

**DEVELOPMENT, SECURITY, STRATEGY:
THE SINO-SOVIET CONFLICT IN RETROSPECT**

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Abstract

Drawing from the latest findings in Romanian archives and also from recent works in Romanian historiography, beside several important international bibliographic resources, this essay is centered around the Sino-Soviet conflict and its immediate aftermath in the communist world from three major perspectives, already announced in the title: development, security and strategy.

Key words: *hegemony, Marxism-Leninism, Yugoslav socialism, Cold War, national interest*

Introduction: ideology and beyond

Drawing from the latest findings in Romanian archives and also from recent works in Romanian historiography, beside several important international bibliographic resources, this essay is centered around the Sino-Soviet conflict and its immediate aftermath in the communist world from three major perspectives, already announced in the title: development, security and strategy.

Although the debate between the two major revisionist powers in the postwar era was addressed in Marxist-Leninist terms, I argue in the following pages that their dispute should not be interpreted by exacerbating the ideological dimension of the entire affair and by placing on a secondary position concrete matters related to the developmental vision of local communist elites, as it was done in Western works published especially during the Cold War (see for example Brzezinski 1971, 397-432), or like I myself did in a previous article on this topic (Copilaș 2009).

Due to the fact that ideology is unavoidable in social sciences due to its omnipresence, one should renounce striving for axiological neutrality, as Max Weber argued, in favor of what Immanuel Wallerstein referred to as axiological transparency (Wallerstein 2011). Consequently, as Cold War capitalist ideology possessed its own distinct brands of liberalism, conservatism, social-democracy and so on, the ideology of the 'socialist camp' was also divided between various types of state socialisms that reflected its internal diversity, although it was not as broad as in the case of capitalist ideologies and, like the 'socialist camp' itself, was younger and less experienced than the latter. Still, because ideology matters so much, it should not be abstracted from the concrete conditions of social, political and economic development and converted into some sort of metaphysics, as it happened in the majority of Sovietology studies produced in the Western world in the second half of the XXth century (Lewin 2005, 271).

This is why the present essay endorses the contribution of other factors, both internal and external, in understanding the evolution and also the aftermath of the

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Sino-Soviet split, the most important being economic development, political consolidation and international predictability and stability. Each actor involved in this political phenomenon entailed particular strategies in order to ensure either the prevalence of its own developmental line (China, the Soviet Union), either to cope with the traditional (Soviet) or the alternative (Chinese) model of socialism: Albania, Romania, the rest of East-European socialist countries, some of the Asian socialist countries like North Korea and Vietnam, and, eventually, all the communist parties in the world.

Consequently, the conflict did not necessarily ‘stand[] out as the most monumental failure of the capacity of the Communist ideology to create a stable international order, thereby refuting one of the most cherished utopias of committed Communists’ (Brzezinski 1971, 432), but as a proof of the adaptability and of the resilience of global socialism in order to achieve various types of modern developments in national contexts while explicitly refuting the capitalist paradigm. Even if in the long run this ambitious aim proved to be an utter failure, it managed however to mobilize huge resources of energy and expectations in the hope that one day, a society freed from the brackets of profit may become possible. As Moshe Lewin argued about the Soviet Union, which offered the world the first model of socialism, with all its failures but also its accomplishments –

Reflection on the USSR has been marred – and still is – by two frequent errors (...). The first is to take anticommunism for a study of the Soviet Union. The second – a consequence of the first – consists in ‘Stalinizing’ the whole Soviet phenomenon, as if it had been one giant gulag from beginning to end.

Anti-communism (and its offshoots) is not historical scholarship: it is an ideology masquerading as such. Not only did it not correspond to the realities of the ‘political animal’ in question, but waving the flag of democracy, it paradoxically exploited the USSR’s authoritarian (dictatorial) regime in the service of conservative causes or worse. In the United States, McCarthyism, or the subversive political role played by the FBI head Hoover, were both based on the communist bogey. The unsavory maneuvering by some of the German Right to whitewash Hitler by foregrounding Stalin and his atrocities entails such use and abuse of history. In defense of human rights, the West proved highly indulgent towards some regimes and very severe with others (this is not to mention its own violation of those rights). Such behavior did not serve to enhance its image and certainly did not aid an understanding of the Soviet experience and related important phenomena (Lewin 2005, 378).

