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By EE NARA Date 11/17/77

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# Intelligence Note - 459

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

June 13, 1969

To : The Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *TH*

Subject: Peking's Tactics and Intentions Along the Sino-Soviet Border

"We must not show the slightest timidity before a wild beast."  
Mao Tse-tung, as quoted by NCNA June 10, 1969

Analysis of the incidents along the Sino-Soviet border since the crisis on the Ussuri River in March suggests that the Chinese are the provocateurs. These tactics, seemingly illogical in the face of overwhelmingly superior Soviet military force on the border, appear designed to offset Chinese weakness. Peking is trying to deter an attack by publicizing the danger in advance and making clear that any attack will be forcefully resisted by a fearless adversary. It also is trying to test Soviet reactions, and foster political unity at home. The growing danger is that Peking may be miscalculating, and that the tactics designed to deter wider conflict with the Soviets will, in fact, bring it on.

One Chinese Killed in Latest Incident. Both Peking and Moscow have issued protests over an incident on the Sinkiang/Kazakhstan border on June 10, which took place in the same location as an incident on May 2. The Chinese claimed that Soviet troops intruded near Yumin, killed one herdsman and kidnapped a herdsman, and also that they sent in tanks and armored vehicles as they did on May 2. As of June 11, the Chinese reported that the "situation is still developing." Moscow's version of the incident asserted that the herdsman intruded, and were followed by Chinese border guards who opened fire on Soviet border guards. The Soviets denied that tanks were used.

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Chinese Confrontation Tactics - Civilian Provocateurs. The most recent incident fits the pattern of the majority of clashes since the Ussuri River crisis in that Chinese civilians were involved by the account of both sides. The usual sequence, as reported in the Chinese protest notes, begins with alleged attacks on peaceloving fishermen or herdsman by Soviet border guards which force a response by Chinese border guards. The incidents are then followed by loud propaganda cries, protests and warnings against further incursion.\* The presence of civilians in the immediate border area is probably strictly controlled by the Chinese. In Sinkiang, for instance, the Chinese reportedly established a coron sanitaire several miles wide on their side of the border after the Ining riots in 1962 (not far from the site of the current incident). Whether this no man's land still exists is not known, but we assume that civilian activities near the border require the permission of Chinese authorities. Furthermore, the frequency of the incidents involving civilians suggest that their activities in these instances have been officially inspired.

Peking's Intentions. Why would Peking bait Moscow in such a way when the military balance of forces along the border so clearly favors the Soviets? There are short term benefits to be gained -- embarrassment of the Soviets during the international conference of Communist parties, dramatization of border claims in disputed areas along Manchurian Rivers -- but the game would seem too dangerous to be played for such minor stakes alone. More profoundly,

\* For details on the border incidents see:

IN-155, "Communist China: Millions Denounce Moscow," 3/7/69 (LIMITED OFFICIAL USE)

IN-186, "Sino-Soviet Border: Has Peking Bitten Off More Than It Can Chew?"  
3/18/69 (CONFIDENTIAL)

IN-441, "Sino-Soviet Dispute: Peking Widens Border Polemic," 6/6/69  
(SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM)

IN-139, "USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River,"  
3/4/69 (SECRET/NO FOREIGN DISSEM /CONTROLLED DISSEM).

We think, Peking's tactics have been developed out of fear to offset a position of weakness. The Chinese have watched with alarm the speed of the Soviet buildup since 1966, seen the "Brezhnev Doctrine" applied in Czechoslovakia, and are genuinely worried that the Soviets are preparing to take some action against them. They know also that they cannot hope to match Soviet military power.

Show No Fear. Given these attitudes, Peking's tactics make sense as an attempt to deter a Soviet attack, using traditional Chinese methods. If Mao believes, as we are told, that the "slightest timidity before the wild beast" invites attack, the posturing and probing on the border and the clanging of the propaganda gongs in Peking may be his way of telling the Russians that the Chinese are not afraid, and will resist to the last no matter what force is applied. In addition, the constant publicity focussed on the possibility of attack appears an attempt to forestall the event by subjecting it in advance to the scrutiny and opprobrium of world opinion.

The Word of the Ancients. Though by Western standards Peking's provocations would seem militarily unsound, they bear some relation to tactics handed down by the Chinese ancients. Sun Tzu, the sixth century B.C. military writer whose Art of War has been a standard text for all Chinese leaders including Mao, counsels in his chapter on Strengths and Weaknesses that the successful general must "agitate the enemy and ascertain the pattern of his movement." Faced with a build-up on its northern border of forces far in excess of those necessary to meet any conceivable Chinese offensive threat, Peking's probes may also be an attempt to "agitate" the Soviets and to determine from the reaction to these counter-pressures how far the Soviets may be prepared to go.

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Unity for War or War for Unity? As the incidents on the border have grown more serious, Chinese propaganda has emphasized the need for internal unity and urged the populace to prepare for war. The disunity engendered by the Cultural Revolution and the resultant strains involved in building a new domestic power structure continue to plague China; so much so, in fact that it is tempting to suggest that the incidents have been engineered solely as a cement for internal politics. Clearly, there is more to it than this and an equally convincing case can be made that Peking's perception of a real threat has given new urgency to the goal of surmounting factional divisions in the country. Whatever emphasis is given, however, the threat provides Peking with useful grist for its domestic mill, although the militant posture adopted before its own people makes it increasingly hard for the leadership to back down.

Where Does Peking Go From Here? Although Peking's tactics are understandable in their own terms, there is a danger that they may have misunderstood their enemy. The Soviets for their part show no signs of calming the situation, but rather are becoming increasingly obdurate toward the Chinese. Given Peking's frame of mind and the methods it has chosen to demonstrate fearlessness, Soviet obduracy may be met only by more Chinese provocations. The outlook, then is for more border incidents, with an increased chance of escalation into wider conflict.

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