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

Intelligence
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To : The Secretary
 Through: S/S
 From : INR - George C. Denney, Jr. *g.c.d.h*

Subject: USSR/China: Soviet and Chinese Forces Clash on the Ussuri River

The Sino-Soviet clash on the Ussuri river on March 2 appears to have been the result of persistent efforts by both sides to establish control over the islands in the Ussuri and is not likely to lead to wider fighting in the near future. However, similar incidents may be expected from time to time.

What Happened? On March 2 TASS reported the text of a Soviet note protesting an alleged incursion by Chinese Communist troops into Soviet territory in the vicinity of an island in the Ussuri river 120 miles south of Khabarovsk. Casualties resulted when Soviet troops rebuffed the intruders. On March 3 the Chinese Communists replied with a counterprotest accusing the Soviets of being the aggressors and claiming that the Chinese had suffered casualties of their own.

Piecing together the evidence cited in these obviously tendentious notes, it appears that both sides have been attempting for some time to establish claims to the islands in the Ussuri river. The Treaty of Peking of 1860, which delimited the Sino-Russian border along the Ussuri, did not assign the river islands to either party and each appear to claim sovereignty over at least the island under contention on March 2, if not over all the river islands. According to the Chinese note, this island, Damansky or Chen Pao, as well as others has been the scene of numerous clashes over the past two years. The clash on March 2, involving loss of life on both sides, thus is

probably the sharpest yet and the Soviet claim of a Chinese "ambush" suggests a well-prepared engagement rather than an accidental clash between small reconnaissance units.

Who Provoked Whom? Available evidence suggests that either side could have provoked the incident. A Japanese security service reported in late 1968 that Soviet tank units had been conducting river-crossing training along the Ussuri river and that Soviet patrol craft on the Ussuri had been harassing Chinese vessels and forcing them to undergo Soviet inspection. According to this report, the Chinese had moved forces into this area in response to Soviet provocations. Another report states that a Soviet diplomat in Peking claimed in early November that the Chinese had conducted some provocative maneuvers along the Heilungkiang border and that the USSR had responded by augmenting its forces in this area. We have no confirmation of either report. In September Peking charged the USSR with repeated violations of Chinese airspace, violations which Soviet diplomats in private conversations with US officials have sought to play down but nevertheless admitted.

Opposing Border Defense Strength. The frequent clashes along the border since the early 1960's are symptomatic of the tension in the area. The USSR, in response to a growing concern over the security of the border area, has greatly expanded its forces along the Chinese border and at present it is estimated that there are 25 Soviet divisions in this area and that another four or five divisions are likely to be deployed in the near future.

The Chinese have not greatly expanded their military forces in Manchuria, perhaps because they have maintained ample reserves in the area since the Korean War. Their ground strength in Manchuria (some of which is positioned in the area adjacent to Korea) consists of 2 divisions of border guards, 24 infantry divisions, 2 armored divisions and 6 artillery divisions, for a total of 34 divisions. Recently, however, the Chinese have apparently increased the number of Production and Construction Corps units in Heilungkiang province; their function probably includes border defense construction as well as general economic development.

Border Demarcation, Not Treaty Revision, At Issue. The Chinese note refers to the 1860 treaty as an "unequal treaty imposed on the Chinese people by the imperialists." This appears to be the first Chinese reference to "unequal" treaties between Russia and China since the subject was raised in acrimonious exchanges by the parties and leaders of the two countries during 1963 and 1964. However, Peking simply cites the treaty in support of its claim to ownership of the island and does not hint at any demand for restoration of the 133,000 square miles ceded to Russia under the terms of the treaty.

The disputed status of the islands in the Amur and Ussuri rivers, which form the Sino-Soviet boundary for most of its distance in Manchuria, has been publicly acknowledged by both the Chinese and Russians for a number of years. A joint boundary commission met in February 1964 with the aim of agreeing to demarcation of the border, but the commission ceased functioning before the end of 1964 and never completed its task.

Soviet Intentions. In nearly doubling its forces on the Chinese border since 1965, the USSR appears to have been motivated by a concern that either the breakdown of order in China or sudden Chinese aggressiveness might threaten Soviet security. It is unlikely that the USSR intends to attack China. It is probable, however, that further incidents similar to that on March 2 will take place as the result of aggressive Soviet patrolling along the border or of Soviet assertions of sovereignty over disputed islands in either the Amur or the Ussuri rivers.

Demonstrations in Mainland: Chinese Intentions Unclear. With the broadcast of the CPR's counterprotest to the Soviet Union on the morning of March 3, crowds of demonstrators gathered at the Soviet Embassy in Peking shouting anti-Soviet slogans and carrying placards reading "Hang Kosygin" and "Fry Brezhnev." Throughout the rest of the mainland mass parades and rallies involving soldiers and civilians were organized to denounce the Soviets.

The use of rallies and demonstrations to dramatize an international protest is a time-honored Chinese Communist device. So far, however, there is little evidence to suggest that the Chicomintend intend to move beyond the propaganda level and use the border incident to create a major political crisis with the Soviets. Peking's statements have been long on bluster but short on commitment. The March 2 protest note pledges "appropriate counterblows" but only if the Soviets "persist in their actions." Similarly a March 4 joint People's Daily-Liberation Army Daily editorial promises severe punishment if the Soviets continue "armed provocation" and quotes Mao's dictum "once attacked we must never fail to return the blow."

Whatever "counterblows," if any, Peking may have in mind, it is not likely to take large scale military action. Since the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, the Chinese have probably been at pains to display greater vigilance along their border with the USSR. They can be expected to be just as aggressive as the Soviets in patrolling what they regard as their own territory. However, the fact that Peking has not considered it necessary to increase its troop strength along the border in the face of the Soviet build-up suggests the Chinese do not wish to provoke a military showdown.