One such phenomena is, of course, the Sino-Soviet conflict.

The main divergence points: de-Stalinization, peaceful coexistence, the transition from capitalism to communism and the Third World

Although frequently placed in 1956, at the XXth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and publicly declared in 1960, during the third

Congress of the Romanian Workers Party (RWP) – it is very likely that the first divergences between communist China and the Soviet Union appeared earlier, during the Korean war (1950-1953). When China stepped in in order to help North Korea, after Stalin's partial reluctance to do so and in order to avoid the difficult neighborhood of a unified capitalist Korea, the Soviet Union demanded payment for the military and logistic assistance offered to China, thus pushing it deeper into an economic crises that was very troublesome for the newly instated communist regime. The Koreans resented the American military occupation of the southern part of the country, thus giving the communists from the north, who already achieved the status of national heroes during World War Two, when they organized a resistance movement against the Japanese occupation– the opportunity to peacefully unify the country under a communist regime. However, Washington was not prepared to renounce a strategic geopolitical point in the Far East and decided to push back North Korea, which eventually opted for a military offensive in the pursuit of reunifying the country. Mao Tse Tung, fearing the political stability of China was on the line, decided to intervene (Kissinger 2003, 423; Croitor 2014, 19-36).

Furthermore, the Chinese communists did not forget Stalin's support for the nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek during the long civil war that started in the 1920s, and neither the Soviet critics with reference to the revolutionary strategy deployed by Mao in this process, who was accused of overemphasizing the role of the peasantry at the expense of the working class. Of course, Stalin was conveniently putting aside the fact that the Bolshevik revolution itself became successful after winning the support of the peasantry, the most important social force in tsarist Russia (London 1966, 207-208).

After Stalin's death in 1953, the Sino-Soviet relations gradually improved, Moscow offering a serious economic aid to a China that was still underdeveloped and vulnerable. But the de-Stalinization process initiated in 1956 will put an end to the Sino-Soviet rapprochement. Although Stalin personally had his disagreements with the Chinese communists and had occasionally treated them with contempt, Stalinist economic and social policies were considered by the Beijing leadership as the only instrument available for the rapid development of China. The Soviet Union, already an industrialized country that started to loosen the reins of accumulation in favor of consumption in order to gain a proper popular and also international legitimacy - may allow itself the liberty of criticizing Stalin and his legacy for motives like immorality, extreme political repression, paranoia and the shameful cult of personality staged with his own approval and frequent implications; China, which endorsed extreme accumulation in attempting to overcome as fast as possible the underdevelopment and chronic economic and infrastructural shortages – did not. Indeed, the Chinese communists interpreted de-Stalinization as a threat to the development of their country and also to its political stability. The fact that Nikita Khrushchev, the first secretary of the CPSU, did not consult them regarding the opportunity of presenting his famous „secret speech” against Stalin made them even more anxious and susceptible. Still, at least for the moment, the disagreements between the two parts remained a private affair (Croitor 2014, 86-95; Croitor M.; Croitor S. 2019a, 291-292,

336-338; Croitor M.; Croitor S. 2014a, 81-85, 118-119; Croitor M.; Croitor S. 2019b, 414; Croitor M.; Croitor S. 2020, 249-250; Cătănuș 2011, 94, 155, 194).

