as the defections of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland from Moscow’s orbit—the Soviet Union did not intervene. As Legvold observes:

Under Gorbachev, the catechism [had] changed. Those who reflect deeply on the power of the Soviet Union in its relations with Eastern Europe (and, in the long run, in Sino-Soviet relations) [...] now acknowledge that socialist international relations are no different from those of any other type of polity. They are just as prone to conflicts, including armed engagements arising from self-interest and ambition, as are relations among and with other systems. In light of this, Soviet leaders now [asked]: Why pretend, let alone demand, that a ‘single truth’, a single shared wisdom, should prevail within what until recently was called the socialist commonwealth?⁶³

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ultimately meant the end of the international communist system. The only regimes to survive the collapse were those of China, Cuba, Laos,

⁵⁹ T. Hartman, *op. cit.*

⁶⁰ P. Dimitrakis, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 521.

⁶² T. Hartman, *op. cit.*

⁶³ R. Legvold, The revolution in Soviet foreign policy. *Foreign Affairs* 1989, 68 (1).

North Korea, and Vietnam. With no competition for geopolitical hegemony, China has steadily improved its relations with Vietnam and renewed its defense treaty with North Korea.

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the expanding communist bloc had been a battleground for geopolitical hegemony. In Eastern Europe, the initial break between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia was a warning sign for Moscow, which tightened its grip on the region thereafter by suppressing the East German uprising and creating the Warsaw Pact alliance. When Hungary and Czechoslovakia tried to defect in 1956 and 1968, respectively, both countries became the immediate targets of military intervention, occupation, and imposed political reforms. Though it cannot be said with certainty, as other explanatory factors may have been at play, it is likely that Poland was spared Hungary's fate in 1956 because Gomulka's reforms stopped just short of undermining the Soviet Union's geopolitical dominance over Poland. On the other hand, though Albania did withdraw from the Warsaw Pact in 1968, its geographic isolation from the rest of the bloc—as well as ongoing Soviet efforts to mend relations with non-aligned Yugoslavia—may have made military intervention in the Balkans an unviable option for Moscow.

Given the problems it experienced controlling its Eastern bloc satellites, the Soviet Union's efforts to subdue much larger and more powerful China as another subordinate regime were doomed from the outset. The 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict finalized the split between the two countries, giving China reason to view Southeast Asia as its own geopolitical sphere of influence. While it did manage to establish a hold on Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge government, Vietnam's successful invasion and subsequent occupation of the country following the 1978 border dispute showed that the Soviet Union had a stronger ally in the region. China's retaliatory invasion of Vietnam in 1979 did little to change the status quo, resulting in nothing but a growing list of Chinese grievances against the expansion of Soviet influence in Southeast Asia.

China was similarly unable to establish a hold on Africa. Combined Soviet and Cuban efforts effectively managed to keep Angola's MPLA government in power between 1975 and 1991 in spite of the Chinese-supported UNITA insurgency. After the Somali invasion of Ethiopia ended in 1978, China finally did gain a sovereign ally in the region, albeit only by appealing to the defeated Somali regime, whose irridentist aggression had been successfully warded off by Soviet and Cuban support for Ethiopia. Finally, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—whose reforms, unlike those of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, were intended to bring the country closer to the Soviet model—further demonstrated Moscow's prioritization of geopolitical realities (the internal stability of its Muslim-majority Central Asian republics) over ideological solidarity (support for building socialism in Afghanistan).

Besides the struggle for the spread of hegemonic influence, many of the cases examined in this study also show the inability of Marxist theory to overcome the perennial issue of nationalism in international relations, as territorial disputes played a significant role in provoking conflicts between communist countries. Yugoslav irridentism was the principal cause

of its diplomatic split with the Soviet Union and Albania, and it was a border dispute that ultimately led to the only military confrontation between the Soviet Union and China. In Southeast Asia, the Khmer Rouge exploited Cambodian nationalism in its aggression towards Vietnam, eventually provoking an even more aggressive retaliation. Though China's subsequent attack on Vietnam was an act of retribution for the invasion of allied Cambodia, the rhetorical motive for the military operation was the preservation of Chinese borders. Lastly, the Somali invasion of Ethiopia had no other motive than territorial expansion in an attempt to create a Greater Somalia based on feelings of national identity.

Conclusion

When the World Peace Council (WPC) was founded as an initiative of the Information Bureau of the Communist and Workers' Parties (Cominform) shortly after the end of the Second World War, its primary objective was to establish a communist peace. As Wernicke notes, "the WPC's monochromatic image in the little research that has been done in Western countries is a mirror inversion of the Marxist-Leninist tenet that peace and socialism are inextricably interlinked, since socialism sets out to replace capitalism, which breeds war."⁶⁴ Since the time of his writing, significantly more research has been done on the conflicts of the Cold War. Though a considerable amount of historical diplomatic and military records has been published since 1991, there still remains a gap in the literature with respect to much of the data, particularly insofar as the conflicts that involved China and Vietnam are concerned. To this day, many of the statistical specifics of the conflicts (i.e. precise numbers of troops deployed or casualties incurred) remain contested. Despite these gaps, however, the data that is available has made a qualitative examination of events possible. Through the lens of comparative historical analysis, this study has put into question the narrative of a united and solidary communist front in a bipolar world order during the Cold War period, revealing that the so-called communist bloc was itself greatly influenced by regional rivalries and hegemonic aggression like the rest of the international system as a whole. In turn, the attribution of the underlying causes of military conflicts between communist states to such geopolitical realities should give reason to reevaluate the validity of the Marxist theory of communist peace.

In defense of the theory of communist peace, some Marxist apologists may argue that neither the Soviet Union nor China ever fully reached the endpoint of communist development, thus rendering the theory of communist peace not applicable to their relations with one another or other socialist states. While this view may prevail in some Marxist circles, it nevertheless renders the theory of communist peace practically unfalsifiable by

⁶⁴ G. Wernicke, The unity of peace and socialism? The World Peace Council on a Cold War tightrope between the peace struggle and intrasystemic communist conflicts. *Peace & Change* 2001, 26 (3), p. 333.

empirical investigation, as it claims that no fully developed communist countries do or have ever existed. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, no new communist states have been established, and most of the ones that remain have taken definitive steps away from the Marxist-Leninist model. Given these trends, it currently seems unlikely that communism will experience a renaissance in world politics. And given the historical experience of attempting to realize international peace through communism, those who continue to pursue this path may first have to reconsider the roles that ideology and geopolitical realities play in international relations.

Though the intent of this study has been to analyze the seven conflicts that took place between communist countries during the Cold War period, more research remains to be done as new information regarding specific diplomatic records and military data becomes declassified by both former and current communist countries. Additionally, future studies in the field should put greater focus on the relations between the Soviet Union and early communist states in the pre-Cold War period, a topic that has received significantly less attention in the scholarly literature than have Cold War studies. While such a focus would be complementary to this study in continuing the same line of research, it was nevertheless outside the limited scope of this study to pursue.

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Annex: Timeline of military conflicts between communist states