Regarding peaceful coexistence, the new Soviet approach of international relations, Khrushchev emphasized that it proved Moscow's commitment to a new international order, one in which, due to the threat of nuclear arms, the competition between socialism and imperialism must put aside military aspects in favor of economic, social and cultural ones. Peaceful coexistence was, beyond its ethical appeal, a strategy employed by Moscow for reducing the number of military troops stationed in different parts of the world and involve them mainly in the Soviet agricultural sector, which Khrushchev considered to be functioning under its potential. However, for the Chinese leadership, peaceful coexistence meant something very different. Namely that Moscow will emphasize Soviet developmental priorities at the expense of strengthening the 'socialist camp' per se. A more relaxed international environment was creating a context in which the allies of the Soviet Union and their national interests could be neglected, and their efforts to supersede underdevelopment threatened. Therefore, an ideologically polarized world, with the prospect of war not totally out of reach, coerced the superpowers into consolidating their allies, while a world united in the quest for peaceful coexistence did exactly the opposite. Furthermore, the specter of war served Chinese communists for maintaining the hard pace of economic accumulation and keeping the population submissive and prone to whatever sacrifices the rulers decided to subject them to in the name of the country's overall progress (Croitor 2013, 32-37, 41-42, 50-51, 57; Croitor M.; Croitor, S. 2019a, 286; Croitor M.; Croitor, S. 2019b, 58; Kardelj in Jacobs 1979, 261-264; Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2020, 207-208, 234, 333-335, 339-340, 401, 404-409, 465; Adjubei et. al. 1960, 507-513).

It follows that the gradual expansion of capitalist countries from capitalism to socialism and eventually to communism could not exclude war. In his works, and also in the official documents of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Mao argued that until now, the expansion of global socialism was inextricably related to war: the Bolshevik revolution was made possible by the First World War, and the expansion of socialism into Eastern Europe and Asia by the second. One should not exclude the possibility of peaceful transitions to socialism, although one should not credit it too much either. Taking into account the development of nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union stressed the importance of a peaceful and prudent advance of global socialism: adventurous military policies could inflict irreversible losses on the 'socialist camp' and on the whole world as well, bringing about the end of the modern civilization as we know it. In this point, the different security strategies employed by both Soviet Union and China were taking their toll: while the first was already a nuclear power more or less satisfied with the global *status-quo*, the second was not; its ambition to become one signaled its readiness to challenge the international and also the socialist order in doing so (Croitor, Borșa 2014a, 206-211; Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2020, 320-321, 324-331, 345, 355-356, 619, 725-726, 1024-1025; Fursenko; Naftali 2006, 327-328; Shepilov 2007, 380-386).

A very interesting remark in this regard is China's astute ideological reproach towards the Soviet Union with reference to the CPSU and the Soviet state, which

were no longer considered by Khrushchev weapons of the proletariat in the class struggle against the bourgeoisie and against reactionaries of all sorts, but political institutions in which every Soviet citizen was welcome. But, the Chinese communists argued, in socialist regimes there cannot be a 'party of the entire people' and a 'state of the entire people', simply because the transition to communism is not yet completed; on the contrary, it may be more vulnerable than ever. This is why, using the old Stalinist thesis according to which class struggle intensifies along with the building of socialism, the Beijing leaders condemned Moscow's peaceful and opportunistic tactic of gaining popular legitimacy at the expense of revolutionary acumen and, eventually, at the expense of Leninism itself (Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2019b, 188-190, 590-600). One again, the use of propaganda and of the Marxist-Leninist ideology is made compatible with the developmental priorities of each of the two socialist powers. Shortly after, Albania and Romania will follow the same strategy, although their objectives were of course not so ambitious as China's and the Soviet Union's.

Finally, the Third World represented another major point of disagreement between the two parts. For the Soviet Union, peaceful coexistence did not exclude class struggle, as China argued, but on the contrary, made it one of its main pillars; however, when it came to the Third World, it was Moscow who accused Beijing that while endorsing anti-colonialism and the national liberation movements in Africa and Asia, it was actually renouncing class struggle in the name of national independence struggle and by arbitrarily separating bourgeois from proletarian nations. But not all national movements from the Third World were democratic or socialist, Moscow warned; after all, the main contradiction of the Cold war was that between socialism and capitalism, not that between the Third World and capitalism (Croitor, Borșa 2014a, 29-32, 55, 124, 157-159, 215-221; Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2020, 336-337, 422-423; Tsetung 1971, 139-140; see also Croitor, Croitor 2021, pp. 109-112.).

Revisionism, dogmatism and the question of Yugoslav socialism

All these important disagreements propelled both China and the Soviet Union to quickly label one another as 'dogmatic' and, respectively, 'revisionist'. In the first case, Moscow argued that Beijing was too inflexible and was pushing for a reckless behavior in international affairs which sometimes was referred to as 'ultraleftism'. In the second case, Beijing considered the post-Stalinist leadership of the Soviet Union to be too eager in accepting the international *status-quo*, without pushing for a revolutionary change, like a true revolutionary power should.

As previously mentioned, China and the Soviet Union were adapting Marxism-Leninism to their own developmental priorities. Consequently, both 'revisionism' and 'dogmatism' are justified characterizations that ultimately reflect the inner diversity and the adaptability of the ideology of the 'socialist camp'; however, more importantly, they reflect different stages of development and different strategies of achieving, respectively expanding it. There are no right or wrong ideological positions in the Sino-Soviet conflict; there are only developmental priorities best served by a Stalinist or a non-Stalinist strategy: underdeveloped China opted for the first, while the incomparable more developed Soviet Union chose the latter.

Why is Yugoslav socialism important in the context of the post Stalin fragmentation of the 'socialist camp'? After Stalin excluded Yugoslavia from the 'socialist camp' in 1948, Khrushchev started to normalize the relations with Belgrade, true to his doctrine of peaceful coexistence. But the Hungarian revolution from 1956 once again cooled down this shy process of rapprochement: Tito blamed Moscow for the repressive manner in which the Hungarian political experiment, deeply influenced by Yugoslav socialism, was brought to a halt, while other socialist countries were worried not to be confronted themselves with this kind of consequences that de-Stalinization made possible. Among them was China, which resented the Yugoslav experiment from the beginning and even more so one year after the Hungarian revolution, when Mao's propagandistic campaign of 'one thousand flowers' ended in a considerable strengthening of the opposition towards Chinese socialism (Griffith 1963, 27-28). As a direct defiance of Stalinism, Yugoslav socialism was a worrisome alternative for the accelerated developmental strategy implemented by the Beijing leadership, proving that a more relaxed and consumer-oriented type of socialism was possible. The Soviet toleration of Tito's Yugoslavia under the banner of peaceful coexistence made China anxious (Croitor, M; Croitor, S. 2020, 439; Croitor, M.; Borșa, S. 2014a, 61-62, 103). But it truly enraged Albania, for which Yugoslavia was not a distant and small country, like it was for China, but a close and powerful neighbor who decided in the past and could decide once again the fate of Albanian socialism.

Consequences of the Sino-Soviet split: amplifying Albanian insecurity

A small country, Albania's history in the last centuries represented a permanent occupation by one of the neighboring powers. This entailed a deep sentiment of insecurity that, coupled with a vehement xenophobia, offered Albania a distinct and virulent blend of communism that came into the open at the beginning of the 1960s, once the Sino-Soviet conflict became public.

Until 1947, the Albanian Communist Party (ACP) was, in general, a creation of Yugoslav communists, and was divided by different factions competing for power. Enver Hodja, an 'intellectual', was the undisputed ruler of the country, but, after the Second World War was over, Tito started to favor Hodja's rival, Koci Xoxe, who represented the 'proletarian wing' of the ACP. The Soviet-Yugoslav dispute came just in time to allow Hodja to dispose of Xoxe and his supporters and to join the Soviet Union in denouncing the 'Titoist clique'. Albania broke ties with Yugoslavia and became an economic, beside a political satellite of the Soviet Union (Griffith 1963, 19-21; Brogan 1990, 176-178).

But Khrushchev's peaceful coexistence challenged Hodja's supremacy within the ACP due to its tolerant posture towards Yugoslav socialism (Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2020, 16-17, 380-381, 384-385, 517-530). After Stalin's death, the Albanian trade with the Soviet Union begun to shrink as a result of Moscow's more favorable attitude towards Tito, and Hodja was forced to find new economic partners. China stepped in as one of the most important ones (Griffith 1963, 22-23; Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2020, 95, 169, 195, 490-491).

The new context favored the internal opposition of the ACP against Hodja; after all, Tito had every reason to try to replace him with a pro-Yugoslav leader. But the Hungarian revolution allowed Hodja's comeback, along with the opportunity to make visible the first signs of discontent against de-Stalinization. However, Albania adopted a prudent tone on this affair, especially since Moscow increased once again the volume of trade with Albania, fearing that China may replace the Soviet Union as the first economic partner of Albania. However, at the beginning of the 1960s, when the Sino-Soviet conflict became public, Albania, although reluctant, was forced to choose China's side (Griffith 1963, 29-34, 41).

As in the case of China, military matters, alongside economic ones, represented some of the key factors that drove Albania away from Moscow (Croitor, M.; Croitor, S. 2020, 281-285, 382-383, 391-393, 486-487, 491-492, 511-515, 533-535, 902-903; Prifti 1973, 241-266), forging an alliance that soon became quite influential in the socialist world and also among communist parties of the West. A coherent and more and more powerful brand of anti-Soviet socialism was now available for all socialist forces that were unhappy with Soviet hegemony; in time, this type of socialism will massively infuse the nonaligned movement, an alliance of Third World countries that tried to develop avoiding both Western capitalism and Soviet socialism. China, as well as Yugoslavia, were representative members of the nonaligned movement.

Opportunities of the Sino-Soviet split: maintaining Romania's development strategy

At first, Romania sided with the Soviet Union in condemning China's and Albania's 'dogmatism' but, as Moscow was planning a more integrated economic policy within the 'socialist camp' with the help of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), one that would reserve Romania and Bulgaria the role of agricultural suppliers for the rest of the camp and thus challenging the prospects of further industrializing the country – Bucharest baked off (Croitor 2012, 68-84, 198-205, 345, 357-358; Croitor, M.; Borșa, S. 2014b, 200-203, 207, 210, 212-216, 241, 244, 254, 259-260, 266-267, 333-335, 337, 484, 510). Even if the Romanian leader Gheorghiu-Dej did not adhere to the Chinese brand of socialism (Cătănuș 2004, 65-67, 70-79, 109, 123), he took the opportunity offered by the Sino-soviet dispute to advance Romania's developmental agenda and to continue the industrializing process.

Offering to mediate the dispute, with no real effect whatsoever, Romania was actually trying to get closer to China and to improve its commercial relations with it (Croitor, M.; Borșa, S. 2014c, 130-132; Croitor M.; Croitor, S. 2019b, 282, 289, 356-357, 369, 370; Fischer-Galati in London 1966, 261-276; King 1972, 373-393; Cătănuș 2004, 275-287, 313, 322, 409-410). In the same time, due to its geographical position and limited resources, Romania could not afford more than a dissident position towards Moscow; an open break, like China and later Albania endorsed, was a too big of a challenge to its security. Due to its successful economic defiance against the Soviet Union, which became clear in 1964, Romania's development line emphasizing heavy industry was maintained without a real challenge to its security. For now, that was enough.

Conclusion: the Sino-Soviet conflict as a confirmation of the plurality of global socialism, not of its failure

The Sino-Soviet conflict occurred within a challenging international environment, one in which the positions of the Soviet Union were weakened by uninspired events like the Cuban missile crisis or the West Berlin problem (for the latter, see Croitor M., Borșa, S. 2013, 49-53, 135-149). Not long after the split between the two most powerful socialist states, Khrushchev was dismissed from power by his own colleagues; among his political shortcomings, the alienation of China was not forgotten.

Still, as I argued at the beginning of the present essay, the Sino-Soviet conflict was not necessarily an example of ideological failure, but a confirmation of the diversity, flexibility and adaptability of the ideology of socialist states in pursuing their own paths of development, choosing their security priorities and endorsing their own strategies in order to achieve the desired outcomes. Ideology was important in this whole political phenomenon, but it did not represent its main stake. The age of socialist polycentrism, as the Italian communist leader Palmiro Togliatti referred to it (Togliatti in Jacobs 1979, 248-249), was opened by the challenge of Yugoslav socialism, but it truly came into being several years later, when it was endorsed by the Chinese socialism.

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